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New Realities of Working Families: Overview

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Placing Balancing Paid Work and Childrearing in Perspective: Overall Household Composition in the U.S.

In thinking about changes that are affecting working families, it is important to begin by placing families, working families in particular, into perspective. To do this, I would like to first examine the distribution of all households. Most Americans will have periods in their lives in which the competing demands of the family and workplace are intense because most Americans still marry and have children.¹ However, this childrearing period of sustained, intense demands on time (and money!) comes later in life as marriages are delayed and it ends earlier as families have fewer children and as we survive longer after our children are raised.

Figure 1(a and b) which shows the distribution of households and persons in the U.S. by family type. Currently, only about 35 percent of all households in the U.S. have children under age 18 residing in them: 25 percent of all households are two parent families with children and 10 percent are single parent households. Focusing on the distribution of people, the percentages are higher but only a little over half of the population is currently residing in a household with

¹This is not to say that others do not have work-family demands. Those who do not have children may still find that elder care (of parents) or obligations to siblings or other extended family members can become issues at points during a their work life.

dependent children: 40 percent of the population (children + adults) are in two-parent families and an additional 12 percent are in single parent families.

Figure 1 a and b about here

Why is this important? Unless currently engaged in the day-to-day juggle of getting kids to the day care center, rushing to the office, and leaving in time to make sure they are picked up by 6pm, the stress involved recedes and the memory of the difficulty of the juggle lessens. It is not that parents who have launched their children or now have grandchildren have no empathy with those engaged in the this balancing act; it is more that the juggling of jobs and kids is not upper most in their minds. The overall distribution of households reminds us that issues of getting established in the labor market or of old age security are most pressing for many in the population. Work-family balance issues may be on their agenda but not at the top of the list of what policies most interest or concern them. Projections of households to the year 2010 suggest that the proportion of households with children under age 18 will decline by about 5 percentage points as the Baby Boom moves into retirement age. This will increase the number of married couple households without minor children and the number of persons living alone.

Having said this, I would like to now focus on the 35 percent of households and 52 percent of the population who are most intensely involved in the day-to-day balancing of work and family obligations.

Juggling Work and Family: The Increase in Mother's Labor Force Participation

When we narrow the focus to families with children, we note some very fundamental shifts in families, primarily as a result of the increase in paid labor force participation of mothers and changes in marriage. Two well documented trends are that more married couple families with children are dual-earner families than in the past and many fewer include a parent, usually the mother, who is engaged in any paid work. And, with increases in family disruption and postponement of marriage (resulting in more births outside marriage), more children today spend time in a single parent family where increasingly the only option is for that coresident parent to

work outside the home to support the family.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate this change is to focus on children. Figure 2 shows the increase in the percentage of children who have both parents (if in two-parent households) or their only resident parent (if in a single parent household) in the workforce. What we see is that already by the mid-1980s, 59 percent of children had all parents with whom they lived in the workforce (51 percent for children under age 6 and 63 percent among school age children, age 6-17 -- data not shown). By 1997, this had increased by 9 percentage points, such that 68 percent of children (61 percent of pre-schoolers and 71 percent of school-age children) had all parents working. The flip side of this, however, was that still in 1997, 32 percent of children had a “stay-at-home” parent (42 percent of pre-school age children in two-parent families and 35 percent in single parent families). (The percentages among school-age children were lower but 31 percent in two-parent families and 24 percent in single parent families had a parent (usually the mother) who was not in the paid workforce.)

Figure 2 about here

Most of this change is driven by the dramatic increase in mother’s labor force participation.² The increase in labor force participation has meant that more married couples commit more than 40 hours a week to market work because now both husband and wife are working for pay. Time is finite: any given individual only has 168 hours per week to commit. Jointly, married parents have 336 hours for all activities (including sleep!). One breadwinner families might, in the past, have used about 40 hours of that total for paid work. As mothers entered the labor force, that number went up – to say 60 hours if she worked half time, 80 hours if she worked full-time. That is a sizable reallocation of time in these households.

Also, when researchers compare the two-breadwinner couples of the past with the present, there appears to have been some increase in the estimated number of joint hours of labor force

²It is not so much that average hours of work per week have changed for workers mothers but rather that more mothers are working some weeks per year and that the number of weeks worked has also increased somewhat for working women.

participation. Marin Clarkberg and Phyllis Moen, using data from the General Social Survey, data report an increase from 78 to 84 hours a week of (combined) labor market hours between 1973 and 1994 for dual-earner couples. Jerry Jacobs and Kathleen Gerson, using data from the Current Population Survey, find a slightly smaller increase (from 78 to 81) in joint labor market hours between 1970 and 1997.

Juggling Work and Family: The Increase in Mother's Labor Force Participation

The changed allocation of time in two-parent families is primarily a change in the allocation of women's time. Hence, it is useful to focus on trends in female labor force participation and changes in domestic work to show just how dramatic these have been.

Figure 3 shows labor force participation rates for men and women in the "work and family" ages of 25 to 54, ages when schooling is typically complete, ages before retirement begins to remove persons in substantial numbers from the paid workforce, and ages when individuals are most likely to be combining paid market work with childrearing. What the figure illustrates is the dramatic increase in women's participation in the paid labor force since 1950 and the substantial narrowing of men's and women's labor force participation rates. A 60 percentage point differential in the labor force rates of women and men existed in 1950, when 37 percent of women but 97 percent of men were in the labor force. BLS projections are that the gap will narrow to only 11 percentage points by 2006, when 79 percent of women in the "work and family" ages and 91 percent of men will be in the paid workforce.

Figure 3 about here

The flip side of women's increased investment of time in market work is illustrated with data on time spent in housework taken from data John Robinson (and others) have collected through time diary methods at 10 year intervals since 1965. Women still do more housework than men but they have substantially reduced the amount of nonmarket work they perform each week and it is this reduction that has contributed most to a narrowing of time spent in nonmarket housework over time. (As an aside: Interestingly, our analysis of time trends in housework shows that, if

anything, women not working for pay have shed housework hours even more rapidly than women working for pay!)

Figure 4 about here

The increase in labor force participation among women has been assisted by trends in marriage and childbearing: in particular, women have been delaying marriage and children and having fewer children than during the Baby Boom years of the 1950s and 1960s. This change in marriage and childbearing has gone hand-in-hand with the rapid increase in (younger) women's labor force participation. In recent decades, women have also increased their investment in post-secondary education, eliminating the gender gap in college attendance and graduation and dramatically increasing their representation in fields such as business, law, medicine. These changes have been accompanied by an increase in the work experience of the female labor force in the last two decades, a narrowing in occupational segregation between men and women workers, and, in the 1980s, a narrowing of the wage gap. (The stagnation in male wages since the early 1970s has also been a factor propelling less educated women to remain in the workforce even after marriage and children.)

Were it only the unmarried and childless who were increasing their paid work, the increase in female labor force participation would have limited implications for families. However, unmarried women marry and childless women become mothers – and what they do about paid work once they make these transitions has tremendous implications for families. In recent decades, more and more women have remained attached to the labor force even after making these transitions to wife and mother. The most dramatic increases in labor force attachment have been among married women, particularly those with young children. As shown in Figure 5, historically, mothers who were not married (either never married or formerly married mothers) had higher labor force participation rates than married mothers. Not surprisingly, these women were more often compelled to combine market work with childrearing. But the truly remarkable change has been the dramatic increase in combining paid work and mothering among those women who might be thought to have more options – married mothers. As the figure shows,

in 1960 only 19 percent of married mothers with children under age 6 were in the labor force but his increased to 64 percent in 1995, a rate very close to that of formerly married mothers and higher than for never-married mothers (who tended to be younger and less well educated than the other two groups).

Figure 5 about here

Hence, while the constituency of those interested in work-family issues may be narrowing to a smaller number of households, because a more limited range of the entire life cycle is spent living with children (as we have smaller families and live longer), among those in the childrearing years, the constituency interested in work-family issues is broadening because the number of working single parents (which continues to increase) is augmented by the growing proportion of two parent families juggling paid work and childcare demands.

There is no question that mothers of young children are devoting more time to paid market work. My colleague, Phil Cohen and I have made some recent estimates of the change in the annual hours of work for mothers with children under age 6. As shown in the top panel of Figure 6, primarily due to the increase in the proportion working for pay, the average annual hours of market work have increased dramatically for mothers on young children -- from an average of just under 600 hours per year to 1,100 hours per year.

Figure 6 about here

The other point that is important to emphasize with this figure, however, is illustrated by the bottom two lines that show the percentage of married and unmarried mothers who work full-time, year-round. This has increased but remains below 40 percent for both groups. That is, it is not yet the case that the majority of mothers of young children work more than 35 hours a week throughout the year. Rather, 42 percent of the married mothers juggle work and family by not working for pay in a given year while they have pre-schoolers and an additional 24 percent juggle work and family by working for pay but doing so part-time or part-year. Hence, still in 1998, only about one-third (34 percent) of married mothers of children under age 6 (mothers with the most

choice about employment because there was another potential earner in their households) worked full-time, year round.

Attitudinal data suggest that our ideas about care of children and women's place in the workforce have become much more supportive of paid work for mothers but that there is still ambivalence about the consequences of combining work and family. There are also interesting gender similarities and differences. Figure 7 shows questions asked in the General Social Survey in 1977 and 1994 about work and family issues. The top panel, focused on questions about changing gender roles, shows that the percentage of Americans, men or women, who disapprove of a married women working even if her husband can support her has declined to under 20 percent (from one-third disapproving in the late 1970s). A very dramatic decline has occurred in the percentage agreeing that it was more important for a wife to help her husband's career than to have one herself and again there was no gender difference in 1994 when only about one-fifth of both men and women agreed with this item.

Figure 7 about here

Somewhat more conflict is evidenced by responses to whether it is better if a man achieves outside the home and a woman cares for home and family. Respondents are dramatically less likely to agree with this "traditional" division of labor in the home in 1994 than they were in 1977, but 38 percent of men and 33 percent of women agree. A slight gender difference emerges.

The questions about children appear in the bottom panel. They too show a dramatic change over time, with a smaller percentage of respondents thinking children will suffer if a mother is employed out side the home. What is interesting about these items, however, is the large gender difference and the substantial ambivalence expressed about combining mothering and paid work, especially on the part of men. Almost 40 percent of men (but about one-quarter of women) feel a working mother cannot have as warm and secure a relationship with a child as a mother who is not employed. And half of men and more than one-third of women still feel that a preschool child is likely to suffer if a mother works for pay.

Perceived Success at Work/Family Balance

Finally, what do we know about how married, employed men and women feel about the balance they have struck between work and family in their lives? Research by my colleagues Melissa Milkie and Pia Peltola with the 1996 General Social Survey show somewhat surprisingly that men and women do not differ in their level of felt success in these matters. About 6-7 percent feel completely successful in balancing work and family, about one third feel very successful, 45-46 percent feel somewhat successful, and 14-15 percent feel not very/not at all successful.

In terms of work adjustments that men and women have made due to family, men and women are equally likely to report they have turned down a promotion (around 16 percent), refused to work overtime or cut back on work.(around 30 percent). The felt need to be the family breadwinner continues to motivate men more so than women, however, in that more men (54%) than women (41%) report taking on additional paid work because of family pressures.

In terms of family adjustments that workers make due to work responsibilities, men report more often missing a family occasion due to work (62 percent of men but only 37 percent of women report such an absence). Interestingly, women more often than men report that work has interfered with family by making them unable to care for a sick child (18 percent of men but 25 percent of women report this family-work conflict).

Concluding Remarks

The changing context surrounding working families includes changing demographics – delayed marriage, more childbearing outside marriage, high levels of divorce, lengthening life expectancy. I have focused on work family balance issues primarily as they relate to balancing children and paid work. Obviously, there are other work-family balance issues but I would argue that childrearing years are a period of particularly intense work-family demands. They are also the years where there have been very large changes in women's allocation of time in recent decades.

I have highlighted the larger context by pointing out that a minority of households and only

about half the population is engaged in this type of work-family balance at the present time. But among those who are, the base of support for policies to help balance work and childrearing is increased -- not just by the growing needs of single parents, especially highlighted by the recent attention to welfare reform, but also by the dramatic increase in married mothers labor force participation.

How are families balancing paid work and childrearing? Despite the increase in women's employment, many mothers still do not work full-time year round when their children are pre-school-age. And, although there has been a substantial shift in attitudes toward more acceptance of working women and mothers, there continues to be ambivalence about women's paid work and children's well-being. (This despite an overwhelming body of evidence suggesting little or no harmful effects of maternal employment on children!)

Many individuals feel they have struck a reasonable balance between paid work and family -- and interestingly, men and women are equally likely to report success in their balancing act. Yet there continue to be large gender differences in work-family balance -- with men more likely to take on additional work in response to felt need to support a family and more likely to miss a family event to fulfill work obligations and women far more likely than men to reduce their commitment to market work to less than full-time to give more time to childrearing. The implications these gendered responses to work-family balance have -- for men's "caring" selves, for women's labor market success, and for children's lives -- are the major issues and challenges ahead.

Finally, one last note, a sidebar issue in my discussion, but one that defines the low percentage of households with children, is the aging of the population, in particular the Baby Boom. This is a very important dimension of the work-family nexus because elder care and balance around meeting needs of parents as well as children will grow as an issue facing tomorrow's working families. The increase in the elderly also is important for the public policy debates that will take place in the coming years -- for support for work-family initiatives will require support by those who no longer juggle work and family as intensely as in the past, that is,

support from grandparents as well as parents.