

## **Moral Dimensions of the Work-Family Nexus**

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In recent decades, transformations in family and work life in the United States have led to widespread feelings of conflict between these two domains. This essay argues that the massive scholarly literature on work-family conflict has largely ignored the moral dimensions of this social issue. This literature is hamstrung by a model of human action that is simultaneously too individualistically strategic and too universally passive. I then draw on a largely separate research stream that has analyzed the institutions of the family and the workplace as imbued with moral meanings, prescriptions, and prohibitions. Crafting a moral lens from this approach could help the work-family literature transcend some theoretical limitations and solve some empirical puzzles. I encourage a model of human action that recognizes more ideological constraint (personal beliefs are structured by socially-constructed moral commitments) and more creativity (by which people make their work-family situations meaningful and honorable).

### **Demographic Change and the Literature on Work-Family Conflict**

In the last forty years, family and work life in the United States have been transformed by rising numbers of employed mothers and single parent families. In 1965, 45 percent of mothers of children under age 18 were employed; by 2000 that figure had risen to 78 percent (Bianchi & Raley 2005, p. 26). By 2008, less than one fifth of U.S. families were of the breadwinner father-homemaker mother variety, and 49 percent of the nation's jobs were held by women. At the same time, work has become more intensely demanding for some and more insecure and precarious for others (Jacobs & Gerson 2004).

A burgeoning scholarly literature has examined the problem of experiencing work-family conflict, a worker's perception that "the demands of work and family roles are incompatible in some respect so that participation in one role is more difficult because of participation in the other role" (Voydanoff, 2004, p. 399). Studies suggest that over a third to more than half of U.S. workers are afflicted by the sense of work-family conflict, while similar numbers feel overworked (Reynolds 2003; Jacobs & Gerson 2004) and always rushed (Bianchi & Riley 2005).

Work-family scholarship has been enormously fruitful.<sup>ii</sup> However, it has generally been hamstrung by two dominant assumptions which, in turn, grant people too little and too much agency with respect to broader cultural and social structures. These assumptions posit human beings as peculiarly dispassionate and morally neutral as we confront structural constraints and weigh costs and benefits of different options.

The first dominant assumption is that structural work and family conditions have near-universal effects on all U.S. workers with broadly similar demographic characteristics. For example, studies have documented that structural factors such as long work hours, work pressures, a lack of schedule control, parenthood, and especially motherhood aggravate the sense of work to family conflict by specified amounts.<sup>iii</sup> However, this research has overlooked whether variation in the

experience of work-family conflict among people in similar social locations could be based on their capacity to subjectively construct different meanings out of similar constraints.

Hitlin's broader critique of a missing analysis of morality in contemporary sociology argues that as "the discipline has become more and more focused on structural forces that shape individuals, less and less attention has been paid to the possibility that people make choices" (forthcoming, p. 16). In the case of the work-family literature, it is true that studies have produced increasingly sophisticated analyses of structural conditions aggravating felt work-family conflict. Yet in contrast to Hitlin's complaint, the problem is not that the literature has ignored choices. Rather, it is the literature's assumptions about the nature of human choice.

This observation leads to the second dominant assumption: that individuals consciously strategize, negotiate, cope with, and make rational trade-offs among workplace and family obligations.<sup>iv</sup> People are presumed to make choices, but these choices all end up being similar kinds of intentional strategies that maximize some kind of self-interest. Much of this literature seems to automatically assume that the populations under study are engaging in this kind of rational action. In contrast, Becker and Moen (1999) thoughtfully develop an explicit model of rational action, in which they analyze how couples deploy conscious and reflexive strategies to "scale back" at work after children are born.

The dominant assumptions of the work-family literature are used as short-hands for conducting much social scientific research, and they are valid for certain circumstances. However, they miss much of what happens in social life.

Some studies have complicated the first assumption, which is that structural factors have straightforward and consistent effects on work to family conflict. For example, some scholars add mediating or moderating effects to linear models (e.g., Gareis, Barnett & Chais 2002). Other research emphasizes the enriching effects of work on family and family on work (e.g., Rothbard 2001, Voydanoff 2004). For example, Bakker and Geurts (2004) find that the individual experience of feeling totally engrossed in one's work mediates the effect of autonomy on the positive effects of work on family life: "Several scholars have argued that workers may also benefit from combining work and family, and that *these benefits may outweigh the costs*" (emphasis added). In sum, studies that complicate the first assumption of universal structural effects generally retain the second assumption of strategic individualism and simply complicate the terrain that people negotiate.

These dominant assumptions in the work-family literature render the institutions of work and family as peculiarly amoral or perhaps morally neutral. This characterization is at odds with rich studies of the historical development of the Western nuclear family and capitalist organizations.

### **The Family and Workplace as Sites of Moral Meanings**

This section will briefly summarize the "separate spheres" literature on the development of the Western family as well as Weber's insights into the devotion to work as a calling. The contemporary Western family has its cultural roots in a middle class "separate spheres" ideology of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. This separate spheres ideology began forming when production

began shifting from family farms to factories, and when distinctions appeared between men's wage labor in the public sphere and women's domestic work in the private sphere (Cott 1977). This ideology conceptualized the division of labor as a gendered division of *moral* labor that socially sanctioned conduct as right or wrong (Gerson 2002). Women were seen as uniquely called to be full-time defenders of a pious, private family life, protected from the competitive marketplace. At this time, the cultural understanding emerged of children as sacred and fragile, deserving of a mother's protective, devoted care (Aries 1962; Zelizer 1985).

Although women from working class and minority and immigrant backgrounds have always been likely to work for wages (Weiner 1985), moral prescriptions about American family life are generally defined by the white middle classes (Garey 1999). The cultural ideology of female caregiver and male breadwinner fit the division of family labor in reality of family life fairly well in the 1950s, when three fifths of American families had a male breadwinner and female full-time homemaker (Skolnick 1991). Today, less than 20 percent of families fit the separate spheres template. Yet aspects of this ideology continue to resonate.

Hays describes the "ideology of intensive motherhood," which prescribes a mother's "child-centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive" care for a child she considers sacred. This ideology is part of the "family devotion schema" (Blair-Loy 2003), which promises financial support and an intimately rewarding emotional life for women who spend most of their adult lives intensively caring for provider-husbands and sacred children. This schema specifies potent, consecrated relationships that are laden with expectations of trust, obligation, care, and mutual dependence. Even when women are employed full-time, many sacrifice sleep and professional advancement to live up to the ideology of intensive motherhood when they are not working (Garey 1999).

Gerson's (2002) study of young adults (mean age 24) imagining their future lives is one of the very few work-family studies to explicitly analyze the work-family nexus as presenting moral dilemmas. As such, it is an enormous step forward.

Yet since her interviews ask young adults to talk in the abstract about hypothetical family ties, future goals and fall-back positions, she too falls back on assumptions about intentional, rational decision making. Gerson (2002) conceptualizes her respondents as "crafting moral strategies" (p. 14), to negotiate potential career and family trajectories. Her term "moral strategies" underestimates the externally binding aspects of moral mandates that help define institutions and shape our responses in taken-for-granted, deeply legitimated ways. To complement this analysis of young people's largely hypothetical strategic choices, it is useful to foreground the morally defined institutions and trajectories that constrain the array of options from which to choose.

Gerson (2002) and Hays (1996) emphasize work as lacking the qualities of commitment to others and caregiving that characterize family life. In contrast, other studies of work conceptualize work as potentially a site of moral obligations, intense relationships, and opportunities for broader service.

Max Weber ([1905] 1958) argued that 17<sup>th</sup> century Puritan idea of work as a methodical and ascetic calling profoundly shaped the early character of the United States. This calling was viewed

as one's divinely ordained life purpose or vocation. One's calling entails the moral duty to use God's gifts in ways that are ascetically virtuous, socially useful, and demonstrate God's grace now and in the hereafter (1958, p. 161). Weber argued that economic success and secular Enlightenment ideas gradually eroded the religious foundation of the calling. Yet he maintained that professional work such as science (broadly conceived) continued to offer secular vocations. Although Weber ([1918] 1981) cautioned that occupations such as science should not explicitly determine the social ends of action, he nonetheless implied that personal dedication to one's work could be an end in itself, worthy of service with integrity. "For nothing is worthy of man as man unless he can pursue it with passionate devotion" (Weber 1981: 135). Akin to a great artist, a great scientist has never "done anything but serve his work and only his work" (Weber 1981, p. 137).

Jackall (1988) argues that even the secularized version of Weber's vocation was eroded by the development of centralized bureaucracies. He maintains that for managers in late 20<sup>th</sup> century bureaucratic work organizations "actual organizational moralities are contextual, situational, highly specific, and most often, unarticulated" (p. 6). But other research suggests that some workplaces continue to be shaped in part by more coherent prescriptive ideologies.

Blair-Loy (2003) found that U.S. corporations are defined in part by a cultural model that assumes elite employees will manifest undivided "devotion to work," including long hours, organizational commitment, career dedication, and a minimization of family caregiving. The work devotion schema is institutionalized in organizational "practices of evaluation, compensation, and advancement," and "has become semi-autonomous from purely economic considerations and acquired its own normative impact" (Blair-Loy, 2003, p. 21). Like other rhetorics of normative control throughout American history (Barley & Kunda, 1992), the schema of work devotion shapes assumptions, values, emotions, and identities. This schema may currently be more firmly entrenched in the U.S. than elsewhere (Wharton & Blair-Loy, 2002, 2006). Others have described similar cultural structures as the "career mystique" (Moen and Roehling 2005), "overtime culture" (Fried, 1998), and as "ideal worker norms" (Williams 2000).

In the U.S., the work devotion schema has several dimensions, each of which may be more or less embraced by different employees. These include an adrenaline high" from challenges and relationships that work provides, the cognitive acceptance of the legitimacy or intractability of work demands, a moral and emotional identification with one's employer or profession, inspiration and transcendence of personal limitations from the larger projects. This schema offers an implicit contract between the worker and the firm, assuring the worker that her sacrifices of time, talent, and energy will be honored and rewarded (Blair-Loy 2003). U.S. workers have a range of responses to this cultural structure. Yet whether it is ultimately embraced or rejected, it is not regarded with indifference (Blair-Loy 2003; Hochschild 1997). It remains an ideological force to be reckoned with.

### **Back to the Work-Family Literature: Theoretical Blindspots and Empirical Puzzles**

This essay began by describing two dominant assumptions in the mainstream of work-family literature: structural factors have similar effects on individuals' experience of work-family conflict; and individuals' actions are self-consciously strategic and rational. These assumptions are adequate for certain circumstances and have allowed scholars to document a great deal.

However, they fail to take into account the morally prescriptive definitions of the workplace and the family as institutions and they ignore moral subjectivities of workers and family members. These omissions have led to some empirical puzzles.

### *Gender and Work-Family Actions*

Cost-benefit calculating actors in a heterosexual marriage in these uncertain economic times might rationally plan to maximize the couple's earning potential and to minimize the threat to family income of a job loss. It could make good financial sense for each partner to focus on their careers and to hire some child care. If paid child care were to be unaffordable relative to the household income or if "benefit" were defined more broadly to include a preference for having children spend more time in a parent's care, then the cost-benefit calculation would be revised such that the partner with less long-term earning potential would cut back at work in order to give more time to the children and household.

So if work-family decisions are truly freely chosen to maximize an individual or couple's utility, why do women's "trade-offs" differ systematically from men's? A study of dual-career couples in upstate New York found that wives were twice as likely as husbands to "scale back" at work (Becker & Moen 1999). Nationally, mothers are six times more likely than fathers to be out of the labor market and six times more likely to work part-time (BLS 2009a).

The common answer – that the couples rationally protect the higher earning male partner's job – is insufficient. Seventy-nine percent of married or partnered couples were dual-earners in 2008, and the women contributed an average of 44 percent of the family income. In one out of four dual-earner couples, the wife out-earns the husband by at least 10 percent (Galinsky et al. 2009, p. 9). However, the long-term gender gap in earnings is much larger: over a 15 year period, prime working aged women earned only about 38 percent of what men earn (Hartmann & Rose 2004). Mothers' decision over the family life course to reduce hours or leave the labor force comes at a huge financial cost to themselves and their families (Crittenden 2001). Even in the case of extremely high earning MBAs, women but not men are likely to cut back on work hours or leave the labor force after childbearing (Bertrand, Goldin, & Katz 2009). This gender difference is simply not well explained by the dominant assumption of conscious, reflexive, rational action.

A moral analysis brings into focus the ways in which the family devotion schema and the ideology of intensive motherhood are still the default normative definitions of women's obligations within institution of the family. At the same time, the work devotion schema continues to define the ideal worker as one who can give primary allegiance to the employer organization (Blair-Loy 2003). Mothers are viewed at work as less competent and less committed than women without children (Correll, Bernard, and Paik 2007) or then men. These normative expectations help pull women into family caregiving (alongside their jobs) and push them out of full-throttled careers. The moral definitions of work and family shape institutional demand and invade people's preconscious expectations in ways not captured by the work-family literature's language of individual "trade-offs" and "strategies."

Nonetheless, mothers have strikingly increased their representation in the labor force since the 1960s. Given lengthening work days for many employees (Jacobs and Gerson 2004), we would

expect that a “trade-off” mothers make to work for pay would necessarily entail spending less time with children. The puzzle is that when Bianchi and colleagues actually measured time use, they find that maternal time with children in 2000 has stayed at the same level it was in 1970, an average of about 48 hours a week (Bianchi & Raley 2005, p. 33)! This puzzle makes sense if viewed through the moral lens of the family devotion and intensive mothering. These ideologies define a good mother as one who spends time with deserving children, regardless of the cost to her career, civic engagement, and personal care.

### *Consequences of Moral Schemas for Work-Family Conflict*

Much research suggests that ideal worker norms exacerbate the sense of work to family conflict by stigmatizing workers who wish to spend more time with family or who use officially available family-friendly organizational policies to manage their family obligations (Blair-Loy & Wharton 2002, 2004a, 2004b; Glass 2004; Hochschild 1997; Williams 2000).

More surprising is evidence that work devotion can also help reduce the sense of work to family conflict among professional women. In a quantitative study of professional women in science, technology, and related fields, Blair-Loy and Cech (2009) found that the individual embrace of the work devotion schema significantly reduces the sense of work-family overload-imbalance. The ideological frame of work devotion counteracts the toll of structural conditions like long hours and work pressures.

However, the power of work devotion to buffer the sense of overload-imbalance is curtailed for the science professionals with young and school aged children. Blair-Loy and Cech speculate that these women must also reckon with moral definitions of their responsibilities as mothers that compete with organizational dedication. The cost of time that intense careers rob from children defined as fragile and sacred may be culturally defined as too high for many mothers in the sample, leading to feelings of overload-imbalance even for those who embrace work devotion. The embrace of the work devotion schema seems to regain its power for women with older and adult children (Blair-Loy & Cech 2009).

In sum, incorporating a moral analysis would help the work-family literature develop a model of human action that recognizes more ideological constraint (personal beliefs are structured by socially-constructed moral commitments) and more creativity (by which people make their work-family situations meaningful).

### *The Work-Family Nexus and Inequality*

The assumption that people strategically weigh costs and benefits of different options may be even more inaccurate for working class and poor Americans than it is for the middle-class. Workers with less power and autonomy at work and fewer resources at home may have fewer benefits to weigh and fewer options to consider. The “choice” to “scale back” at work may not be a choice at all, if there is no other stable breadwinner in the family, if the job is precarious, or if paid child care is simply unaffordable (Edgell et al. 2009).

The rational individual model of action may be an analyst's uncritical reflection of middle class workers' accounts of their action. Workers' own discussions of strategic decision making may be evidence of the constraints of another construct of moral ideologies in the United States: individual achievement by expressive selves (cf. Charles and Bradley 2009). It is remarkable how supposedly conscious and reflexive strategies around work and family consistently reproduce the gender order. Much more so than men, women "scale back" at work after children are born, at great financial cost to themselves and their families. Much more so than men, employed women sacrifice career advancement and sleep in order to maintain high levels of time with children. Middle-class women's accounts of these kinds of decisions are replete with a soft feminist, "soft essentialist" (Messner 2009) rhetoric of personal choice that serves to make meaningful their own conscription into reproducing an unequal society.

## Conclusion

The dominant assumptions of much work-family literature simultaneously grant individuals too much and too little agency. One assumption posits individuals as strategically negotiating work and family obligations in line with the personal preferences they hold. In contrast, a moral analysis of work and family emphasizes how people are often *held by* their personal beliefs, which are structured by and resonate with socially-imposed moral commitments. The second assumption in much work-family literature posits workers as being affected in near universal ways by structural forces largely beyond their control. In contrast, a moral analysis sees workers as meaningfully responding to structural conditions and ideologies in ways that make their work-family actions comprehensible and honorable.

Moral prescriptions, experienced as externally binding and subjectively compelling, have defined the institutions of work and family and our participation in them as women and men, as workers and nurturers. This moral valence creates obligations but also offers relationships that make life worth living.

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<sup>ii</sup> For reviews, see Perry-Jenkins, Repetti, and Crouter (2000); Kossek (2005); Kelly et al. (2008).

<sup>iii</sup> See e.g., Jacobs & Gerson (2004); Voydanoff (1995, 2004); Galinsky, Bond, & Friedman (1996); Schnittker (2007); Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie (2006); Fredriksen-Goldsen & Scharlach 2001; Wharton and Blair-Loy (2006).

<sup>iv</sup> See, e.g., Becker & Moen (1999); Gareis & Barnett (2000); Mennino, Falter & Brayfield (2002); Ammons and Edgell (2007); Jacobs & Gerson (2004, p. 80).