This book—an edited volume—presents findings from a range of linked research studies investigating couples transitions to parenthood in a variety of European settings (including Sweden, Germany, Holland, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, Poland, and the Czech Republic).

Whilst understanding parenting as a deeply “ethical act” (in the sense of reproducing social values), the volume aims to explore issues faced by couples as they becoming parents, as they relate to gender culture, family policy, and socio-economic context. Theoretically and methodologically, a couple focus is used to emphasise the fact that individual plans and experiences are inevitably tied to that of the partner. Furthermore, and inherent to the international scope of the project, gender ideologies are understood to operate at both macro and micro-levels, giving the volume a sophisticated and comprehensive theoretical framework.

This is a particularly interesting time to be studying the transition to parenthood in European settings. As the introduction outlines, recent years have been characterised by, one the one hand, an “intensification” of cultural ideas about parenting, which reiterates the importance of parent–child contact, and on the other, a commitment to gender equality as childcare responsibilities relate to men and women’s career prospects and “work-life-balance.” Systems of shared parental leave, increasingly considered the “gold standard” of policymaking are promoted with the idea that this enables either or both parents to take extended periods of time away from work, with the “ideal” couple being the dual earner/dual carer couple.

However, evidence from across a range of settings (presented in the volume, as well as elsewhere) has pointed out that despite being committed to egalitarian ideals before having children, the majority of couples revert to traditional gendered practices once they arrive (even, as the volume shows, planning to do this in advance). The driving question, or paradox, that the volume is trying to understand is why that might be.

Clearly, state structures and wider socio-economic factors will affect both cultural ideas about “good parenting” or “gender equality”) as well as have implications for the feasibility of measures to change either, so this collection is a welcome and valuable contribution in providing rich and in-depth data from such a range of settings. Where this first volume, on the whole, presents findings from interviews with couples during pregnancy, a planned follow up volume will examine further their accounting for their experiences after the children have been born, which will elucidate further this fascinating question.

In so far as conclusions can be reached at this stage, then, the authors point out that whilst they play a part in decision making around the division of childcare and work, neither rational (financial) nor physiological reasons can explain the persistence of the paradox alone. Instead, the evidence points to the active contemplation of couples in the move towards a more traditional model of the division of labour. This is linked closely to their own identity-work, in ways that were particularly profound for women. For example, whilst respondents talked about “naturally becoming” a mother, there was a sense that fatherhood was something that needed to be actively constructed, and was not something which affected men’s career plans (on the whole).
Whilst offering some fascinating, empirically supported insights, it would be interesting to hear more from the authors about their perspective on whether policy around parental leave and childcare is truly a solution to “gender equality.” In particular, whether this risks rolling out an intensive model of childcare to men, which only places more pressure on couples rather than looking for wider social solutions to the care/work “problem.” Furthermore, some comment on to what extent states can—or should—intervene in intimate relations in the course of trying to create social change might also be warranted, particularly as some of their evidence seems to imply that couples do not actually want the “ideal” dual earner/dual carer set up, so beloved of policymakers. The next volume is awaited with eager anticipation.

Charlotte Faircloth
University College London

BOOK REVIEWS

DELIVERING SOCIAL WELFARE: GOVERNANCE AND SERVICE PROVISION IN THE UK

By Derek Birrell | Ann Marie Gray


In Delivering Social Welfare: Governance & Service Provision in the UK, Birrel and Gray have provided an engaging and well-written contribution to the literature concerning contemporary social policy. When considered in the light of the current swirling discourses surrounding the delivery and governance of welfare in the UK, the work might also be considered timely. The book tackles the extremely complex area of welfare governance across all countries of the UK and in doing so neatly encapsulates various paradigm shifts up to and including the current shift towards devolution. While the subject area is undoubtedly dense and intensely factual, the book manages to remain accessible and well organised, allowing it to be to read cover to cover whilst simultaneously functioning as an excellent reference book.

The layout of the book is straightforward and sensible. An introductory chapter sets the parameters by discussing the dominant trends and their accompanying discourses in the general area of welfare governance in the UK. Chapter two focuses on the role of devolution in the administration of welfare services across the UK. From here, the authors move on to examine the structure and function of various government departments. They usefully distinguish between a range of departments such as ministerial, non-ministerial, and executive agencies. Considerable detail of the major policy reforms that have shaped and influenced the structure and function of the current central administration is also given here. Chapters four and five focus on the role and structure of local government as a traditional deliverer of welfare services and examines changes here, such as the move away from direct service provision in favour of commissioning and partnership. Chapter six examines the role of quasi autonomous non-governmental organisations or “quangos.” It identifies different types and considers the growth of quangos as a method of governance as well as the more recent push to reduce their number. Chapter seven explores the role of partnerships and describes the reasons for the proliferation of partnerships as a method of governance in the areas health and social care, particularly at local authority level. Closely related to this, chapter eight examines the role of outsourcing and privatisation in the governance and delivery of welfare services, focusing particularly on recent developments. Chapter nine moves on to explore the user and public participation...