

Grandparents and the Law: Rights and Relationships

ed. by Samantha M. Davey and Jaime Lindsey

Hart
2023
239 pages
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This book deals with legislation in England and Wales, and beyond, on the rights of grandparents, yet it is of immense interest to sociologists focusing on family life. Many of the chapters deal with whether, and if so how, rights for grandparents could be incorporated into law in England and Wales. There are three chapters illustrating the different legal positions and cultural and social circumstances in Iran, France and Nepal.

This book makes a welcome contribution to what we know about the frameworks that sustain important family relationships, and which also enable change to them through the modification of 'heteronormative' assumptions. This releases the space for a relational perspective to take hold and possibly give more voice to grandparents.

Up to 40% of grandparents over the age of 50 provide regular care for their grandchildren. The evidence suggests that their importance in the lives of the grandchildren extends to making them significant figures still as they enter adulthood. When a marriage, or a couple, faces a breakdown in their relationship the courts and legal frameworks have minimised, and in many cases ignored, the practical involvement that grandparents can have on an everyday basis. As the editors comment, grandparents have no specific legal rights in the laws of England and Wales, with a blanket preference

instead being shown towards parents (p.13).

Placing the focus on grandparents and their legal status may shed new light on the navigation of informal caring practices within families. We know that with new parents having children later in life and grandparents now likely to live for longer than in previous years, changing patterns may emerge. Looking after children as grandparents while the parents are working may merge into those same children a few years later helping their now less agile grandparents.

Grandparents and the Law also gives us valuable insights from a different angle, namely into unpaid work. It helps to penetrate some of the felt obligations, duties and sometimes simple love which find expression in the world of work done without a price tag attached.

If the primary consideration is to have the best interest of the child in mind (United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child; European Court of Human Rights), it is argued that a review is required into the grandparent-grandchild relationship in the law in England and Wales. By contrast, in France, as the chapter by Laure Sauvé underlines, the Civil Code now states that a "child has a right to maintain personal relations with his ancestors. Only the interest of the child can impede the exercise of such a right" (p.197). Whilst there is an important



Bookends

legal/cultural difference on display here in France, it remains the case that issues of parenthood are based largely on biological relationships, so that "non-biological family constellations (such as step-families) are often regulated differently than the blood family" (p.194), as applies of course to many other jurisdictions including England and Wales.

It is very good to have the French and other perspectives. In Iran, tradition and Shia jurisprudence give paternal grandparents a strong status; in Nepal grandparents have cultural influence, but in a relatively weak legal framework. More light from other comparative material would have been welcome.

The index excludes mention of authors (bibliographical detail are in footnotes). Their exclusion is frustrating if your interest is in the use of authors in the whole book (for the record, Mill is used chapter three, Luhmann in chapter seven!).

■ **Professor John Offer**
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amplified by the paucity of the 'structure vs agency' debate in today's sociological discourse.

In the analysis of social action, the author highlights the complementary effect Parsons and Goffman had on our current understanding of structure and social action. Specifically, Parsons' treatment of consensus in social structures was possibly misconstrued by his students, and the author points to Goffman's later and partially unfinished work and demonstrates how it adds to our understanding of Parsonian social structure. It thereby elegantly aligns with previous accounts of Goffman as a systematic social theorist, e.g. Giddens' *Social Theory and Modern Sociology*, and offers new ways to re-engage with his work pertaining to the 'interaction order'.

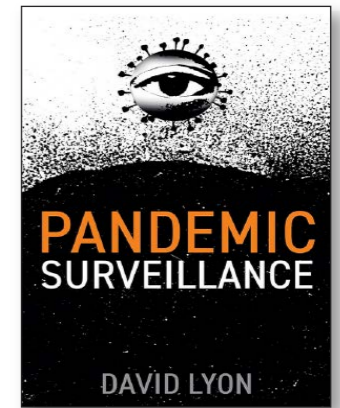
At the heart of the theoretical contribution

Reviews of recent books in social science and sociology

Pandemic Surveillance

David Lyon

Polity
2022
176 pages
£45 hbk £15.55 pbk
ISBN: 9781509550302



provoking journey as to how the Covid-19 pandemic has given birth to a new era of surveillance culture. Drawing on his extensive research in surveillance studies, Lyon meticulously dissects the diverse forms of surveillance that emerged during the pandemic and the often contentious and uneven impact they had on the liberties, rights and everyday lives of people.

The book doesn't shy away from addressing the critical challenges posed by the expansion of surveillance. One challenge is the extension of state power through the questionable use of technologies, such as the use of drones by local police in Italy to monitor curfew compliance, as well as the implementation of vaccine passports to strictly regulate borders. Lyon aptly coins the term 'surveillance capitalism' to describe how the private sector, through Big Data, became intertwined with the Covid-19 surveillance landscape by tapping into data generated by everyday users on platforms such as Facebook, WeChat, and Google. Surveillance capitalism has also unleashed a normalising of 'technological solutionism' that continues to sustain everyday activities remotely.

The book also adeptly links the rise of controversial surveillance methods to questions of power and who is allowed civil liberties in a state of emergency. Lyon reveals the disproportionate and uneven impact of pandemic surveillance, pointing to the increased policing and monitoring of

marginalised communities. For instance, he cites the unsettling use of contact tracing mechanisms in Minnesota, US, to identify Black Lives Matter protesters in June 2020, and the encroachment on liberties for Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank through Israel's controversial contact tracing app with Shin Bet.

However, the book only scratches the surface of the intricate relationship between surveillance and racism. While the racialised nature of surveillance is not a novel concern, the Covid-19 pandemic brought this issue into sharper focus. Yet, despite the rich array of examples in the book, Lyon's exploration falls short of fully addressing the profound implications of surveillance on racialised communities that unevenly bear the brunt of these technologies in the name of public safety.

Nevertheless, *Pandemic Surveillance* is a compelling and timely exploration of how the Covid-19 pandemic reshaped the surveillance landscape. It provides a valuable contribution to the ongoing sociological debates about the delicate balance between public safety and personal freedoms, especially in moments of uncertainty and crisis. The thoroughly crafted blend of empirical examples and theoretical discussions, presented in an engaging and accessible style, makes this book a fascinating read for anyone interested in the future of surveillance in a post Covid-19 era.

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Structure and Social Action:

On Constituting and
Connecting Social Worlds

John Scott

2022

120 pages

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ISBN 9781802628005

This book captures the main protagonists of European and American sociological theory of the 20th century and brings their work together in simultaneous conversation around structure and social action. By elaborating on the historical context and emergence of social structure in sociological thought, the book provides unique insight into what shapes our common assumptions as social theorists today.

The author's work illuminates the fact that prior debates in the social sciences around structure and agency may have been slightly misplaced and, through a rigorous historic analysis, shows that the assumptions we all hold today do indeed derive from a cumulative and iterative process of theory-building around 'social action', particularly by Parsons and Goffman. The argument is

as formational structures may inform figurational structures and researchers may infer theoretical insights through, for instance, structural equivalence. Block modelling is used as an illustration of the way the formational structures can inform the nature of the social network. The preceding concepts are brought together on a macro-level in a case study on class conflict in France. Through this, the multi-level analysis is completed.

Rather than revive the debate around structure and agency, the book coherently places social structure in a historic context and develops its explanatory potential. While it seems that Scott argues what modern sociology has learnt to assume, namely, that social structures are produced, reproduced and transformed through social action, the

author thereby highlights that this precisely forms the need for sociology as a discipline to focus on both aspects, empirically and theoretically. The introduction of figurational and formational structures can aid in this process.

The book is not only of importance to social and organisation theorists, but the constructs Scott develops will be useful for researchers studying social and informal networks at work and offers a theoretical approach to multi-level analysis in inter-organisational networks. Figuratively, the book may undoubtedly provide a rich and sturdy 'baseline' for those researchers with empirical and theoretical interests in social and organisational networks more broadly.

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