

## Book Reviews/Comptes rendus

GILLIAN RANSON (2010) *Against the Grain: Couples, Gender, and the Reframing of Parenting*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 214 p., index.

Gillian Ranson's book *Against the Grain: Couples, Gender, and the Reframing of Parenting* challenges dominant understandings of mothering and fathering through the examination of couples who have opted for less traditional divisions of labour. Ranson uses interviews conducted between 2003 and 2007 with thirty-two families in different cities across Canada. This sample includes breadwinner mothers, caregiver fathers, dual-earner couples, and heterosexual and same-sex couples who struggle to share equally both the provider and nurturing roles. The author uses the metaphor "against the grain" to describe families in which traditional ideas are most likely to be challenged and thus mothering and fathering are most likely to be transformed. A central claim of this book is that when parents are equally involved in caregiving, they tend to move away from "mothering" and "fathering" and towards "parenting." This book is organized in four parts, which include situating the study in a broad institutional and cultural context; focusing on breadwinning mothers, fathers as primary caregivers, and couples who share both earning and caring; examining the challenges to shared earning and caring; and lastly, the author's reflections and implications of the study.

A major theme covered in this text is mothering and fathering in "crossover" families. These are families where women are the breadwinners and the fathers are the caregivers. However, for many couples, the role reversal was neither a smooth nor straightforward transition. Unlike many fathers, the female breadwinners would not fully integrate themselves into the family circle immediately on their arrival from work. These women would also share the evening chores of making dinner, cleaning up, bathing the children, and all other evening rituals before bed. Moreover, unlike fathers who have caregiving partners at home, breadwinning women in this study did not expect nor did they feel it was socially allowable to have off-duty leisure. All of the breadwinning mothers in this study also put limits on their paid employment and rarely accepted extended hours. While the after-hours work experienced by the breadwinning women did not include domestic chores, a challenge experienced by all of these mothers was the emotional work of reconnecting with their children. Moreover, many of the women positioned their partners as "mothers" because they are gentler, more comforting, and more nurturing than themselves. In addition, these women also claimed to exhibit practices associated with fathering such as discipline and rough play.

A second major theme in the book is what "going against the grain" looks like in families when both partners are sharing the earning work. In this study, "shift

workers” refers to couples who coordinate paid employment so that one parent is available to care for the children nearly all of the time. “Dual dividers” refers to parents that use outside childcare during their own standard work hours but who also share child care after work and share this responsibility all of the time. Shift-worker parents spend more time in caregiving than the other dual-earner couples but also saw themselves as more interchangeable across the range of earning and caring responsibilities. The most interesting challenges to conventional understandings of parenting were those of the same-sex couples because all were aware of the advocacy and educating they needed to do in their communities in order to reduce the possibility of homophobia directed against their children. While the same-sex couples did occasionally slot themselves in “mother” and “father” roles, these divisions faded fast when tasks within the family were performed.

The last theme in the book looks at couples who have been “going against the grain” for a long time in both earning and caring and who in general had encountered the most significant challenges to conventional expectations about mothering and fathering. These couples had similar work time commitments and an equal division of domestic labour and caring responsibilities outside of work hours. However, for the men in this group, employment was not something that they were particularly committed to or satisfied with. Thus they assumed a larger portion of caregiving to alleviate the burden on their wives and provide a solution to their childcare needs. In addition, with these couples the “gatekeeper” was not only assumed by women, but rather was something that was common among the fathers in this group as they too placed great emphasis on forming close bonds with their children. Thus the couples in this “crossover” group show that fathers’ increased participation in childcare does not directly lead to equality or the “undoing” of gender, but rather that patterns of inequality must be resisted or they will inevitably become engrained.

Ranson concludes that while change in contemporary Canadian families is slow it is nonetheless persistent. Change is not solely about men staying home and performing caregiving tasks while women go to work and provide for the family. Change is having each parent perform the same tasks equally. This will create a functional interchangeability of roles between both parents in the household. Ranson’s book makes an important contribution to scholarship on gender and parenthood because it focuses on the unconventional division of labour and how parents negotiate the transition away from traditional roles of parenting. This book is easy and enjoyable reading which is well suited for any undergraduate or graduate course in sociology or anthropology that covers issues of gender, sexuality and social constructions of parenting.

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