



Women, Work, and Family: Balancing and Weaving

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ANGELA HATTERY*Women, Work, and Family: Balancing and Weaving*

Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2001. xiii + 233 p. \$29.95.

From January through March of 1994, 1,000 women gave birth in Dane County, Wisconsin—home of the city of Madison. A year later Angela Hattery sent 450 of these women a survey on childcare and employment. Half responded, of whom about a third volunteered to be interviewed. Hattery selected 30 married white mothers to interview: 10 who worked full-time, 10 who worked part-time, and 10 who stayed at home. Hattery uses her interview findings to question the adequacy of various theoretical approaches commonly used to study maternal labor force participation: structural functionalism, rational choice theory, neoclassical economics, feminism, and race/class/gender theory. She faults all these approaches for not recognizing how greatly maternal employment decisions are influenced by “motherhood ideology,” the set of beliefs a woman holds about appropriate behavior for mothers.

Hattery contends that “the ideology of intensive motherhood” that arose in the 1950s “continues hegemonic rule” in American society. This set of beliefs holds that women are naturally better able to care for children than men and that mothers are better able than anyone else to care for their own children (p. 40). Five of the women Hattery interviewed, whom she labels “conformists,” so totally accept the precepts of this ideology that they willingly stay home even when their families live in near poverty. Fourteen others are “pragmatists” who make their employment decisions only after weighing the benefits of taking care of their own children against the improvement in living standards that their earnings might allow. Pragmatists tend to face the greatest number of conflicts. Those who choose to work worry of shortchanging their children, and those who choose to stay home worry about not providing adequately for their families. Hattery found eight “innovators” who sidestep this conundrum by consciously devising work options that allow them to simultaneously care for their children. Finally, three “nonconformists” believe none of the basic tenets of the intensive motherhood ideology, have full-time careers, and do not think that their working harms their children.

As the catchy category labels indicate, Hattery makes an effort to attract a general audience. In fact, numbers and tables are hard to find in this volume. She makes scant mention of twentieth-century trends in women’s labor force participation, and even relegates the reporting of her own quantitative survey findings to three pages of commentary and four tables in an appendix. Even so, there is a reason for quantitative researchers to read this book: to hear mothers of 13-month-old-infants tell their stories about deciding whether to go back to work or stay home. Their explanations might be the simple rationalizations of individuals who find themselves in certain social circumstances with particular opportunity structures. They might also be the nuanced accounts of what truly motivates mothers’ employment decisions, choices that even the most sophisticated analyses would never be able to tease from survey data. Paying attention to such accounts can only add depth to our understanding of a dramatically changing aspect of American family life. The experience of being a working mother with a young child, still uncommon in the 1950s, has now become the norm. If the intensive motherhood

ideology nevertheless rules supreme, then more American mothers are likely to feel distraught as they leave their small children in the care of others, and real strain should be evident in the American social structure.

But Hattery's research is not convincing concerning the societal significance of motherhood ideology. Her categories (conformist, nonconformist, pragmatist, and innovator) make sense only if the intensive motherhood ideology actually is hegemonic. But interview findings from 30 mothers can hardly be used to document this hegemony. Her survey produced a mean score of 23.4 on an eight-item "intensive mother ideology" scale, where a score of 8 indicates strong disagreement and a score of 40 indicates strong agreement (pp. 208–209). Apparently, mothers of young children in Dane County tend to have neutral feelings about the precepts of this ideology, a finding not commented on by Hattery. She relies on anecdotes to illustrate hegemony—the occasional court case, magazine article, or quote from a presidential candidate. Yet better evidence exists. For decades the General Social Survey has tracked American attitudes about mothers' working and its effects on children (see GSS data at: www.icpsr.umich.edu/GSS/). These data show Americans becoming much more approving of working mothers, even those with young children. If beliefs and behavior are changing in such a coordinated fashion, then fewer problems might be in store for individuals and society. Such coordinated change also raises theoretical questions about the relationship between beliefs and behavior. Hattery wants us to see a woman's employment decision as flowing from her beliefs about mothering. But might her beliefs about appropriate mothering in fact be changing as she finds herself moving into the labor force?

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JOHN I. CLARKE

The Human Dichotomy: The Changing Numbers of Males and Females

Oxford: Elsevier, 2000. xiv + 146 p. \$78.50.

The population sex ratio—the number of males per 100 females—and its determinants are the topics of this slim volume. This close look at a demographic variable that has received limited attention quickly betrays one likely reason for that neglect: across populations, the sex ratio varies mostly within a very narrow band centered just below unity. Probably by necessity, most of the estimates presented throughout the volume are national statistics and, with the exceptions of Arab countries with high immigration, national sex ratios range from 85 to 110 males per 100 females (p. 18). At some point, the reader might thus be reminded of Ronald Rindfuss's (1991) observation that demographers "have had the tough job of making a straight line interesting. But demographers are adept with boring data; we disaggregate" (p. 506). Indeed, John Clarke presents a number of disaggregations of population sex ratios by residential area and by age group. But with the exception of areas of high and sex-selective migration and of the oldest age groups,