

**Julia Brannen and Ann Nilsen**

**A collaborator par excellence: reflections upon Sue Lewis' contribution to cross-national research in the work-family field**

**Revised 25 November 2015**

**ABSTRACT**

This paper will discuss the development of work-family research in the UK and cross nationally, and the critical contribution of Suzan Lewis to this field. The first part of the paper focusses on the ways in which, in the context of the growth of dual earner lifestyles in Britain, Suzan's work made a key contribution. A central part of this story is also the collaborative role that Sue played both through initiating projects across universities in the UK but also in carrying out European Union-funded research and more widely, including leading multi-national teams. In particular, two studies will be considered: Young people's views about their future work and family lives (Futures on hold); and Gender, Parenthood and the Changing European Workplace (Transitions). The paper points to some of the key prerequisites necessary for working in cross-national research teams and the conduct of high quality, qualitative cross-national research, especially studies that address different layers of social context.

Ce papier examinera le développement de la recherche travail-famille tant internationalement que dans la Royaume-Uni, et de la contribution critique de Suzan Lewis à ce domaine. La première partie du papier se concentre sur la façon dont, dans le contexte de la croissance des modes de vie les deux conjoints travaillent en Grande-Bretagne, le travail de Suzan apporté une contribution essentielle. Un élément central de cette histoire est aussi le rôle de collaboration que Sue a joué à la fois par le lancement de projets dans les universités au Royaume-Uni, mais aussi dans la réalisation de la recherche européenne financée par l'Union Européenne et, plus largement, y compris la direction d'équipes multi-nationales. En particulier, deux recherches scientifiques seront examinées: les opinions des jeunes au sujet de leurs obligations professionnelles et familiales vies futures (Futures en attente); et le sexe, parentale et l'emploi transformé en Europe (Transitions). Le papier propose des conditions nécessaires pour travailler dans les équipes de recherche transnationales et la conduite de haute qualité la recherche transnationale qualitative, en particulier les études qui portent sur différents niveaux de contexte social.

**PAPER**

Work-family research, as it came to be known, began in Britain in the 1960s with the research of Rhona and Robert Rapoport. As the obituary for Rhona Rapoport stated, their 'article Work and Family in Contemporary Society .... published in *American Sociological Review* in 1965 challenged [the] traditional mindset and launched a new discipline just as women were entering the workforce in large numbers. Their study examined what they called the "normal crises" of young couples leaving university, getting married and finding their first jobs.' (The Guardian 10 January 2012).

Although as a budding family sociologist one of us, Julia, knew the Rapoport and their work in the 1970s, Julia did not encounter Suzan Lewis, an organisational psychologist, until the 1980s. Julia's memory of her first encounter with Sue was a telephone call in which they not only discussed their mutual interest in working couples with children, work that engaged both of them personally as working mothers, but also their mutual research that was at that time ahead of maternal employment trends in Britain. The number of mothers of young children returning to work after childbirth only escalated in the UK in the late 1980s.

Coincidentally Sue's interest in maternal employment and dual earner couples converged with work that Julia was undertaking in the 1980s with Peter Moss on dual earner families, in particular following mothers as they returned to work after maternity leave and subsequently (*Managing Mothers 1991*). Both studies were interestingly longitudinal in design. Sue's first book (with Carey Cooper), entitled *Career Couples; Contemporary Lifestyles and How to Manage Them* (1989), was the first to question the received wisdom in this country that the transition to dual earner parenthood after the birth of the first child was necessarily more stressful than for those mothers in single (male headed) earner households. That she found evidence to the contrary was a surprising finding given that most mothers in dual earner households continued to take the major responsibility in the home.

By the time Sue's and the work of Brannen and Moss was published, their research began to chime with the times, in particular with UK maternal employment trends. Suddenly the research was seen as policy relevant. Indeed the work also became relevant in other ways, in particular with the growing deregulation of the labour market that was heralded by Thatcher's rise to power in 1979.

As this Special Issue demonstrates, Sue has been a pioneer and research leader in this area both in Europe but also in other countries including the global South (for example, Lewis, Izraeli and Hootsmans 1992; Gambles, Lewis and Rapoport 2006). Over more than thirty five years Sue developed and consolidated her interests in the changing workplace in relation to the reconciliation of work and family responsibilities. She has also focussed on the consequences of globalisation and new technology, and the ways in which organisations are gendered and act in gendered ways (e.g. Lewis 2010, Lewis and Humbert 2010). Her approach is particularly renowned by her interrogation of work-family policies introduced by employers and the state and how they are enacted (or not) in practice. Early on she identified the trend towards flexible employment policies that were adopted in workplaces in the 1980s and 1990s, a practice she regarded with scepticism as largely employer-led and adopted for employers' own benefit rather than for those of employees (e.g. Lewis 1997). Among Sue's many other theoretical and substantive contributions to this important field have been her development and application of the concept of 'entitlement to support' for employees' caring responsibilities and the ways in which she with her colleague, Janet Smithson, have shown how this sense of entitlement to state and employer support is shaped by the national context – by the gender contract and the welfare state (Lewis and Smithson 2001).

Based on our experience of working with Sue including organising seminars and workshops, writing together and doing team research, it is clear that one of her hallmarks is her considerable skill as a mediator and collaborator. Sue leads in ways that always make working with or for her a positive experience. Furthermore, such is Sue's ability as a research leader that she rarely draws attention to her senior status and authority. Another hallmark of Sue's work is her commitment to what used to be called action research and what today is now mainstream, that is, to ensure that those taking part in research, or are the relevant audiences for it, are seen as active parties in the research process. Sue has led the way in encouraging researchers to take their findings back to those they study, especially to those in organisational contexts. Many of us who worked with her learned not only how to develop these skills in practice but also the value of the process to the development of knowledge.

In the remaining part of this paper to celebrate the contribution of Suzan Lewis we would like to focus on two particular projects in which both of us were among Sue's collaborators. We would like in our reflections on the projects to draw out their particular significance to the field and what we learned from Sue during these collaborations. Given that most of the collaborations in which we have been involved relate to cross-national work, we propose to preface the discussion the following projects to which Sue made a significant contribution with some points about the nature of collaborative work in an international context, something about which Sue has not only offered an exemplary role model but also written (for example, Lewis and Smithson 2006, Lewis and Brannen 2011).

### **Collaborative research in an international context**

Cross national research requires governance. This takes place at different layers or levels of context. At the time that Sue was a coordinator of international teams it was common for British researchers to take on that role. They have the advantage of being native English speakers, the language in which most international research is conducted and so they also have the advantage in bid writing and communication. Moreover, British researchers were well prepared to take on the role of research entrepreneur (Tennom 1995) because neoliberalism had taken root and permeated academe earlier in the UK than in some other countries and, from the 1980s, it had become an important driver of social science research culture. Social science had not only to be 'useful' (via policy relevance and impact), it had to compete in the knowledge world (Brannen 2009). As Sue and Julia wrote in a chapter (Lewis and Brannen 2011) about research collaboration in an international context, the teams in which we worked exhibited, 'a great diversity of age, experience and occupational status. Not only were members experts on their own national contexts but they also brought different perspectives, expectations and approaches - as sociologists, psychologists and demographers. They had diverse expertise in the study of organisations, families and social policy, different types of methodological expertise, and approached the topic of the research through different generational and life course lenses, all of which enriched the research process.' (p 276)

In the cross-national studies such as those in which we have worked together, some of us were located in traditional university teaching departments with secure established posts,

while others were employed in research institutes where employment was dependent on the research funding raised and more used to working in research teams. Some were contract researchers whose jobs were tied to the particular research grants. Within this latter group there were differences. There were those with lesser experience who were embarked on masters degrees and postdoctoral programmes and located in hierarchical settings; others were working in research institutes with flatter working structures. This latter group (mainly British researchers) tended to have extensive experience of marketing themselves in a national research market.

Such diversity can be productive and open up new ways of thinking and working. It can also be challenging especially in a large international team. Size and diversity do not lend themselves easily to achieving consensus especially when they interact with different styles of communication and argumentation as well as different research traditions, theoretical perspectives and interests. Other inequalities lay beneath the surface. In Europe, countries typically range from those at the top of the European index of economic prosperity to those at the bottom. These differences are reflected in the financial resources made available under European Union funding rules to each country team, so that teams in poorer countries are allocated lower amounts of funding because research costs are lower compared with teams in richer countries where research costs are higher. In addition, researchers in the different countries are often differentially supported by their own institutions/departments, with some richer countries keen to be included in European Union research projects subsidising the costs.

Sue has contributed hugely in her practical and methodological insights into how to make cross-national work a truly positive and collaborative experience. This positivity is refreshing especially to those who belong to disciplines that tend to thrive on critique. Undoubtedly Sue's own research on reconciling work and family life, together with the many years in which she sought to do this in her own life, have benefited these understandings and the way she practices research. As set out in several publications (Lewis and Smithson 2006, Lewis and Brannen 2011), Sue has contributed the following guidance to research in an international context, the main elements of which we set out below.

First is the importance of reflexivity, awareness and sensitivity to norms, cultures and expectations of the disciplines and traditions that researchers belong to. Sources of difference within cross-national teams need to be made explicit and framed as positive strengths. In studies of work-family matters, there is an additional opportunity to harness reflection upon personal experience.

Second, therefore, is the importance of giving time: time to get to know potential partners in advance of the project and so to assess the skills and strengths of team members in order to be able to work together fruitfully. It is also important to build time into project schedules at different stages so that team members fully share ownership in the decisions made, are in agreement with the conceptual frameworks adopted and have the time to train in the relevant methodologies (in cases where team members are unfamiliar with particular methods proposed). It is important that teams do not feel driven solely by the externalities of research proposals and research timetables. It therefore becomes critical to

encourage and provide opportunities for social interaction and discussion in cross-national teams. Cross-national research requires us also to take account of and understand the specificities of our own lives, cultures and contexts and to interrogate them.

Third, cross-national teams demand some flexibility despite the constraints of highly developed research proposals. Compromises and adjustments including to research plans and outputs have to be made. As Lewis and Brannen noted discussing their cross-national EU-funded seven country study called Transitions (to be discussed later), 'much of the cross-national analysis took place after the completion of the project, when most team members have moved on to new jobs or projects. This was a considerable loss. It takes time to digest and reflect on the findings from cross-national research and their significance and policy implications. The team concluded that a lesson for future EU projects might be to be less ambitious in terms of multiple deliverables throughout the project and in order to facilitate cross national analysis, to schedule in a number of analysis workshops and more visits and exchanges'.(p 283)

Fourth, and of particular relevance to working cross-nationally, is the importance of avoiding the trap of focussing on the 'national' level in making comparisons between the respective country data analyses. Other levels may be more critical, for example, depending upon the research question and design of the study, the organisational level if the study is designed to compare similar organisations in different countries, or the individual level, in the case of particular groups of working mothers.

Fifth, at a more practical level, judicious use of email and discussion forums should be made. However, this should not replace face to face interaction that can take place through regular meetings, study visits, training workshops, including capacity building for early career researchers. Spin off funding on a smaller scale can often be attached to international projects, forming bases for larger networks. In addition, attention should be given to formal workload management including responsibilities and timetables. The work package system that typifies EU Framework funding mechanisms under which we were funded, while helpful in many ways, can be a relentless driver of the research process. Attention has also to be given to other demands for outputs from researchers' own environments and according to the needs of their research careers. All this demands a lot of invisible work in cross-national research. Behind the scenes there is also a need, especially by those who are the project leaders and coordinators, to work hard at an interpersonal level to encourage group cohesion. Sue was such a mediator and conciliator *par excellence*.

### **Intimations of the future: the Futures on hold study**

One of Julia's first collaborations with Sue took place in the context of a longstanding Seminar Series that Julia ran with Gail Wilson, The Resources in Households Group, a project funded from different sources throughout the twelve years of its duration (1982-1994). At some time in the early 1990s Sue and Julia teamed up to organise a seminar at the London School of Economics for which Sue found funding from a private company, Pilkingtons Glass. A year or two later Sue approached Julia to see if she would be interested in developing some cross-national work around the theme of work and family. Sue gained funding from a

couple of sources and organised a workshop in Manchester to discuss it (Sue was at Manchester Metropolitan University at that time).

Next, some potential European partners were invited to Ljubljana in Slovenia to do some brain storming and the group came up with a new potential focus for research: to examine young people's orientations towards the future reconciliation of work and family life. In 1996 *The Reconciliation of Future Employment and Family Life: Understanding and Supporting the Family and Employment Orientations of Young People in Europe* was funded by the Employment and Social Affairs Directorate (DGV Fourth Action Programme on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men in the EU), a project that lasted for two years (Brannen, Lewis, Nilsen and Smithson 2002). In the same year Sue and Julia interviewed and appointed Dr Janet Smithson as the manager of the project. In addition, the project was supported by the Midland Bank, Manchester Training and Enterprise Council and the British Council. Some of the partners who joined the project (from UK, Ireland, Portugal, Sweden and Norway) also found funding from their own countries and institutions.

The project was a watershed on a number of counts. Firstly, it was our first experience of working as a cross-national team. This project became moreover a successful launch pad for future more ambitious large cross-national collaborations. Secondly, the project was significant in its focus in bringing young people into the 'work-family' frame and in being ahead of its time, signalling what has proved to be a current and increasingly problematic trend concerning young people in many European societies. In particular, it prefigured the ongoing uncertainty that accompanies the social transitions of many young people today in terms of finding secure well paid jobs commensurate with their qualifications, the problems of getting on to the housing ladder, and hence the difficulty of establishing the conditions for parenthood. Our first report *Futures on Hold* from the study was received with great interest by employers and policymakers at the time, especially in Britain and Portugal where it was also published. Thirdly, this project started life and was funded in a policy environment (an EU policy directorate). However, particularly in the writing of the book *Young Europeans, Work and Family: Futures in Transition*, (Brannen, Lewis, Nilsen and Smithson 2002) the approach we adopted took on a theoretical and methodological turn, a direction that usually happens in reverse because most funded research today is required to demonstrate through its 'outputs' its economic and societal impact.

The book contributed a number of significant developments several of which were led by Sue, in particular debates about the 'psychological contract', the significance of a sense of entitlement to work-family support, as well as the infusion of a life course perspective, the problematisation of the concept of time in young people's perspectives, the importance of giving equal weight to both sides of the individual-structural dynamic in interpreting young people's lives, and a critique of the accepted notion of adulthood - what it means to become a young woman/ young man. The discussion and application of these theoretical frames and debates meant that our methodological approach was not one dimensional. Thus we did not rely solely on our research participants' accounts of their lives but also sought to base our analysis in an institutional understanding of welfare states, local contexts and educational and workplace conditions in which the young people in each country were

situated. From a structural perspective we took into account the often 'silent discourses' that underpin respondent accounts of everyday life.

While Sue, Julia and Ann were in the final rounds of editing and finalising the book *Young Europeans, Work and Family. Futures in Transition* in the basement of the Thomas Coram Research Unit in London where Julia works, taking turns at two computers and working 24/7 for two days we began to talk about our next cross-national project. The idea of a follow up was a logical next step: what would the actual transition to parenthood be like for the cohort we had interviewed in the previous project?

### **Working parents across Europe: Transitions**

In the next project our objective was to examine how working mothers and fathers managed to combine employment and parenthood: 'how young European men and women working in public and private sector workplaces negotiate motherhood and fatherhood and work-family boundaries in the context of different national welfare regimes, family and employer support' (Lewis and Smithson Final Report 2006, p. 7). This time we sought funding under the European Union's Framework Programme (FP5), a programme that sought to develop the best European science to support European Union policies and encouraged methodological cooperation across several countries, including Eastern and Southern Europe. The full title of this medium sized project was *Gender, Parenthood and the Changing European Workplace*, and to which we gave the shorter name *Transitions*. Sue took a lead in writing the proposal for the new project. Were it not for Sue's unique management capability and determination, the project may not have been realised. Together we successfully developed a multi-layered design that was informed by a life course perspective, a design and approach that set the project apart from many similar initiatives at the time. As with all EU Framework proposals, the process of development was lengthy and complex. It involved engaging the cooperation of other partners in which Sue took a lead, negotiating with researchers in Bulgaria, France, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Slovenia, Sweden and the UK. The proposal development also involved garnering administrative support as well as much redrafting and many face-to-face meetings. On one such occasion Julia and Ann arrived by train from London to Manchester, Ann wearing Julia's husband's shoes that were several sizes too big because she had huge blisters from a pair of new shoes. Janet Smithson, who was to be the project manager and Sue's invaluable support as co-ordinator, also joined the meeting with her two week old first born child. Even with such diversions Sue managed to keep us all focussed on budgets and discussing the eleven work packages.

The research strategy that we adopted included a combination of approaches that involved largely qualitative methods. The research design was unusual and challenging because it sought to address three layers of context: the national public policy level including the welfare support and provision for working parents; the public discourses that addressed work-family issues as expressed in the media; the organisational contexts in which parents were employed that included private and public sector workplaces (a finance company and a social services department were studied in each country); and the individual biographical level of working mothers and fathers.

At the national level, we carried out documentary analysis of work-family discourses in the different countries and conducted secondary analysis of international data relating to the different countries concerning parenthood and employment. At the organisational level, we documented workplace policies concerning work-family issues, conducted interviews with managers at different levels of the organisations and held focus groups with parents employed in these workplaces. At the family and individual level, in depth biographical interviews and life lines were carried out with ten parents (mothers and fathers) drawn from each workplace who had at least one child under the age of 10. Our aim therefore was to understand how working parents fared in similar organisational contexts while being located in different countries. In order to examine the diversity of experience we also sought to compare within each organisation and country fathers with mothers, lone parents with couple parents and parents occupying different occupational statuses.

Each of the respective partners took responsibility for leading one of eleven work packages, with Sue taking overall responsibility for the project and liaison with the EU supported by Janet. Project meetings were held in all the partner countries. As well as being crucial to keeping the project on track, they were also important for training and discussion of sometimes difficult issues. Importantly, they offered team members an opportunity to experience each of the contexts in which the study was being conducted.

In a large project like Transitions it takes time to come to terms with the sheer volume of data and their nuances and to do justice to the material in the analysis. The project produced a great number of publications. We disseminated our work in report form (one for each work package) as required by the protocols of EU research and through numerous co-authored papers and book chapters written by different partners in different combinations. Papers were given at seminars and conferences in international arenas and also in each national context.

There was also the additional challenge of how to bring the different levels of analysis together. Moreover, when funding has finished it is difficult for research teams to find the time and the money to do further analysis on the material and after a while the data become dated. However the project team, with Sue's encouragement, managed to publish two books within a respectable period of time after the end of the project funding. We reserved the focus of one book for the organisational level and another for the biographical level, while locating both sets of analyses within the national public policy contexts. Sue took a lead in editing the book based on the organisational case studies - *Work, Families and Organisations in Transition* (Lewis, Brannen and Nilsen 2009). The book brought together contributions from the seven countries in which organisational case studies were carried out. Some of the important insights offered by the book were those with which Sue has concerned herself over her academic career, one of which is the accelerating pace of work faced by working parents of young children in the workplace. Another insight suggested that working parents in the private sector shared many of the same conditions across the European countries. By contrast, parents working in (public sector) social services, in spite of being organised very differently across contexts, enjoyed on the whole better employment conditions. However, at the time of writing the book the conditions in the public sector

were eroding as the neoliberal business principles of efficiency and work intensification spread from the private sector. At the same time, we found that national policies for the support of working parents varied widely across Europe thereby validating our research strategy of exploring policies and practices at different levels of social context. The research findings pointed to the variation in the policies themselves, the extent to which employers implement policies, the variation in the take up of policies by employees and also the ways in which policies, while seemingly framed in non gendered terms, are biased towards mothers.

Sue was also very important in writing a second book from the project - *Transitions to parenthood in Europe: A comparative life course perspective* (Nilsen, Brannen and Lewis 2012) that was based on the individual biographical interviews with mothers and fathers. Some of its findings highlight the importance of adopting a temporal frame of understanding when discussing issues of motherhood and fatherhood. Extending attention to individual cases over time and over the life course served to expand the knowledge produced in the first book which focussed on the parents' situation in specific work organisations. The value of the individual case material lies in its specificity, demonstrating how policies work in particular contexts and under the particular conditions in which individuals find themselves. It also points to the conditions needed to support and sustain future generations of working families in those conditions.

Not long after the completion of this last book Sue suddenly developed a life threatening illness. Her condition was critical for several months but her stamina and positive attitude to life sustained her in that terrible time. Mercifully she recovered and slowly regained her former strength. At the launch of *Transitions to parenthood in Europe* in 2012 Sue was her old self again and the whole team took part in the book launch in London, which also became a celebration of Sue's recovery.

### **Concluding remarks**

In this paper we have discussed the development of work-family research both in the UK and internationally with reference to some of Sue Lewis' key contributions to this field over the past three decades. Sue's outstanding impact in the role of collaborator and project initiator has been illustrated in two qualitative cross-national projects in which we, the authors of this paper, were involved. Her unique management style, which combines a positive and optimistic outlook on life with a wonderful sense of humour and complete lack of self-importance, has made working with Sue an experience of pure joy.

Our experiences suggest that there is much that can be learned in applying chiefly qualitative methods within a large and multi-disciplinary cross-national research team. The example that Sue has set cannot be readily be summed up. But it points to some of the prerequisites for taking forward cross-national research, whatever its methodology, in the future. Of key importance is the value of difference and to capitalise on different approaches, disciplines, backgrounds and personal characteristics within a cross-national team. To do this requires investing in the relational aspects of research. It means carrying others with you: understanding and listening to other team members, communicating

clearly and consulting with others and acting sensitively. The conditions for the genesis of the research project are crucial, in particular the creation of possibilities for team members to be involved in the proposal writing and, during the project's life span, in the writing up of the outputs from the study. Good cross-national research is like all research but the issues are writ large, requiring talented leadership and imagination as well as considerable methodological expertise, especially in research design and analysis.

## References

Brannen, J. Lewis, S Nilsen, A and Smithson, J (2002) *Young Europeans, Work and Family. Futures in Transition*, London: Routledge.

Brannen, J (2009) *How do we know Europe? Theory and methodology for comparative studies; a response* European Sociological Association, Lisbon, September.

Brannen, J, and Moss, P (1991) *Managing Mothers: Dual earner households after maternity leave*, London: Unwin Hyman

Gambles, R, Lewis, S. and Rapoport, R (2006). *The Myth of Work-Life Balance. The Challenge of our Time. Men, Women, and Societies* Wiley (translated into |Danish and Greek)

Lewis, S. and Cooper, C.L. 1989 *Career Couples; Contemporary Lifestyles and How to Manage Them*. London: Unwin Hyman.

Lewis, S., Izraeli, D. and Hootsmans, H. (eds) (1992) *Dual Earner Families. International Perspectives*. London: Sage

Lewis, S (1997) Family friendly policies. Organisational culture change or playing around at the margins? *Gender, Work and Organisation*, 4 13-23

Lewis, S and Smithson, J (2006) Final Report, Gender, parenthood and the changing European workplace: Young adults negotiating the work-family boundary (TRANSITIONS). Brussels: European Commission

Lewis, S and Brannen, J (2011) Reflections on working in cross national research teams in I Hojer and S Hojer (eds) *Familj, vardagsliv och modernitet* Goteborg: Goteborg Universitet

Lewis, S and Smithson, J (2001) Sense of entitlement to support for the reconciliation of employment and family life *Human Relations* 55(11). 1455-1481

Lewis, S and Humbert, A (2010) Discourse or reality? "Work-life balance", flexible working policies and gendered organisations *Equality, Diversity and Inclusion: An International Journal* 29,3, 239 - 254

Lewis, S (2010) Reflecting on impact, changes and continuities: Restructuring workplace cultures: the ultimate work-family challenge? *Gender and Management*, 25 5 348-354

Lewis, S Brannen J and Nilsen A (2009) (eds) *Work, Family and Organisations in Transition: European Perspectives* Bristol: Policy Press

Nilsen, A J. Brannen, S. Lewis (eds) (2012) *Transitions to Parenthood in Europe. A comparative life course perspective*. Bristol: Policy Press

Tennom, J (1995) European research communities: France versus the United Kingdom, *The Puzzle of Integration. European Youth Policy and Research (CYRCE)*, Vol. 1: 261–281.