

CONCLUSION

Siân Pooley and Kaveri Qureshi

This is not a conclusion in the conventional sense; we will not seek to press the diverse, nuanced and specific content of the previous chapters into a neatly tied-up ending. Our studies of inter-generational relationships do not support global theories of demographic transition, of the decline of extended family, of the rise of individualism, of youthful generational rebellion, or of ever more child-centred affective cultures across the last century. Yet cultures of reproduction do matter. In rejecting these linear narratives, we are not simply being destructive. Nor are we proposing that all we can conclude is that human societies are too complex, diverse and fluid to be usefully thought about at a scale above the individual case study. The introduction laid out the critical, analytical framework that this volume offers – of the insights that emerge from framing the study of parenthood around lifelong cultures of reproduction, of the need to understand how generational interactions and identities shape the passing-on of the practices that make these relationships, and of the four key, entangled processes by which people in one generation influence the parenthood of another generation. We will not repeat these arguments here. Instead, we focus on the theme of transformation through the principal ways in which men and women are altered by – and alter – cultures of reproduction. In each case, we also suggest some of the methodological and interpretative implications that are raised for future research by our reading of these diverse studies together.

This volume has demonstrated that it is constructive to ask the neglected question of *how* parenthood is passed on. In seeking to

answer this question, we have suggested that a comparative and interdisciplinary lens is especially fruitful. It is primarily in exploring these processes by which parenthood is passed 'between' that we deduce the most fundamental similarities in the ways in which one generation influences another's parenthood. By contrast, when exploring the more frequently asked questions of what people do to raise their children and who takes on these roles, our chapters reveal above all the particularities of human and social experience, the diversity of cultures of reproduction, the significance of contingency and context, and the inherently dynamic nature of these reproductive relationships. Only through this sort of comparative work is it possible to establish what is universal or widespread across cultural and historical contexts – and how this could be so – and what arises only in particular human, social and political circumstances.

When thinking across time and place, we have shown how little of these cultures of reproduction is made in blood. We suggest that it is worthwhile to dwell on the practices that fill the space 'between' generations – the acts that make relationships. The chapters reveal the degree to which this liminal relational space is not simply about unthinking duplication and timeless repetition, so as to be encompassed within the term reproduction in its literal sense. Instead, the complex range of acts and ideas that lie in these interstices can be understood as being fundamentally about invention, creativity and self-expression, as people work out who they are through the people they act daily to make. Building on this approach, we suggest that future research into parenthood could attend more fundamentally to the sustained power of those relationships between generations. State programmes and advice literature offer the most coherent and explicit guidance on how one should rear the young. Yet our research suggests that it is by studying the incoherent and often unarticulated body of memories, practices and emotions that make intimate relationships that we are able to explain most about what parenthood means to men and women, as well as what it does to them. The hands-on experience of parenthood and face-to-face models encountered everyday matter. They have the power to profoundly alter people's expressed convictions and enacted approaches to bringing up children, leading them to re-evaluate the wisdoms promulgated by those who claim expertise legitimated by scientific, religious, cultural or state authority. This has important implications for policy-making and practice. It is not sufficient to provide a new technology to young adults or to recommend a new childcare practice without also attending to the embedded and intimate power

of previous generations – men and women, ongoing and in memory. These figures always shape what people mean when they think about, and act, in making their own parenthood.

Our studies were selected to illustrate diverse global experiences of lifelong parenthood – whether that be in terms of gender, sexuality, age, marital status, ethnicity, nation or socio-economic class. Yet these chapters together also indicate some of the key contexts that create periods in which reproductive cultures are transformed most radically and rapidly. We suggest that insecurity is central to this analysis. First, many chapters in the volume examine insecurity through geographical mobility. Studies of contemporary parenthood have underlined the significance of globalization in enabling the rapid, global spread of new parenting technologies, standards and consumerism. Without denying the specificity of these changes in the contemporary world, our work instead emphasizes the significance of the mobility of people – of the emotional rupture, social dislocation, cultural hybridity and socio-economic inequalities that are most frequently engendered in the short-term by human mobility. High rates of intergenerational separation through geographical mobility are far from peculiar to the contemporary world. It matters little whether one generation is moving to the neighbouring town or to the other side of the earth: both produce absences which are felt intensely at the juncture of becoming a parent. These absences have to be managed individually or socially through invocations of memory, through short-term moves to bring people face-to-face, or through using communication technologies to do so virtually. Second, other chapters in this volume highlight the parallel significance of demography. High rates of mortality in mid-adulthood or the breakdown of relationships likewise result in shifts in patterns of intergenerational relations that produce particular patterns of aching loss, of grudging dependency, of strategic adaptation and of social change. Third, insecurity is profoundly shaped by structural inequalities – of economic poverty, of social and political oppression, or of sustained cultural marginality. Parents often worked to hide these inequalities from the historic child and they are glossed over in the personal narratives these same people later tell of growing up. Nevertheless, it is these patterns of presence and absence that most profoundly shape the next generation's decisions, practices and aspirations as parents. Of course, in none of these contexts does absence denote a lack of power; indeed the reverse is often the case, as the absent figure gains a mythologized or profoundly ambivalent status in memory. It is therefore revealing to place these unpredictable

patterns of security – the normally ordinary touch and taken-for-granted presence of a previous generation – as a central influence, not only in explaining when cultures change, but also in understanding its neglected opposite, of when mundane continuities are sustained. This suggests important avenues for future research into how reproductive cultures alter at an individual and societal level. We emphasize contingent constraints and contextually experienced crisis, rather than a linear, cumulative narrative of change.

Finally, reproductive cultures also transform at the level of the individual life. In discussing animal reproduction from the classical to the early modern period, many writers described how mother bears would ‘lick into shape’ the ‘shapeless’ offspring to which they had given birth. Only as a result of the mother’s care would the ‘lump’ come into being as a bear cub. Pliny the Elder argued that people were different to these beasts that were not ‘finished at birth’. Yet what our studies suggest is that it is more revealing to approach reproduction through attention to this lifelong moulding through the relationships we form and the cultural meanings we place on them. These most relational identities shift across the life course, as new generational identities are added and others diminish in importance. Yet the power to make others does not lie solely with the older generation. Chapters in this volume demonstrate how younger generations also mould their parents, both knowingly and unknowingly. Each cub for which the mother cares makes her into a fundamentally different bear. Cultures of lifelong reproduction are profoundly gendered, but in the human societies that we consider in this volume, it is not solely mothers who are shaped in this way. Our research has variously demonstrated the particular, contextually-shaped significance of fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers to the passing-on of parenthood.

While our chapters mostly focus on either the detailed study of these practices or on the later narration of lives made from them, together they suggest the insights that can be drawn from innovative longitudinal research that seeks to combine these methodologies by attending to the temporality of people’s lives. Historians can examine subjectivity in this way, by considering the life of an individual, not solely through the rationalized autobiographical narratives or oral history testimonies that they offered later in life, but by examining the silences, gaps and overlaps that are revealed when these accounts are read alongside earlier, less coherently self-managed archival sources such as letters, diaries or court records. In a contemporary context, by returning repeatedly to the same setting,

researchers can explore how people remake themselves – and their reproductive culture – as they go through specific moments of the life course. Likewise, by carrying out reflective interviews across generations within the same family, researchers can identify the slippages between the stories that are coined and passed between generations, and the often far messier lived experiences of parenthood. This allows the exploration of the intersections and disjunctions between the immediate, short-term and often incoherent explanations people offer within the very living of relationships, and the intensely emotional, but shifting, life-course narratives that are articulated in attempting to make more coherent relational selves out of the complexity of parenthood.