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THE HANDS THAT (YET) ROCK
THE CRADLE: UNVEILING THE
SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF
THE FAMILY THROUGH THE
CONTEMPORARY BIRTHING
RITUAL

Rosalina Pisco Costa

ABSTRACT

Despite all recent changes in families, and maybe because of them, the
birth of a child remains an event of intense expectation, investment, and
symbolic meaning. In this chapter, we offer a simultaneously new, inno-
\vative, and contemporary perspective on the social construction of the
family through the lens of family rituals, specifically directed to the post-
natal hospital visit following the birth of a child. The raw data were col-
lected through episodic interviews carried out to Portuguese middle-class
men and women. A qualitative content analysis of their detailed descrip-
tions was then conducted making use of software NVivo. The sociological
perspective we used allows us to conclude that the moment of the birth of

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a child is a quintessential time—space for the social construction of the family. Around the baby, for the task of rocking the cradle, men and women join and take on their old and new roles. While the postnatal hospital visit allows the presentation of the newborn family member for the extended family and friends, it strongly underlies the strategies and senses of belonging to one particular family, thereby serving the purpose of its social construction.

**Keywords:** Family rituals; birth; postnatal hospital visit; liminal stage; small talks; social construction of reality

**BEHIND CHANGING STATISTICS: BIRTH (STILL) MATTERS**

As fertility rates do not seem to stop its downward in Western countries, the moment of the birth of a child remains an event of intense affective investment, expectation, and symbolic meaning (Gillis, 1996; Miller, 2005, 2010). A universal phenomenon, which anticipation and experience is socially diverse, the birth of a child has always attracted the interest of social scientists. From their different perspectives, demographers, economists, psychologists, anthropologists, and sociologists are unanimous in considering the social importance of the birth of a child, in the individual biography, in the family life course, or as far as the community and the larger society are concerned.

Over the past few years, birth came down the center of the social and political agenda, mainly due to the recent demographic rates’ evolution and expected future trends, which in Western countries seriously compromise the replacement of generations. Portugal is no exception. In this country, the decrease of birth and fertility rates started in the late 1920s, when the birth rate went down the 30‰ (Nazareth, 1979); however, the most profound changes occurred mostly after the 1960s. Until that time, Portugal had, in the European context, high birth and fertility values and rates, as well as strong territorial differences: the North having the highest values while the South and Lisbon region (the capital) registering the lowest ones (Almeida et al., 1995; Almeida, André, & Lalanda, 2002; Carrilho, 2002). Since then, Portuguese fertility had a distant evolution in relation to the traditional model, with a reduction greater than 50% in the birth and fertility rates, as well as in the total fertility rate. At the same time, the number of living births outside marriage, the women mean age at first childbirth,