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Cities and Families

Research approach

Families with kids are like little welfare states. They prioritise something other than their market earnings and the adult earners tax themselves heavily in terms of both money and time to fulfil obligations to their dependents (Folbre 2001: 202).

The household provides one of two essential sites in which to unravel connections between home, work, the city and daily life. The other is the web of networks locating the household geographically and culturally; to social and kin networks, resource provision, information, knowledge, and learning. It is in relation to this milieu that strategies of behaviour are reflexively constituted. Couples seek to make sense of everyday experience at a level which is perceived to be ‘local’, within social networks of ‘sense-making, unravelling the complexities of colliding worlds; gender, generation, uncertainty and change’ (Kvale 1996: 52–58; Dyck 1990: 462). These settings transmit ‘mutual knowledge’ whereby ‘agents make sense of what others say and do’ (Giddens 1987: 99). This duality of people-place relations establishes the rationale for building three scales of analysis into the comparative perspectives presented in this book. First is the micro-social household scale of everyday decisions and behaviour. Second is the often neglected meso-scale of the city and its environment; the natural attributes and morphology of the place combined with its historic pattern of transport development and growth politics. Third is the macro-economic paradigm of the state. While the main focus is on the household and its internal relations of gender, generation, identity and power, the
enquiry is at all times conducted as a situated analysis. Consequently all three scales are built into the research approach.

Taking the household as the primary ‘lens’ through which to view contemporary restructuring builds on a broad consensus along the lines that the home (and its inhabitants) provides greater salience to individual life chance than the workplace (Hodgson 1988; Morris 1990; Allen and Hamnett 1991). This is because the individual worker is attached to a household institution and therefore rarely acts outside this context (Williams and Windebank 1995; Jarvis 1997: 523). It is within the household that individual and group interests are compromised and continuous adjustments are made to changing events through ‘a multiplicity of often minor processes’ (Foucault 1977: 138). This way the household should be viewed as neither a ‘helpless victim’ of changing economic situations or as the systematic master of a bounded domestic universe (Thrift 1995: 29–31). Consequently this book peers inside the ‘black box’ of household decision-making, understanding this as a site of conflict and negotiation (of gender roles, labour divisions, power relations and over the allocation of resources) (Sen 1990; Burgoyne 1990).

At all times the household research considers a specific sub-population of middle class (mainly white) two parent families. Working families which fit the criteria were selected in batches of twenty across five equivalent case studies: three dynamic cities of varying size and status on the US West Coast (San Francisco, Seattle and Portland); and two similarly buoyant high-status UK cities of contrasting size (London and Edinburgh). This chapter provides a brief outline of the research approach (further technical details are provided in Appendix A). Discussion then turns to the overall context of the household research, namely the ‘successful city’ and extreme market liberalism. An important debate within which to locate the study is that relating to an apparent renaissance in city living and urban cultural cachet. This is introduced in relation to an uneasy alliance between urbanism and environmentalism which is suggested in a popular ‘new urbanism’. Finally, selection of the working families is considered together with the way they are represented in particular neighbourhood settings in the following chapters.

The research replicates a well established two-tier schema combining intensive in-depth analysis of household biographies and narrative vignettes with extensive secondary data in a complementary mixed method approach (Sayer 1992; Jarvis et al. 2001). This time-consuming approach allows active engagement with evidence of attitudes and