



Conversations with the Experts

Disseminating Research Findings: A Responsibility



Rosalind Chait Barnett, Ph.D.

Bio: Rosalind Chait Barnett, Ph.D., is a Senior Scientist at the Women's Studies Research Center at Brandeis University and Director of its new Community, Families & Work Program. Alone and with others, she has published over 80 articles, 20 chapters, and six books. *She Works/He Works: How Two-Income Families are Happy, Healthy and Thriving* was published in paperback in 1998 by Harvard University Press. This book, co-authored with Caryl Rivers, was the 1996 recipient of a National Books for a Better Life Award. Her articles have appeared in academic journals and in general publications (*The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, *The Washington Post*, *Newsday*, *McCall's*, *Self*, and *Working Woman*). She is currently writing a book with Caryl Rivers tentatively called *Dumping Ophelia and Tuning Out a Different Voice*. Barnett is the recipient of several national awards, including the American Personnel and Guidance Association's Annual Award for Outstanding Research, the Radcliffe College Graduate Society's Distinguished Achievement Medal and Harvard University, Kennedy School of Government's 1999 Goldsmith Research Award. A 1997 journal article co-authored with Robert Brennan received the "best paper of the year" of 1997 award from the *Journal of Organizational Behavior*.

Ellin Reisner, Ph.D.

Bio: Ellin Reisner is Research Director of the Community, Families and Work Program. Her current research includes working on a Sloan Foundation funded study exploring the role of travel demands in managing work/family among dual-earner couples with children. She has conducted research on work and family life and occupational social work, taught at the Boston University School of Social Work and Metropolitan College and at Springfield College.

In addition, Reisner has over 12 years of experience in Transportation and Human Resources. She serves on the Management and Productivity Committee of the Transportation Research Board (TRB), National Academy of Sciences. Her involvement in TRB has included numerous presentations, contributions to several TRB publications, organized seminars and participated in overseeing research conducted by the National Co-operative Highway Transportation Program of TRB. While working for the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority, Reisner produced and edited numerous training videos, community education publications and written training curricula.



Karen Gareis, Ph.D.

Bio: Karen Gareis, Ph.D., is a Senior Research Associate at the Women's Studies Research Center at Brandeis University. She serves as Research Project Director and Web Content Manager of the Community, Work & Families Program and is currently the Project Director on two of Dr. Rosalind Barnett's research studies, one on work schedules and women's health funded by NIOSH and one on maternal work shifts and child and family outcomes funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. Gareis received her Ph.D. in social psychology from Boston University in 1997. She has conducted research on work-family issues, gender, and social support and has taught at the Boston University College of Arts and Sciences and Metropolitan College.

audience of practitioners. "Partnerships are a key to communicating," observes Barnett. Please read: "How To Use Reduced Hours To Win the War for Talent," in *Organizational Dynamics* 29(3):192-210.

In a recent survey (2001) the Sloan Network asked researchers to identify key individuals who influenced their thinking about work and family issues. One of the most frequent responses, if not the most frequent, was –Roz Barnett.

A Dialogue with Rosalind Barnett, Ellin Reisner, and Karen Gareis

Introduction

Barnett is a highly respected and prolific work-family scholar who has pushed the boundaries of the work-family area of study for decades with her sophisticated research designs and theoretical models.

With her customary vision, Barnett founded the Community, Work and Families Program at Brandeis University. In a short time, she has carved out an impressive research agenda. The program's research focus is based on the premise that "well-functioning communities enhance the ability of families to meet their needs and promote the well-being of employees and workplaces."

This innovative program reflects Barnett's commitment to conducting cutting-edge policy-oriented research that integrates the domains of community, family and work. The program's researchers collaborate with various stakeholders, business leaders, community representatives, and families. Meetings are arranged and projects are discussed at critical points. In the initial stages of the project, the goal is to articulate issues and the linkages between domains. During the project, meetings are designed to gather feedback from the community on proposed and ongoing research projects. Following analysis, the project's goal is to present the findings to the community in an attempt to make that data immediately useful. This collaborative approach to setting a research agenda underscores a commitment to building knowledge and disseminating knowledge.

On a recent visit to the Program, we had the pleasure of discussing the thematic focus of this newsletter with Barnett and the Program's senior research associates, Ellin Reisner and Karen Gareis.

Sloan Work and Family Research Network: As researchers, do you think it is enough to build knowledge for the sake of building knowledge or do we have to go further? What are the mandates for researchers?

Barnett: As researchers, part of our responsibility is to disseminate our research findings as widely as possible. If you do a study, you write an article and it sits on a shelf in the library, you really haven't done the work, because part of your responsibility is to disseminate the findings as widely as you can...I think it's tragic that people are making decisions about their work-family lives and don't have access to the information that would help them make better decisions.

Reisner: The public needs to understand that many of the people and institutions that are disseminating the information are driven by an ideology. My concern is that many of the individuals and institutions that frame the research are very ideological in terms of family and work issues. Whether I agree with them or not, my point is that the information presented may not fully or accurately reflect what the research is telling us. For instance, we have all seen cases where research findings are touted as trends when this is not really the case. I'm concerned that a lot of the good research may not get to the public because researchers don't have channels to the media.

Barnett: Researchers should understand that if they want their work to have an impact and they do not want their work to be misrepresented, it is the researchers' job to present that information in a format that will promote understanding and get to the media.

One of the things I've learned from working with presenters at conferences (helping them to shape their presentations) is that often they are unable to present information to the media. As an example, even when I developed a media-friendly template, many researchers were unable to use it, and instead relied on the academic journal model. No, this won't do. I think we need a "Research and Media 101" class!

It's awfully easy for researchers, myself included, to blame the media for miscommunications– "They're shallow, they misrepresent." But the media representatives are under deadline and often have more than one beat. Researchers have a responsibility to present their information in a format such as an executive summary or press release that will reach a broader audience and be understood.

As a Program, we are trying to facilitate communication between journalists and researchers and to improve the quality of media coverage of research. We have established the Annual Invitational Journalism-Work/Family Conference, which brings together media representatives and work-family researchers. One of our goals is to keep alive the connections we've established at the work-family conference.

Gareis: One of our strategies is to develop a listserv or a message board to establish a continuing dialogue between work-family researchers and journalists who are interested, starting with those who participated in the First Annual Invitational Journalism-Work/Family Conference. We would also produce some content for the listserv; for example, we might list 5 tips from researchers for journalists or 5 tips from journalists for researchers.

At the conference, journalists underscored the importance for researchers of developing skills for communicating their research. The skill of boiling down the research findings to the main point is central to effective communication with the public, media, funding agencies and others.

Reisner: Well, this skill is also important to policy-makers who usually rely on organizations for their data. Sometimes, though, the media provides other sources for policy-makers, and this clear and easily digested writing resonates for them. I also think there is a synergy that goes on in the media—journalists will jump off an idea from someone else’s article and follow up with a different angle.

Barnett: This happened recently when someone from *Working Mother* magazine read the piece on work-family conflict that I co-authored with Caryl Rivers in the business section of the *Boston Globe*. The journalist called me to do an interview for an article she’s doing on a similar topic.

Gareis: I agree; when we ask journalists about their sources for ideas, we often hear, “...from other media.”

Reisner: The relationship that researchers in universities have to their public relations department is important. Getting the word out on what you’re doing.

Barnett: Yes, I have a very close relationship with someone here in the media relations department; every time something happens I’m in touch or she’ll call me. The researcher needs to take the initiative.

Gareis: And then be available to take calls. Frequently, journalists remark that they want a contact person who will actually take their phone calls--and on a timely basis, because they are always on deadline!

Barnett: Researchers should be prepared to answer the questions “Why?” and “Well, what use will these findings be?” Journalists always ask these questions. When I was a post-doctorate fellow, I had a professor who asked these difficult questions, but no one in graduate school had prepared me.

SWFRN (To Gareis): Were you asked those questions?

Gareis: I had one professor who always asked “Who cares?” “Why is that important?” But it was not that common. And these are the questions that journalists and others ask.

Reisner: I think that we as researchers have to be able to answer these questions and become more media-savvy -- because information does influence public opinion. And by influencing public opinion, in effect, we have an impact on policy, both public and corporate.

Barnett: To reach these audiences, researchers should partner with other researchers or experts to disseminate information. I recommend that researchers begin to think about building relationships with other researchers and the local media. One of the requirements in our “Research and Media --101” class would be for researchers to develop skills in answering the “Why is it important?” question, writing for different publications in different styles, and linking findings to policy.

Community, Families & Work program Brandeis University Women’s Studies Research Center

We invite you to go to the Website (<http://www.bcfwp.org/>) to learn more about the Center’s innovative programs, including “the Missy Carter Award,” The Annual Invitational Journalism 2003 Work-Family Conference, etc.

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