

**An Essay to Accompany**  
**Looking Backwards to Go Forward:**  
**A Timeline of the Work-Family Field in the United States since World War II**

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## Introduction

The work-family field captured in this essay and the timeline on which it draws encompasses both research and advocacy on issues related to the intersection of these two institutions – work and family – and issues of equity. A central feature of the period covered, from the end of World War II to the present day, has been the dramatic increase in the numbers of women in the workplace: a phenomenon that began well before 1945; then seemed to reverse itself in the immediate postwar decades; and accelerated greatly thereafter. A central irony underlying the field is that, while reality has changed, with more and more women sharing the breadwinning role and more men sharing some of the child rearing role, the underlying assumptions about the gendered nature of these roles has changed little. William Ogburn first noticed this phenomenon in 1950 and labeled it a “cultural lag.” One goal of the timeline and this essay is to place the development of the work-family field clearly in this cultural context – both the changing cultural reality, and the lagging pattern of sense making around that reality.

### 1944 – 1950s

The end of World War II brought a burst of family formation, as soldiers returned to civilian life and most of the women who had taken wartime jobs left them, many in order to marry. The G.I. Bill provided former soldiers with financial assistance to purchase homes and to attend college, raising the career expectations and economic prospects of a large portion of the wartime generation. The “American dream” of home ownership became a reality for many, as suburban tract housing spread rapidly. A deep reservoir of pent-up savings, plenty of good jobs (with benefits) in the re-tooling U.S. economy, and the postwar baby boom fueled the rise of a consumer society, as the dream expanded to include appliances, TVs, and a car or two in the driveway.

These demographic and economic realities produced a flowering of what would become in the late twentieth century the idealized “traditional” American family: a wife and mother as a full-time homemaker, two or more children, all supported by a husband and father through his employment outside the home. The Industrial Revolution had made this family form a feature of middle-class life, but the unique social and economic conditions of the immediate postwar era greatly expanded the middle class, opening this lifestyle to a much larger segment of the population. Over the course of the decade, the percentage of mothers in the workforce increased, to nearly 40 percent of women with children over six years and nearly 20 percent of women with children under six, but this countertrend received little attention. The long-running television series launched in 1954, *Father Knows Best*, is representative of the powerful reinforcement in the popular culture – particularly through advertising – that this was the “norm.” The influential work of sociologist Talcott Parsons (*The Social Structure of the Family*) and pediatrician-child psychologist Benjamin Spock (*The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*) added the weight of their expertise to support the notion that this gendered division of labor in work and family was the appropriate one.

At the same time, there were two discernable streams of research and advocacy that would later feed into the work-family field. One, flowing out of New Deal pro-labor politics and centered in the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor, focused on securing rights and support – particularly child care – for families in the socio-economic stratum below the growing middle class, for whom stay-at-home mothering was rarely an option. Business and Professional Women/USA, a national organization with local affiliates, represented another important stream that originated in the women's rights movement of the 1920s and focused on the rights of working women. Symbolically, if not in fact, the towering, solid figure of Eleanor Roosevelt kept these two main currents of the future field alive through the 1950s, when “work-family” was a non-issue in the popular culture. The publication in 1953 of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, which coined the phrase “women's liberation,” went largely unrecognized as a harbinger of the large cultural shifts to come.

## **The 1960s**

Those shifts began to hit hard in the 1960s. As Baby Boomers started reaching college age, women's liberation became a more potent force, with the passion for expanding women's autonomy and opportunity outside marriage taking hold first among young women engaged in the larger civil rights and anti-war movements on college campuses. At the same time, the introduction of “The Pill” in 1961 was a critical milestone in the sexual revolution – a breakdown of cultural constraints on extra-marital sex that expanded the practical impact of “women's lib” well beyond the ranks of the politically active, and also beyond college campuses, to the broader youth culture. Speaking for the already-married, Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique*, published in 1963, challenged the theories of Parsons and others that homemaking and mothering were “natural” roles for women with evidence that many women felt unfulfilled and trapped in those roles. Also, in the 1960s, the divorce rate began to rise and would more than double between 1960 and 1980 – another factor promoting the movement of women into the workforce. By 1970, nearly half of women with children over 6 and 30 percent of women with children under six were working for wages outside the home.

With these cultural changes as backdrop, the nascent work-family field focused largely on issues of equity for women in the workplace. A step of great significance in the realm of political advocacy, Eleanor Roosevelt's convincing the decidedly non-feminist president John F. Kennedy to establish the President's Commission on the Status of Women, in 1961. Women's rights to equal opportunity in education and the workplace became linked to the larger Civil Rights movement, pushed forward under the leadership of Kennedy's successor Lyndon B. Johnson; and this helped to produce some legislative measures aimed at securing women's rights in the workplace. The success of *The Feminine Mystique* propelled Friedan into a leadership role in the emerging women's movement, most visibly as co-founder and first president of NOW (the National Organization of Women) and proponent of the Equal Rights Amendment to the U.S. Constitution (the ERA), introduced into Congress in 1967.

Questions of equity and equal opportunity in education and employment were also central to the stream of work by some of the pioneers in the work-family field. In the academic realm, Lotte Bailyn and Alice Rossi challenged the entrenched view that gender-based role segregation was based on “natural” differences in male and female capabilities, a challenge central to the case for equal rights. Jesse Bernard exposed inequities for women in academic careers. A seminal article bringing work and family together in a single study – “Work and Family in Contemporary Society” by Robert and Rhona Rapoport – looked at the interaction of the two spheres in the lives of young couples and the patterns of gender inequity in them. Outside of academia, Felice Schwartz founded Catalyst to pursue research and advocacy for changes within business that would open up careers for women.

### **The 1970s**

This early years of this decade saw the waxing of the women’s liberation movement. The two-year period, 1972-73 brought the launch of *Ms. Magazine*, an exuberant celebration of Women’s Lib, taking aim at a wide array of “male chauvinist” targets; the publication of Jessie Bernard’s *The Future of Marriage*, which offered scientific evidence suggesting that marriage was an oppressive institution, bad for women’s psychological health; the legislative passage of the ERA, which then moved to the states for ratification; the passage of Title IX, a federal statute with far-reaching implications, prohibiting sex-based discrimination in federally-funded educational institutions; and the momentous Supreme Court decision (*Roe v. Wade*) legalizing abortion. These achievements of the feminist movement expanded women’s expectations and opportunities, but they also created a backlash among both women and men who began to see feminism as anti-male, anti-marriage, and anti-children. As the 1970s progressed, the movement lost momentum. By the early 1980s, the ERA would be a dead issue, having failed the state ratification process; the movement to undo *Roe v. Wade* would be in full swing; and Betty Friedan’s new book, *The Second Wave*, would be heralding a new “post-feminist” reality for women.

Quite apart from these trends and counter-trends in the women’s movement, however, women continued to enter the workforce in increasing numbers – two-thirds of women with children over six and half of women with children under six by 1980. In part this phenomenon represented the emergence of the “dual-career” couple among the elite. But the economic environment of the 1970s, marked by oil crises and “stagflation,” also undoubtedly contributed, making it more and more difficult for most families to maintain their standards of living with only one breadwinner. The rising divorce rate and increasing number of single-parent households also helped to bring about the practical reality that, quite independent of the ideological debate, women were in the workforce to stay.

In this context, the expanding work-family field evolved in new directions. One major stream focused on men’s and women’s roles, especially in parenting. Rhona and Robert Rapoport contributed to this discussion in numerous books and articles, including *Dual*

*Career Families* (1971) and *Fathers, Mothers, and Society* (1978). While T. Berry Brazelton's popular *Infants and Mothers* (1969) added to the weight of Dr. Spock's teachings on the unique importance of the mother's role in early child development, a number of men began studying the parental role and contribution of fathers. Two in particular, Joe Pleck and James Levine, began in the mid-1970s what would become career-long investigations of this topic – still going strong in 2002. Nancy Chodorow's *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* challenged the conventional wisdom on parenting and child psychology. The success of the film *Kramer versus Kramer* (1979), suggests that this discussion of parental roles was quite relevant to the concerns in the popular culture of the 1970s. The father in this story, who becomes engaged in his son's life only after his wife has walked out, is a sympathetic character; and the movie's conclusion, in which the mother wins sole custody of their son, even though she had originally abandoned the family, conveys a sense of injustice in this powerful display of institutional support for "traditional" gender roles.

Another stream of work that became a major segment in the work-family field in this decade focused on work organizations. Rosabeth Moss Kanter published two seminal works in 1977: *Men and Women of the Corporation* and *Work and Family in the United States*. Kanter's work was notable for examining structural aspects of work organizations affecting men and women differentially, and for explicitly challenging the separate-spheres assumptions underlying those structures. Another seminal study published in 1977 was the Quality of Employment Survey, which looked systematically at work-family issues as manifested in the workplace. This study gave the field the term "work-family conflict" and measured this phenomenon for the first time.

Sponsored by the U.S. Department of Labor, the Quality of Employment Survey signified growing official recognition of the reality of women in the workplace and concern over issues arising from the intersection of work and personal life. The founding of the Work in America Institute, a research organization with support from business, labor, and government; the passage of the Pregnancy Discrimination Act in 1978; and the Carter Administration's White House Conference on Families in 1979 also reflected this growing concern. In the 1980s, work-family conflict and workplace changes aimed at amelioration of the conflict would take center stage in the field.

## **The 1980s**

In the 1980s, Baby Boomer women moved into prime employment years (as well as child-bearing years) – the oldest hitting 40 and the youngest reaching 20 at mid-decade. At the same time, the stagflation of the 1970s gave way to the Reagan recession and the competitive crisis of U.S. industry, bringing massive "downsizings," as industries restructured through mergers, acquisitions, and spin-offs. In this economic climate, two incomes became more necessary than ever for middle-class couples to maintain their families' standard of living. And, as the divorce rate continued to rise, single-parent households were growing in number: between 1970 and 1996 the number of children

living in such households more than doubled. All of these factors contributed to the largest influx of women into the workplace of any decade in the postwar period.

This was also a time of disillusionment for many women, however. The ERA fizzled and died in the states, in part due to a backlash from middle-class women who chose not to work outside the home and felt that the women's movement had disparaged the homemaker role. The writings of post-feminist authors, like Friedan and Deborah Fallows, captured a sense of worry inside the movement about the impact of women's working on marriages and children. A controversial study on the negative effect of child care on infants became a hot topic on television and radio talk shows. In short, work-family conflict was existential as well as practical in many post-feminist marriages, as women confronted the trade-offs involved in "having it all." Arlie Hochschild's *The Second Shift* (1989) captured the reality for two-earner households, in which women continued to shoulder the lion's share of household responsibilities. In the workplace, there was the discouraging recognition of the so-called glass ceiling. The invisible barriers to women's advancement, most talked about at the top of organizations, existed at all levels, as women remained segregated into lower status and lower paying jobs – in part because of the part-time and contingent work that enabled many to combine work and family in the first place. If the exultant, in-your-face feminism of *Ms. Magazine* represented the spirit going into the 1970s, the practical, how-to-cope guide, *Working Mother*, launched in 1981, better captured women's mood and concerns a decade later.

In this context arose a major new stream in the work-family field, focused on advocacy for and development of "family-friendly" policies and benefits in the workplace, and on examination of the social issues – in particular, work-family conflict and the impact on families – arising from the reality of so many women working. The pressure on companies to become more hospitable to working parents began to build, for example, with the launch of the Child Care Action Campaign (1983), the proposal (1984) of legislation that would eventually become the Family and Medical Leave Act, the appearance of *Working Mother* magazine's annual "Best Companies for Mothers" list (1985), and a growing body of research documenting the deleterious effects of work-personal life conflicts on people's mental health. The corporate world began to move on the issue in various ways. For example, Exxon funded a Catalyst study in 1981 aimed at developing policy in this area. In 1983, Fran Rogers formed a consulting firm to provide child-care referral services to giant IBM. Her company, Work/Family Directions, was a pioneer in what would become a large industry, consulting to companies on child care and other related benefits.

In the research area, too, there developed a segment of the field focused on promoting change from within work organizations. In 1983 Dana Friedman joined the Conference Board (a membership organization of business leaders) and began organizing its Work-Family Research Council. Ellen Galinsky, at Bank Street College of Education, conducted the first of a series of research studies on work-family issues, inside and with the partnership of corporations, in this case Merck. Galinsky and Friedman joined forces in 1989 to create the Families & Work Institute, which joined Catalyst as a leader in research aimed at supporting the development of corporate policies in the work-family

area. At MIT's Sloan School of Management, Lotte Bailyn was moving into this segment from a somewhat different direction, more connected to Kanter's work examining structural aspects of organizations than to the emerging policy-focused stream of research. In a series of articles, Bailyn began to develop the argument that the problems women were having integrating work and family reflected larger dysfunctions in work practices that had negative implications for men as well as women, and for the effectiveness of the organization as a whole.

At the national level, the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor shifted its focus to work-family issues in 1984. Similarly, the National Research Council Committee on Women's Employment and Related Issues, which concentrated initially on pay inequities and occupational sex segregation, turned to work-family conflict issues in 1988. Its National Panel on Employer Policies and Working Families was the first national level discussion of these issues. All of this work contributed to the pressure on organizations to develop a response to work-family issues.

Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s the major impact of the field had been made in federal legislation, in the 1980s the attention paid to the practical problems of work-family conflict – both in the field and in the popular culture – resulted in significant changes in workplace policies and benefits. Increasingly companies, following leaders like IBM and Merck, that began by adopting maternity leave and developing programs for child-care referral, adopted a wider array of policies such as flextime and home-based work and employee assistance programs to help individuals deal with work-family problems and stresses. A related development was the rise of a new occupational group of work-family professionals, people either consulting to organizations or employed by them, to design, implement, and administer the subset of human-relations issues falling under work-family. This development can be charted in part by the founding in 1984 of Work & Family Connection, a news service for employers “and those that offer them goods and services.” In 1989, Business Publishers, Inc. launched a semi-monthly newsletter on work-family “legislation, litigation, and employer policies;” and in 1990 Work & Family Connection began publishing Susan Seitel's *Work & Family News Brief* and *Work & Family Trend Report*, to share information and best practices within this professional group.

In this period, the discussion of women's capabilities shifted from insistence on similarities to men toward the study of the differences and their value. In 1981, Wellesley College created the Stone Center to advance the work of Jean Baker Miller, whose book *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (1976) tackled Freudian theories of development through individuation and separation as masculine-centered and offered a theory of women's growth-in-connection that recast as positive many aspects of female relationships and psychology that Freud had labeled dependent and immature. Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1982) carried this strand of work further and helped to give it a higher public profile. These works paved the way for the rise in the 1990s of a “female advantage” literature, following the general arguments of Sally Hegelsen's book of that title. Meanwhile, through the 1980s, Pleck, Levine, and others continued to explore gender role issues from the masculine perspective. In 1981, with support from

the Ford Foundation, Levine founded the long-running Fatherhood Project, which he moved to the Families and Work Institute in 1989.

By the end of the decade, the push for family-friendly policies and benefits in the workplace had had a substantial impact. Work-family had also become less of a strictly feminist issue and more of a general social concern. For example, a large-scale study at DuPont showed that child care was a problem for male as well as female employees. At some point in the late 1980s, people began to use the term “work-life,” instead of “work-family,” to indicate a more widely shared set of issues.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, for all this success, there remained a conundrum: companies were adopting family-friendly policies, but employees were not using them. Two reports in 1989, one by the Department of Labor and one coming out of the Ford Foundation’s Women’s Program Forum, noted this phenomenon. Some work was already examining the “disincentives” that discouraged people taking these options. Felice Schwartz’s disturbing discussion of the “mommy track” pointed to the problems facing career-oriented women; and Joe Pleck wrote about the discouraging factors for men, including the fact that managers tended to look unfavorably on those who took advantage of family-friendly policies. These issues relating to the gap between policy and practice and the seeming intransigence of the problem of work-personal life conflict shaped a major stream of research in the 1990s.

## **The 1990s**

The timeline clearly shows the exponential growth in the 1990s of what we might now call the work-family-work-life field. The purpose of using this combined name here is to convey something of the breadth of concerns under this tent. On one hand, a major stream of research and advocacy, focused mainly on the workplace, adopted the terminology of work-life, signifying that the issue of the intersection between paid work and the rest of life is central for everyone – men and women, single and attached, parents and non-parents. On the other hand, persistent questions around the relationship between work and family as key institutions in society remained alive in another large stream of work, which can only be understood as work-family. These two streams, though clearly different, were not truly separate. There were many areas of overlap between them. Arguably the most important is the fact that both were grappling at a fundamental level with questions of gender differences and gender roles.

This central concern was resonant with the popular culture of the 1990s. In this period, American society began to face the reality that women had joined the workforce to stay: in 1990, the majority of women with and without children were working; by 1997 only 15 percent of U.S. families fit the “traditional model” of breadwinner father and stay-at-home mother. The political advocacy of that model by vice presidential candidate Dan Quayle in the 1992 election campaign had no traction with the electorate – it was

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen Galinsky and Arlene A. Johnson, *Reframing the Business Case for Work-Life Initiatives* (New York: Families and Work Institute, 1998), p. 8. The authors attribute the shift in terminology to employers’ effort to “convey inclusiveness” in what had been conceived as “family-friendly” policies and benefits.

just too far out of step with reality for most people. Nevertheless, the question of gender roles was a central theme of the decade. In contrast to earlier eras, when the focus was primarily on women's role, in the 1990s the most burning issues related to the role of men. The "male identity crisis" literature that flowered in the 1990s clearly reflected this preoccupation, as did the so-called fatherhood movement. The fact that the question of the proper role of fathers engaged people across the spectrum from highly conservative to liberal speaks to the compelling need to grapple with the tension between new realities and ingrained beliefs about gender roles – the same tension the society had been struggling with throughout the post-World War II era.

A second key element of the context in which the field developed in the 1990s – documented by people in the field – was the erosion of the quality of life for many Americans, a painful irony in an era of strong economic growth and low unemployment. As Shelley MacDermid and others have written, it was a period that created the contrast of highly-paid professionals, struggling with overwork, and underemployed non-professionals, losing ground economically (80 percent of workers experienced a drop in real wages of 2 to nearly 12 percent between 1973 and 1997).<sup>2</sup> Another facet of the eroding quality of life in the 1990s was the "crisis of care" documented by Mona Harrington in *Care and Equality* (1999) resulting from the collective failure to find alternatives to the traditional system of women providing care for children and elders in the home. Finally, the context included the realities associated with the failure of the "family-friendly" policies put into place in the 1980s to have a significant impact on the problem of work-personal life conflict, including the reality that by the end of the decade Americans were working on average more hours per year than people in any other industrialized nations and that a majority were feeling overworked much of the time.

The pressing nature of these issues help to explain the growth of the work-life-work-family field in the 1990s. One measure of this growth captured in this timeline is the proliferation of academic research centers. Beginning in 1990 with the Center for Work and Family at Boston University (later moved to Boston College), thirteen came into being by 2001, joining the two non-academic research organizations, Families and Work Institute and Catalyst. Marcie Pitt-Casouphes's "2002 Timeline of the Work-Family Area of Study" (available on-line at wfnetwork) shows clearly the impact of this greater research emphasis in the big increase in the number of publications, beginning in the late 1980s.

As Leslie Stebbins makes clear in her substantial bibliographic essay, this work of the late 1980s and 1990s has greatly deepened our understanding of work-life-work-family issues on many fronts.<sup>3</sup> For example, there has been a lot of solid historical research to illuminate patterns over time. This has included debunking the myth of the breadwinner/stay-at-home mother family model as the "traditional" American family

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<sup>2</sup> Shelley M. MacDermid, Mary Dean Lee, and Stephen C. Smith, "Forward into Yesterday? Families and Work in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," paper presented to a meeting of the Work-Life Leadership Council of the Conference Board (May, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> Leslie F. Stebbins, *Work and Family in America: A Reference Handbook* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2001), pp. 1-69.

form. More present-focused researchers have documented changing attitudes toward work, personal life, family, the “balance” between them, as well as the continuing and widespread ambivalence about gender roles.

Late in the 1990s, a few researchers began to turn their attention to understudied groups – low-wage earners and minorities. Research on the working poor has shown how the work-personal life conflicts experienced by middle- and high-income workers are magnified for people at the low end of the wealth distribution. Burt Landry and others have contributed great knowledge about African-American families – showing among other things that black women were, in Landry’s words, the “pioneers of the dual-career family.” In recent years, researchers have also begun to study the experiences of Latinos, a highly diverse group, and Asian-Americans. Stebbins also points to a few investigations of lesbian couples and single parents.

These new lines of study have begun to fill some of the gaps in our understanding of the variety of experiences in American society. At the same time, Suzan Lewis and other researchers have begun to provide greater insight through international comparisons. These are important trends, given the diversity of American society and the pressing need to grapple with issues related to globalization. In the 1990s, and since, the large stream of work devoted to child care also broadened to emphasize care giving more generally and elder care in particular, reflecting a growing appreciation of the implications of demographic shifts for the magnitude of the crisis of care.

Within the stream of work focused on the interface between paid work and the rest of life, a significant development in the 1990s was a group of action-research projects that tackled the persistent gap between workplace policy and practice. Largely funded by the Ford Foundation, this research began in the mid-1990s to produce exciting results about the potential for changes in work practice to advance a so-called dual agenda of improving organizational effectiveness *and* enabling workers to integrate work and personal life more fully and comfortably. Another key strand of this dual-agenda literature focused on the connection between the relational skills that people develop through family interactions and the skills called for in increasingly team-oriented work environments. Though they received considerable attention at the time, these findings have so far been limited in their impact on work organizations; and within the field there has emerged, since the late 1990s, a new emphasis on the need to press for change across a broad front, spanning family, community, and workplaces together.

## **2001-2002**

The growth of the work-life-work-family field has continued apace since the turn of the century. An informal measure of this is the expansion of the electronic network, “workfam,” launched by Robert Drago in 1995. At 180 members in 1999, it grew to 400 members by 2000, and to 700 members by early 2002. The wealth of work presented in February 2002 at a major research conference, “Persons, Processes, and Places: Research

on Families, Workplaces, and Communities,” clearly indicates the continuing vitality of this branch of the field.

Yet, at an overlapping conference, the annual meeting of the Alliance of Work/Life Professionals, the future of the field seemed more uncertain. Attendance was down, in part because many people had lost jobs. And, the proliferation of research notwithstanding, conference speakers made clear that the field has a long way to go to have the impact it seeks, both within work organizations and in public policy. Similarly, at the Legacy Meeting organized in connection with “Looking Backwards to Go Forward” and with a meeting of the Work-Life Leadership Council of the Conference Board (a group of high-level corporate Human Resources and Work-Life professionals), the mood and outlook were sober. The accomplishments have been substantial, the field remains vital, and the challenges remain great.