

Understanding the Couple Norm: Concepts and Comparisons Across Europe

Roseneil, Sasha, Isabel Crowhurst, Tone Hellesund, Ana Cristina Santos and Mariya Stoilova. 2020. *The Tenacity of the Couple-Norm: Intimate Citizenship Regimes in a Changing Europe*. London: UCL Press. (296 pages)

DEPARTING FROM THE concept of intimate citizenship regimes, this book offers a detailed analysis of how the UK, Bulgaria, Norway and Portugal have historically regulated intimate relationships by law and social policy, and how people today experience the couple norm while living outside conventional heterosexual and coupled relationships. It delves into the different countries' intimate citizenship regimes, and case studies on living with and against the couple norm in London, Sofia, Oslo and Lisbon respectively. By using the concept intimate citizenship regimes, the authors aim to capture norms and practices related to intimate life, as well as the legal, social and cultural conditions which provide a framework for people's relationships. The case studies consist of 16 interviews (drawn from a total of 67 interviews in the project) that are analysed in-depth using a biographical-narrative interpretive method. There is a thorough methodological discussion which is an excellent

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source of inspiration for anyone looking to delve deeper into narrative methods and life stories.

The couple norm is the focal point of the analyses, but the authors also develop the relationship between the couple norm and other norms. The intimate citizenship regimes are said to consist of four core norms: the couple norm, the gender norm of differentiation and hierarchization, the hetero norm, and the procreative norm. These are said to intertwine and strengthen each other but they are also analytically distinguishable from one another. Focusing on the couple norm is important for the contribution of these analyses, as it allows for an in-depth understanding of how this specific norm operates.

The authors describe changes that have resulted in less repression of same-sex relationships, a strengthening of the rights of women, and a move away from regulations that only accept life-long marital relationships. This development is most pronounced in the UK, Norway and Portugal, while Bulgaria has tended to shift back and forth, for instance regarding views on same-sex relationships. The overall conclusion of the book is however that in all four countries, cohabiting couples remain at the center for social policy as well as legal regulations. The book balances the ambition of sketching larger European patterns and tendencies and highlighting the differences between the countries well.

One of the main contributions of the book is the development of concepts for understanding the tenacity of the couple norm. The authors point out how the capaciousness of the norm allows for it to be supported in a multitude of ways that can shift over time and between places. A pairing of the concepts *expectation* and *injunction* is used to capture a continuum between more subtle social and cultural pressure on the one hand and more rigid regulation on the other. The pairing of these concepts using a bi-directional arrow (expectation↔injunction) works to join different types of normative components together. This is very convincing in some cases, for example when it comes to marriage, as it shows how the legal and social aspects of the imperative to marry can work in tandem. Similarly, the authors show how family approval

and ideals of homogamy (marrying/partnering with someone who is similar to you) work in both soft and hard ways to control life choices and to push toward coupledness. Their analysis here works to dissolve the dichotomy of autonomously initiated and arranged marriages, as it reveals how strong the ideal of family approval is, also in families from majority-groups in these different European countries. In other cases, the conceptual pairing of expectation↔injunction is less convincing. As a reader, I am left wondering why, in some cases where more rigid regulations are absent, expectation is not used on its own. When it comes to love and relationship work, for example, there are clearly expectations of these dimensions in a coupled relationship, but it is not supported that there are also injunctions, and it might have benefited the analysis to distinguish somewhat between the amount of pressure/regulation that is exerted.

One aspect in which I find the book lacking is how the authors deal with life choices that in different ways go beyond the heterosexual couple norm. Being single, living with friends or in a same-sex relationship are consistently brought to the fore of the analysis, in a very relevant way. However, consensual non-monogamy (CNM) or polyamory, is not highlighted in the book, even though there is at least one example of an open relationship among the interviewees. I think it would have benefited the analysis to take these types of relationships more seriously and incorporate the growing field of CNM-studies, which one of the authors, Ana Cristina Santos, is a part of. Resisting the couple norm by for example choosing *not* to enter a coupled intimate relationship, is very different from resisting the same norm by entering into non-coupled intimate relationships. Taking these nuances into account would have been an interesting way to develop the arguments made.

Finally, I want to emphasise that *The Tenacity of the Couple-Norm: Intimate Citizenship Regimes in a Changing Europe*, in a multi-faceted way captures how the couple norm operates to promote coupledness as the main way to reach “normal” and respectable adulthood. By detailing the specificities of these different European countries’ intimate citizenship

regimes, as well as their similarities, the authors manage to formulate a cohesive conceptualization of the couple norm without losing sight of nuance or change. I would highly recommend this book to anyone interested in contemporary intimate relationships.

CATRINE ANDERSSON

MALMÖ UNIVERSITET