

## The Changing Realities of Work and Family

Amy Marcus-Newhall, Diane F. Halpern, and Sherylle J. Tan, eds.  
Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008.

### Reviewed by Kelly Dombroski

*The Changing Realities of Work and Family* is an edited collection of essays that collectively explores “the dynamics at the intersection of work and family” and seeks “to better understand the relationship between work and families” in a multidisciplinary way. The volume does not specifically set out to investigate mothering, but many of the essays deal with maternal employment and the work-family balances made by women in particular. The book takes the form of fifteen essays, with separate introductions for each themed section: Employment and Children; Culture, Age and Sexual Orientation; Work, Stress, and Health Linkages; and Politics, Business, and the Legal System. The book boasts of its “multidisciplinary approach” (it is edited by three social psychologists, and includes contributions by at least 14 psychologists), yet the general research approaches and “starting points” of all contributors are similar – most rely heavily on the social psychologists’ toolbox of survey methods and quantitative data analysis, and do not seek to problematize key research concepts such as work, family, employment, etc. The taken-for-granted nature of these key terms means that proposed “solutions” to the problem of “work-family balance” are limited to the usual recommendations: we should recognize that maternal employment is here to stay; there should be more flexibility in the workplace; and there should be more research into working-class and ethnic minority families.

For non-social psychologist readers of this Journal, some of the most interesting essays will be those written by non-academic authors. Jane Swift’s essay entitled “Politics, Motherhood, and Madame President” gives some insight into the beliefs that drive her political career. Donna Klein of Corporate Voices for Working Families documents the research conducted by this non-governmental organization into the business impacts of increased flexibility in the workplace, findings that confirm that flexible workplace practices have a positive financial impact on companies. V. Sue Molina, retired partner from the accounting firm Deloitte & Touche, offers insight into potential changes in firms by describing the policies and programs of her former employer. With eight out of 10 workers wanting greater flexibility in the workplace, she insists that the issue of work-family balance is not limited to mothers with small children, despite having been stigmatized as such. These three essays in particular provide relevant real-life examples that add colour to the statistical analysis that dominates the rest of the book.

Another fascinating contribution is Darby E. Saxbe and Rena L. Repetti's "Taking the Temperature of Family Life: Preliminary Results from an Observational Study." This essay cites results from an exciting real-life observational study of dual-income families using videos, interviews, and self-reporting techniques. Although the data is limited to dual income families above a certain income level and with a mortgage, it brings to light some interesting characteristics of these middle-class families. For example, although most families report that they value family time and their landscaped outdoor spaces, they rarely spend time together either inside or outside their homes. In fact, most family members spend large amounts of time watching television or using other electronic equipment. There are also strong indications that these employed women still shoulder the bulk of domestic labour in their homes, with little contribution from their male partners or children. Many women in the study report very negative feelings in the evenings, when they often find themselves alone in the kitchen completing household chores. This finding adds impetus to Joan C. Williams's assertion in her essay "What Psychologists Need to Know about Family Responsibilities Discrimination": that we need to do away with the conscious/unconscious dichotomy in thinking about gender and maternal discrimination, as it provides an excuse for gender bias in many settings. That the more powerful members of society can get away with ignoring the perspectives and experiences of the less powerful facilitates unconscious discrimination.

The aim of this collection is to focus on the intersection of work and family, and to chart the "changing realities" of this nexus for mainstream America. Despite the inclusion of a section that focuses on diversity, the volume does not challenge the work/family preoccupations of the middle class. For instance, by vigorously defending maternal employment in terms of child development and the business bottom line, the contributions on maternal employment implicitly uphold the idea that mothers can only be employed as long as their employment does not negatively affect a child or a business. Does this mean that maternal employment would otherwise not be supported? On the other hand, this lack of radical critique could be one of the book's strengths, as it is likely to be well-received by policy makers—corporate, public, and political—who are looking for "hard data" (rather than new conceptualizations of family and work) to support decisions about work/family policies for middle-class Americans.