

Editorial on the special issue “Geographical Mobilities and Family Lives”

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This special issue of *Comparative Population Studies on Geographical Mobilities and Family Lives* is drawn from a selection of papers presented at the Interim Meeting of the *Research Network on Family and Intimate Lives of the European Sociological Association*, which took place in Wiesbaden in the Fall of 2011. Although the five papers included in the special issue focus on distinct national contexts, concern dissimilar issues and use different methodologies, they all contribute to the advancement of the understanding of spatial dimensions of family life.

This understanding has been made easier by recent changes in family sociology, which has rejected the assumption that family units are always and above all constituted by domestic households. This challenge to the Parsonian view of families, which sees them as nuclear, has enabled researchers to emphasise the importance of spatial localisations of family members for understanding family processes. To some extent, all families are multi-local: Individuals have always had significant family members living elsewhere. The forms of family multi-localism, however, change according to the historical and social contexts.

The multi-localism of contemporary families is exemplified by the study of *Isengard* (in this special issue), which deals with the distance between the residence of individuals and their adult children. Typically, this distance becomes of central concern when one considers family ties beyond the household unit as functionally important. The study of *Isengard*, based on data collected for 14 countries by the *Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe (SHARE)* shows that a variety of factors stemming from the macro-contexts as well as from the social status of respondents influences the localisation of parents and their adult children. The position of individuals in the family life cycle as well as their socio-economic situation have an impact on the living distance between parents and children. The analysis also revealed that in the south of Europe, parents and their adult children live far closer than in the northern parts, a likely consequence of distinct social policies and other structural constraints. The findings of the study are important, as residential distance has a whole series of consequences for exchanges between family generations.

Family multilocalism has one of its roots in migration practices, which are obviously linked with work and job demands. Therefore, an interest for the link between job-mobility and family life has developed during the last decade, which eventually lead to the funding by the EU of the *Job mobility and family life research project*,

which made it possible for research teams from six European countries to work together (*Schneider/Collet* 2010). Considering the impact of job-mobility on partnerships and parent-child relationships is a novel way of addressing the crucial issue of work-family balance. Indeed, the globalisation of the market economy has considerable consequences for the organisation of families. The study by *Feldhaus* and *Schleegel* (in this special issue) extends beyond this work by considering the influence of different types of spatial mobility on partnership quality. Job-related mobility has a negative effect on partnership quality only for women and mothers. For men, there are actually positive effects. Therefore, job-mobility to some extent contributes to increasing gender inequalities. However, the results of that study also show that the mechanisms linking mobility and family interactions are far from linear. Indeed, spatial mobility does not reduce mutual relatedness in partnerships nor increases conflict behaviour significantly. In fact, much depends on the type of job-mobility.

Job-mobility also has very different meanings and consequences depending on the larger social context. In the case of Portugal, as *Ramos* and colleagues show (in this special issue), the lack of job opportunities and the impoverishment of rural areas impelled many individuals to migrate, with non-linear consequences for their family trajectories. Both work and family trajectories depend on work opportunities found by Portuguese people in their birth place, in other areas of Portugal or overseas. Therefore, it is necessary to include information about the social context and its evolution over time in order to understand how family trajectories and work opportunities intermingle. Migration helps individuals to accumulate savings necessary to start a family. We may add that many individuals migrate with this exact purpose in mind. Therefore, family and professional decisions made in the life course are influenced by the localisation of work opportunities and family members.

Job-mobility is certainly a strong causal factor for understanding family trajectories and family relationships. The inverse causality, however, is also relevant: Family transitions and family events are likely to create a spatial reorganisation of family ties. For instance, divorce as a family event in many cases triggers a large number of moves, intertwined in the constraints associated with family life and paid work trajectories. According to the research of *van Ham* and *Feijten* (in this special issue), divorcees more often change places of residence than married persons, but move shorter distances. Residential decisions after a divorce have a family meaning. It is therefore meaningless to analyse them without considering the family context from which they stem. Indeed, in the circumstances of divorce, relocating means facing the risk of severing one's ties with non-coresiding children, whose custody parent is not likely to relocate as well. Divorce therefore is not a liberating factor in terms of spatiality, but rather imposes new constraints on parents and children.

As *Bonizzoni's* and *Leonini's* research shows (in this special issue), the migration of mothers from third world countries to more wealthy contexts triggers a series of changes in family configurations which are often unintended and have consequences for a large number of family relationships. Many women have to leave their children in their countries of origin. This in turn has consequences for the childrens' fathers, but also for their grandparents, uncles and aunts or pseudo-kinship ties, which are encouraged to participate in or to fully take over the education of the

children. The understanding of the impact of spatial mobility on family life should therefore not be limited to the conjugal or the parent-child ties. Indeed, family configurations beyond ties of the nuclear family are affected by the spatial distancing of family members created by transnational migration. The way in which children and the members of their family configurations interpret and adjust to these changes depends on the care givers, who took over childcare when the mothers left the country. Thus, a large set of family relationships are involved for children to adapt to the effects of the transnational migration of their mothers.

From the various results drawn from the papers collected in this special issue, I personally gather four general ideas, which may be important for future research:

First, family practices and the spatial dispersion of family members are highly interconnected realities. Geographic mobility does matter for family relationships, and not always in a negative sense. But family events and transitions also have effects on the spatial strategies of individuals, including their spatial mobility options. Therefore, researchers should try to understand the systemic linkage existing between space, work and family life, without necessarily trying to set *a priori* which are the causes and which are the effects.

Second, the results presented in this special issue suggest that a majority of individuals currently have to deal with spatially distant relationships in their family life. To some extent, all families are multi-local, as all individuals have significant family members not living in their household. There is however a great variability of spatial localisations in family configurations that goes beyond the nuclear family (Widmer 2010). Therefore, when addressing the link between geographical mobility and family life, one should go beyond the ties between spouses, partners, or parent-child relationships, by considering larger family configurations of ties.

Third, the understanding of living arrangements is much increased, when the life course is included as a variable in the research design. In other words, it is unlikely that one could understand a spatial arrangement without knowing how it has emerged throughout the involved persons' life trajectories. The spatial dimension is entrenched within central issues for family research. It is also entrenched in job constraints. Thus, one gets back to the idea of systemic linkages between the life trajectories of family and work (Sapin *et al.* 2006), with spatial moves being a consequence of the interaction between the two spheres.

At last, the systemic link existing between geographical mobility and key dimensions of family life are accounted for by several mechanisms that need additional research to be fully understood. It seems worth to invest research funds and time in this endeavour if we believe that the globalisation of the world economy is going to continue, and with it, the continuous spread of family ties across space.

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