

Contemporary Perspectives in Family Research  
Volume 7

# Visions of the 21st Century Family: Transforming Structures and Identities

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9 THE FAMILY THROUGH THE  
11 CONTEMPORARY BIRTHING  
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21 **ABSTRACT**

23 *Despite all recent changes in families, and maybe because of them, the*  
25 *birth of a child remains an event of intense expectation, investment, and*  
27 *symbolic meaning. In this chapter, we offer a simultaneously new, inno-*  
29 *vative, and contemporary perspective on the social construction of the*  
31 *family through the lens of family rituals, specifically directed to the post-*  
33 *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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37 **Visions of the 21st Century Family: Transforming Structures and Identities**  
39 **Contemporary Perspectives in Family Research, Volume 7, 105–131**  
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**ISSN: 1530-3535/doi:10.1108/S1530-3535(2013)0000007007**

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

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

### 13 **BEHIND CHANGING STATISTICS:** 15 **BIRTH (STILL) MATTERS**

17 As fertility rates do not seem to stop its downward in Western countries,  
 19 the moment of the birth of a child remains an event of intense affective  
 21 investment, expectation, and symbolic meaning (Gillis, 1996; Miller, 2005,  
 23 2010). A universal phenomenon, which anticipation and experience is  
 25 socially diverse, the birth of a child has always attracted the interest of  
 social scientists. From their different perspectives, demographers, econo-  
 mists, 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 lar-  
 ger 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 pro-  
 found 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 ferti-  
 lity 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,

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