

Arnstein Aassve

Malcolm Brynin, John Ermisch (eds.), **Changing Relationships**. London: Routledge, 2008, 244 pp

(doi: 10.2383/32065)

Sociologica (ISSN 1971-8853)

Fascicolo 1, gennaio-aprile 2010

Ente di afferenza:

()

Copyright © by Società editrice il Mulino, Bologna. Tutti i diritti sono riservati.

Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it>

Licenza d'uso

Questo articolo è reso disponibile con licenza CC BY NC ND. Per altre informazioni si veda <https://www.rivisteweb.it/>

Malcolm Brynin, John Ermisch (eds.), *Changing Relationships*. London: Routledge, 2008, 244 pp.

doi: 10.2383/32065

Coming from the field of demography, a discipline that almost by definition is inter-disciplinary, one relies on both sociology and economics to enhance ones understanding of demographic phenomena. It is interesting, albeit disappointing, to see how poorly the two disciplines often communicate. Sociologists tend to criticise economics for having a too simplistic view on social phenomena, whereas economics criticise sociology for being too vague and imprecise on their theoretical and empirical implementations. Whereas, sociology is good at emphasising the shortcomings of economics, one often gets the impression that the economists ignore the insights from sociology all together. How stimulating it is then to find a book which introduces the topic from both angles. The book concerns the many facets of social relationships, many of which are new and emerging in our societies, other more established in the sphere of social science research. The book is edited by Malcolm Brynin and John Ermisch from the Institute for Economic and Social Research (ISER), an empirical driven research centre located between the Economics and Sociology departments at University of Essex. The book is in large part a tribute to the British Household Panel Survey (BHPS), now with 17 waves. The contributions are made by ISER staff and gives important insights into how relationships are indeed changing and evolving. The book is divided in two parts – the first concerning “Forming and maintaining relationships” whereas the second part deals with “Relationships and social welfare.” Its content derives from the key academic strengths of ISER namely a strong and rigorous empirical analysis based on an exceptional rich and high quality longitudinal survey. However, the book takes a rather broad view on what relationships entail, and the empirical analysis is not only based on the BHPS. It covers the “usual suspects” of marriage and cohabitation, childbearing and divorce, but also deals with new and emerging forms of relationships that are becoming commonplace in modern society. For instance, the second chapter deals with “Living Apart Together” that is, couples who are in a romantic relationship but do not live together. The analysis uses the BHPS and the German Socio Economic Panel to consider the dynamics of such relationships. That is, how do they form and how long do they last. The next chapter considers a novel way of analysing friendship networks. Again, interesting insights are drawn from the longitudinal nature of the BHPS. By following individuals over several waves one gets a good grasp of how friendship network change, and in particular how they change given key life course events, such as marriage, divorce and childbearing. Interestingly, the analysis confirms to a large extent the gendered nature of social networks, and in many cases, friendships cannot be easily distinguished from relatives.

The fourth chapter considers young individuals leaving the parental home. The analysis is based on the European Community Household Panel Survey (ECHP). It is an excellent summary of key papers published on this topic, though it also provides further insights, especially by the fact that the author also considers young individuals *returning* home. Independence is an elastic concept and leaving the parental home is certainly not the same as economic independence everywhere. The last two chapters of the first part of the book are of great interest. In a time where cohabitation is replacing marriage and

divorce is on the increase, one might expect larger differences between partners within couples. However, the analysis based on the BHPS suggests this is not the case. Thus, individuals tend to partner on similar attributes, which in turn suggests that individuals tend to match on the principle of equality rather than power differentials – such as the traditional male breadwinner model. The second part of the book considers relationships in light of social welfare. The first two chapters consider the relationships between parents and their children. The analysis focuses first on the interactions between parents and their children to assess if there is any impact on the welfare of the children. The second chapter considers the relationship between children and parents – when parents have reached retirement age. Both chapters give a very fine account of an emerging and hugely important literature. In the next chapter time-use data is combined with the BHPS as a means to construct a series of time-use estimates over couples' life cycle. In particular, one considers how the time-use patterns change with important life-course event – here the focus being on childbearing. The following chapters consider patterns of geographical mobility, the influence of early labour market experiences on family formation, whereas the two final chapters consider determinants and consequences of marital disruption.

Overall, this is an impressive book which truly highlights the benefits of long and high quality panel survey. Good for anyone interested in the many facets of individuals and couple relationships.

Arnstein Aassve
Università Bocconi, Milan