Doing Family through Gender, Doing Gender through Family. Exploring Social Inequalities and Cultural Changes in Everyday Parenting. An Introduction

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1   Why Family? A Lens for Viewing Social Change

Societies are always on the move. We shape and reshape the environment we live in continuously, creating the impression that we are living in eternal motion. The impression is the same when we, as sociologists, look at families.

On the one hand, we see continuity: families are formed, children are born, and family solidarity remains the main pillar upon which families are built. Despite the 'family decline' interpretation, in fact, no evidence of a weakening of commitment and responsibility for children and in reciprocity for kin is emerging from research (Skolnick & Skolnick, 1994; Chambers, 2012; Naldini, 2017).

On the other hand, we see discontinuity and rapid changes. Over the last fifty years, there have been a number of significant demographic changes: the increasing postponement of marriage and parenthood, the rise in marital instability and the decline in fertility rates, a growing disconnection between marriage and childbearing (Sobotka & Toulemon, 2008; Saraceno & Naldini, 2013). In terms of family relationships, it has been said that new kinds of love and intimacy, new 'democratization' of couple's and parent-child relationships and new forms of family commitment are being forged (Giddens, 1992). Competing theoretical explanations have been advanced in this connection, ranging from economic, demographic and cultural accounts (i.e., the rational choice approach and the New Home Economics, the 'second demographic transition,' the 'individualization' thesis, and so on) to more recent approaches such as the 'incomplete revolution' thesis, which maintains that transformations in gender relations are not fully reflected in the domestic sphere notwithstanding greater changes in other domains (Gerson, 2011; Esping-Andersen, 2009).

We also know that family changes have been accompanied by an increase in family diversity, resulting from new partnership and childbearing trends, and more generally from a de-standardization of the individual and family life-course (Brückner & Mayer, 2005). Family law and family policy have also changed: take, for example, the recognition of same-sex marriage, and how deeply it changed our ideas, our definitions and our experiences of family life. Nevertheless, these changes do not always point to a convergence (Roussel, 1992; Kujisten, 1996), since there are still large variations in behaviors, legislation and regulations even among Western countries.

Overall, the transformation of the family and the growing heterogeneity in personal and family life that have taken place in the past decades leave us with the impression that we have never witnessed such rapid changes in the past. And yet, we know from historical studies that this impression is wrong (Therborn, 2004; Mortelmans, Matthijs, Alofs, & Segaert, 2016): renovation in family structures and practices has been continuous at all times, and has always been in line with societal change on a broader spectrum. Families are shaped by societies but they also have the power to transform them. The mutual relationship between demographic, cultural, economic and political change, on the one hand, and family life on the other, is crucial in revealing the persistent and the relentless work of interpretation, transformation and redefinition which is at the basis of our family experiences and practices. This holds true at the micro-level of individual experience, at the meso-level of interaction with relevant others, and at the macro-level of society. Recent achievements in the study of families and society require us to take into account the interrelation between these three levels, as Risman's theory (2004) of gender as social structure suggests (see her contribution to this Symposium), in order to fully grasp the complex dynamics of changes and continuities.

2   Why Parenting? A New Focus on Inequalities in Everyday Family Practices

In considering the complex processes of mutual exchange between families and society, as well as the eternal motion of changes and continuities, this Symposium focuses on how family relationships contribute to doing (or undoing) gender and how gender is produced and reproduced through everyday family life. More specifically, it focuses on how parenting practices and socio-economic conditions interact with children's socialization to gender roles, thus contributing to transmitting not only gender but also social inequalities to new generations.

More specifically, there are at least three main reasons why a Symposium presenting this new research perspective in *Sociologica* is much needed:

First, the area of research is crucial for understanding the intergenerational transmission of inequalities. In analyzing the dynamic interactions between family and society, the transformations in family life — and specifically issues involving child-parents relationships — are powerful indicators of social change (Elder 1994). Generational changes within families, shifts in parenting ideals, discourses and practices, modifications in the way children are born, grow up, move out, get married — and their agency in those processes — are all sources of both continuities and discontinuities. And, conversely, they all impact on experiences, interests and failures, on individual and family time demand and supply, and of course on prospective cohorts and generations of children.

Second, this perspective is particularly fruitful and timely, as it enables the new 'parenting culture' to emerge clearly throughout empirical analyses (Furedi, 2002; Faircloth & Murray, 2015). In a context characterized by rising job insecurity and 'family instability,' parenting is a turning point in the life course of women and men which marks and symbolizes the long-lasting commitment *par excellence*. As one of our authors in this Symposium puts it, while mothers viewed their romantic relationships as potentially insecure, caring for children felt like a commitment they could maintain, as "a promise […] I can keep." In all Western countries, the social and cultural meaning of "parenting" has changed profoundly (Furedi, 2001). Interestingly, the terminological shift from the noun "parent" to the verb "parenting" emphasizes the new role and responsibility that parents owe to children and the belief that children require special care and attention for their correct and *successful* development. This reflects a "deterministic view of parents and defines expectations about how a parent should raise their child" (Lee, Bristow, Faircloth, & Macvarish, 2014, pp. 9–10), but it refers especially to mothers. Indeed, mothers have been at the center of scrutiny in the emergence of the "intensive mothering" ideology (Hays, 1996) which governs mothering and serves as a "device" to differentiate between "good" and "bad" mothers and cast blame on the latter.

This shift evolved alongside a different conceptualization of the value of the child in our societies. Concentrated mainly in Western countries, this view no longer sees children's value as connected to their economic contribution to paid work, but to their emotional value and status within the family and society at large (Zelizer, 1994). The rise of the "priceless child" has been accompanied by the development of a "new paradigm" of the sociology of childhood (James & Prout, 1990; James, Jenks, & Prout 1998; Alanen & Mayall, 2001; Mayall, 2002) which emerged in the 1980s in British sociological schools and was developed quite rapidly in the 1990s and 2000s. The New Paradigm is a substantial challenge to mainstream sociological and common sense assumptions about children and childhood, promoting a critical understanding of discourses on childhood and an in-depth analysis of the structural condition in which they live (within the family as well) (Brannen & O'Brien, 1996; Morrow, 1998; Thomson, Berriman, & Bragg, 2018). This approach emphasizes children's agency and their active role in shaping their childhood and in contributing to social change (Corsaro, 1997 & 2009; James, 2009). The new awareness of childhood's value and the increased responsibility put on parents has led to a growing concern about "poor parenting" by public media, experts and public policies, as well as to disputes about what constitutes appropriate care for children and what it takes to be a "good mother" and a "good father" (Nelson, 2010; Naldini, 2015 & 2016; Long, Naldini, & Santero, 2018).

Third, an emergent challenge for the sociology of the family is to produce empirical research and concepts that can explain the complexities and diversity of family settings and dynamics. A key concept in this regard is "family practices," as it was first conceived in the foundational work of David Morgan (Morgan, 1996 & 2011). According to Morgan, the family should not be considered as a "relatively static structure or set of positions or status" (2011, p. 6) which people "have" or "are," but as something that people "do." His focus on everyday practices is pivotal in introducing a shift in sociological analysis from the family as a structure to the family as a "set of activities." Indeed, practice is a "fluid" and flexible term that encompasses the different ways individuals interpret their role as fathers, mothers, sons or daughters, as well as the circumstances or settings that define over time who is included or excluded. At the same time, this term allows us to focus on the everyday, in the sense of those "life-events" and the routines (including those that are very mundane) that characterize all families regardless of their structural differentiations, in contrast with a common narrative that often frames the family (mainly when there are children) in terms of a "social problem" (i.e., separations, breakdown, dysfunctions etc.). The benefit of focusing on family practices is that it can "cut across differences" in class, ethnicity and

other dimensions. Creating a commonality between activities and experiences which individuals can have and recognize as meaningful in defining their belonging or bonding to a specific group as a family sets the scene for a more inclusive idea of family.

Overall, we believe that viewing families from the perspective of everyday life practices can help sociologists understand them as a more complex phenomenon than classical, ontological and normative definitions would suggest. From a methodological standpoint, this fruitful approach can also pave the way to considering other contexts and relationships that are outside the domestic space and the household domain. Doing the shopping, planning a trip, going on holidays, buying a car, changing house, going to a restaurant, driving the kids to school or to the playground, watching their games or performances, organizing family chores and so on, can all be regarded as family practices that take place in locations other than the domestic space and that involve a variety of relationships (Kay, 2009; McCabe, 2015; Satta, 2016). To quote Janet Finch, "families need to be 'displayed' as well as 'done.'" Here, by "displaying," she means that to be effective, family practices must also be both "conveyed to and understood by relevant others" as constitutive of family relationships or as a "family thing" (2007, p. 66). In all these dynamics, from structure-agency constraints to parenting cultures and family practices, we shall see that *gender matters*. To make sense of changes and continuities in parental roles and in children's socialization, in fact, it is crucial to assess how much gender continues to play a crucial role regardless of the heterogeneity of contemporary families.

3 Why Gender? Changes and Constraints in Action

Gender is a pervasive dimension of our society and of our lives, as Connell points out (2009), and the family is the arena *par excellence*, where gender displays all its potentiality.

Gender shapes family life and everyday practices in multiple ways. First, it molds *intergenerational* relations, as it provides the blueprint for the new generations' practices of socialization. Parental care and education have long been considered as the first domains to provide children with gender role models and cultural expectations. According to the classical interpretation of gender socialization processes, parents influence children's gender development through their own role models and they encourage (consciously or not) different behaviors in sons and daughters. Children, in their turn, learn and reproduce gender ideology, thanks to overt praise and punishments, and implicit sanctions and reinforcements. Despite its widespread acceptance, this understanding of socialization as top-down transmission has been challenged by empirical research over the past few decades, and also reconceptualized as a relational process (James, 2013). A number of studies now focus on children as actors, and not only as beneficiaries of parents' care, but also as active producers of their own gender culture and practices (Blaise, 2005; Messner, 1990; Thorne, 1993).

Ethnographic observations and qualitative studies on adults' and children's daily practices and discourses suggest a nuanced and multifaceted understanding, in line with the new research perspectives on childhood and family practices we mentioned earlier. Moreover, classical interpretations of gender socialization fail to take into account possible contrasting gender models and norms among family members. As structural configurations of households are complex and biographical and family trajectories change over time and are far from linear and standardized (e.g., blended families, multiethnic families, divorced or separated parents, transnational families), gender roles and norms can differ greatly not only from one household to another, but also among family members in the same household.

Second, gender shapes relationships among peer family members on an *intragenerational* level (among partners of the conjugal couple or siblings). From this point of view, important cultural changes are emerging in Western societies. "Intensive" parenting culture and the idea that both men and women can and must engage in child care are reinforced by a widespread understanding of involved fatherhood as an enriching experience for both children and adults. These assumptions are driving forces for more egalitarian family arrangements. Nevertheless, they coexist with persistent essentialist ideas about masculinity and femininity as necessarily being complementary opposite poles. In fact, innovative common beliefs about the value of equal sharing of domestic burdens co-occur with the general perception that paid work (and participation in public life in general) is a key dimension of life for men but not for women.

Despite the changes that have taken place in the family and in women's employment, child-rearing arrangements and welfare regimes continue to assume the "old" model of the family, a model that in most cases is no longer either practicable or desired (Gerson, 2011; Hochschild, 1989). But why has the gender "revolution" remained "stalled" and "incomplete"? Studies attempting to answer this question have highlighted a variety of factors. Some point to the fact that major shifts in education, employment and equality-focused legislation did not sufficiently affect the allocation of household chores or the sharing of familial caring responsibilities for children because of long-standing stereotypes about men and women being "naturally" predisposed to different tasks. Others emphasize the discrepancies between parenting ideals and realities on transition to parenthood, and the fact that among the most egalitarian couples, the child's arrival signals a re-traditionalization of family practices and gender divisions (Grunow & Evertsson, 2016; Naldini, 2015). Contrasting gender norms, values and stereotypes can cause ongoing negotiations, conflicts and frustration among peer members. This is especially true in welfare regimes encouraging family-based assistance, where the burden of childcare and elderly care is still on women (Esping-Andersen, 2009). In any case, inequalities in care and domestic work persist and gender socialization is still imbued with essentialist ideas on gender roles, despite all the cultural and structural changes we have discussed so far. This is why in the study of the nexus between family and society it is crucial to understand why and how gender is produced and reproduced in family life: new generations' gender culture impacts on social change and vice versa.

4   What This Symposium Provides (and What It Does Not)

The contributions to this Symposium will illustrate how individual and social forces are set against a multilevel gender order, through the analysis of parenting practices as pathways of intergenerational transmission of social inequalities and of reproduction of social, cultural and economic advantages and disadvantages. Material and symbolic resources influence children's agency and parental cultures, but they are unequally distributed among and within single households. Papers as well as comments will also shed light on the methodological challenges and new data sources of this fresh field of empirical research, giving new force to more classical assumptions that family life is a key indicator of social change.

All the presentations at the Symposium very clearly show the gap between dominant discourses about family or the claim that gender (and generational) equality among its members has been achieved, and whether actual practices of doing family meet the gendered and generational needs, expectations and desires of all its members.

Of course, our Symposium is far from being exhaustive or representative of the groundbreaking literature on everyday family life which has emerged in last few decades. All contributions, for example, focus on the parents' role and perspectives — as if parents were the only active agents in the domestic sphere and family was not a relational interage construct. To quote the title of a classic work by Barrie Thorne (1987), we could ask "Where are the children?" and suggest that further research should take children's perspectives more systematically into account. In this respect, we argue that the sociology of the family still fails to substantially recognize the place of children in domestic relations (Jensen & McKee, 2003). Taking inspiration from Julie Seymour and Sally McNamee's (2012) work (which focuses on children's engagement with parenting rather than on the activities and outcomes of good parenting), we should accept the challenge of broadening the research agenda to the "space of betweenness" (Katz, 1994) between parents and children, as well as between partners. Secondly, the explicit recognition of interdependent effects on family practices by multiple dimensions of inequality aside from gender and social class (such as race, age, sexual orientation, religion, etc.) poses both conceptual and empirical research challenges for further intersectional analyses (Crenshaw, 1989; Collins, 1990). This line of reasoning can then be extended to the institutional arrangements that determine structural conditions and values. Last but not least, taking into account everyday arrangements can also be useful in order to provide policy suggestions across a range of different stakeholders.

So we hope that the Symposium will be a valuable resource for anyone who is interested in family and/or gender research, and will help stimulate further interest in this area.

5   Outline of the Symposium

The first paper is authored by Laura Merla, Professor of Sociology at the University of Louvain, who is currently conducting an ERC Starting Grant project on children growing in post-divorce/separation shared custody arrangements. Her contribution sheds light on the socialization of children who alternatively reside with their separated or divorced mother and father, growing up in different households with potentially divergent and contrasting gendered norms, values and practices. It then shows how children's gendered socialization "between" and "through" households interacts with the material and communicative environment they live in, with a focus on gendered features of mobility and use of ICTs.

Tina Miller, Professor of Sociology at Oxford Brookes University, is currently conducting two longitudinal studies on "Making Sense of Motherhood" and "Making Sense of Fatherhood." In the second contribution to the Symposium, she explores what has often been left aside by readings of maternal gatekeeping from the Nineties onwards: the paternal participation in relational and interactive dynamics of gatekeeping. Drawing upon findings from two comparative UK-based qualitative longitudinal studies, this paper explicitly criticizes any one-sided perspective on behaviors "protecting" maternal privilege and power, and shows how fruitful research on claims of lack of competency as a form of paternal gatekeeping can be. In this sense, gender socialization shows its relevance again, since fathers' feeling of no responsibility for family labor can be read as originally due to their own internalization of gendered expectations during childhood.

Esther Dermott, Professor in Sociology at the University of Bristol, has a longstanding interest in men's parenting and the rise of "intimate fatherhood." She is currently involved in a British Academy funded project on Syrian refugee families, where she explores the relationship between families, gender and poverty. Her contribution, the third of our Symposium, suggests a critical examination of the impact of ideas on fathering as well as of economic resources, employment practices, and institutional policies to better understand continuities and discontinuities in men's involvement in caregiving. Despite some radical changes, e.g., extensive female participation in the labor market, empirical evidence highlights the ongoing ways in which the allocation of financial resources within households, and the nature and extent of parental obligations to children, result in mothers' taking charge of most parental care.

Allison Pugh, Professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia, is the author of the Symposium's last presentation. Her paper focuses on the effects of job insecurity on childrearing, specifically on how parents prepare their children for the future they anticipate. Drawing on in-depth interviews with 80 parents with varying experience of job precariousness, Pugh documents that most parents encourage their children to be "flexible," but the meaning of this word is shaped by socio-economic dynamics. In a context where job insecurity correlates with relationship insecurity, particularly for less advantaged people, but idealization of familiar kinship is a pervasive cultural schema, the paper outlines the ways in which children's gender and class shape how parents prepare them for the world to come.

The four contributions are then commented on by two well-known international experts in the field of gender studies and family relations. Barbara Risman, Professor and Head of Sociology at the University of Illinois at Chicago, is a leading scholar in the field of gender studies at a worldwide level. Her theory on gender as structure provides a conceptual framework for comprehending the way gender is reproduced through cultural and material processes taking place at individual, interactional, and macro dimensions. In her insightful comment, she then applies her gender structure theory to help understand Merla's and Miller's research. Alyia Rao, sociologist of the University of Singapore, is the author of *Crunch Time: How Couples Confront Unemployment*, which will be soon published by the University of California Press. Her research interests focus on how gender inequalities persist in the institutions of the family and workplace, and especially on the gendered framing of women's job loss, so her expertise is particularly appropriate to comment on Dermott's and Pugh's contributions. In her comment, she powerfully brings together both contributions and research on cultures of intensive parenting in an insecure time.

We are convinced that all the contributions to this Symposium are successful in providing an empirical demonstration that both family and gender are ongoing accomplishments which are achieved through practices, structures and expectations in and out of the domestic space. They are examples of

the fruitfulness of empirical research intersecting new perspectives on parenthood and being parented, egalitarian discourses and unequal practices, cultural changes and long-standing structural constraints. We hope they can be inspiring for further development, recognizing that children' socialization and parenthood are still strongly gendered domains, and that (to paraphrase one of our authors) they do not begin or end with the household.

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