Janet Gornick and Marcia Meyers have offered reasoned and idealistic suggestions for the creation of institutional supports to assist working parents while simultaneously creating gender equity. Generous paid parental leaves that provide incentives for gender-equitable parenting; policies that limit working hours, and that create fair wages and benefits for part-time workers; and universal child care—all are important steps toward improving the lives of working families. In this essay, I raise the issue of culture, and particularly of ideologies concerning the “good mother,” as a potential barrier to the kind of social change Gornick and Meyers envision. I argue that making significant workplace changes in parenting arrangements without also addressing the dominant mothering ideology is short-sighted, and thus risky. Too little regard for the power of gender ideologies in general, and of mothering ideologies in particular, may lead a set of overtly progressive policies to produce regressive results.

I draw on my own research on working mothers and a review of the extensive literature on mothering to raise two questions. First, given the contemporary norm of the “good mother” as an “at-home mother,” will women take up parental leave and, more crucially, part-time work at a much higher rate than men? Doing so would entrench a “mommy track” within a set of policies designed to be both family-friendly and gender equitable. Second, given that gender intersects with race and class will mothers of different backgrounds respond to the proposed policies, and in particular to publicly provided child care, in class- and race-based ways that reproduce existing inequalities
among children? I limit my discussion of Gornick and Meyers' proposals to those aimed at improving the conditions of part-time work and at instituting publicly provided child care, because these two social policies risk the most regressive consequences, given the nature of contemporary mothering norms. I focus mainly on the US context because, although widespread, childrearing norms are contextually specific.

**MOTHERING AND CULTURE**

Since I accept the utopian mandate that informs this volume, I leave aside thorny questions concerning whether or not policy-makers would support or enact the proposed changes, and move directly to exploring the cultural and social belief systems in which actors are embedded. A clear understanding of context is essential. In order for any policy change to be effective, individuals have to be willing to implement it in their daily lives. Borrowing from sociologists Mary Blair-Loy (2003: 115) and William Sewell (1992: 27), I suggest that social structures are composed of "mutually sustaining cultural schemas and sets of resources that empower and constrain social action and tend to be reproduced by that action." Further, these schemas "help define and make sense of what [one] finds desirable and compelling." In the US, working-class and middle-class mothers are expected not only to raise their own children using their own resources, but also to *want* to provide this mother-care, particularly during the period from birth to age three. Mothering action takes shape within these cultural constraints, as mothers choose which aspects of existing norms to embrace and which to resist. How might Gornick and Meyers' proposed policies fare in this context?

The current cultural climate is particularly hard on mothers, pitting them against one another along a rigid mother-care/other-care binary, and giving rise to the so-called "mommy wars" (Johnston and Swanson, 2004). Swidler (1986, 2001) makes the case that, in times of social upheaval, common-sense knowledge or cultural "taken-for-granted" often harden into dogma. It is this dynamic that underlies the "mommy wars." Evidence of the increasingly dogmatic approach to mothers' roles and responsibilities is evident in the strident nature of debates over childrearing. For example, even the panel of experts in a 1997 government-sponsored study intended to resolve debates regarding the value of mother-care versus child care (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1997, 1998) could not reach consensus.

 Accusations of bias created deep divisions among panel members (Arnst, 2001; Birns, 1999; Bruer, 1999; Chira, 1998; Lamb, 1990). The surge in the number of advice books on parenting that has accompanied the significant rise in mothers' participation in the labor force is another indicator of polarizing perspectives. Five times as many childrearing advice books were published in 1997 as in 1973 (Hulbert, 2003).

The US can be said to be in the midst of an epoch of unsettled mothering, in which ideological views on good mothering have both hardened and proliferated. Here I refer to ideology not in the Marxian sense (which can be interpreted to entail some degree of intention on the part of knowledge-producers), but rather in the Weberian or Foucauldian sense of expert discourse that filters through the capillaries of popular culture and social structures, forming a general consensus concerning what is normal or abnormal. As I will discuss below, mothering ideologies are produced by experts—typically, pediatricians, neurologists, and child development researchers—and circulated through conferences and research papers. Experts' views are then interpreted and disseminated via mass media such as newspapers, popular magazines, and childrearing advice books. Different groups of mothers consume this information at different rates and act on it to different degrees. The result, however, is a widespread acceptance of the current state of expert ideologies concerning childrearing and maternal obligations. Pediatricians and child psychologists do not set out to make mothers miserable when they formulate the latest version of what children need, but this is the net effect of their pronouncements. It is impossible to write about what children need without simultaneously implying what mothers "ought."

Likewise, many commentators who write about working mothers seem unable to avoid blaming the victim, or assuming some degree of "false consciousness" among women who try simultaneously to emulate the "good mother" and the "unencumbered worker" (Williams, 2000). I reject these views and instead endorse Nancy Folbre's argument (this volume: 111-119) that good childrearing is both publicly valuable and intrinsically fulfilling work. At the same time, it is important to recognize that the contemporary mother-blame rhetoric has reached levels of near hysteria. The views of child development specialists, the content of advice books, and the shifting tides of public opinion combine to pressure all mothers to maintain their status as primary parent. It is not surprising, then, that so many mothers strive to adhere to some version of what Hays (1996) has termed "intensive mothering."
Other essays in this collection (see the contributions by Scott Coltrane and Ruth Milkman) also address the problem of ideology and motivation. Scott Coltrane approaches the problem from the fathers' side, while Ruth Milkman examines the employers' perspective. These are important areas, as is demonstrated by the need for incentives and sanctions to promote employer and paternal participation in countries that already have enacted family leave policies. However, most work–family studies assume, somewhat uncritically, that mothers will embrace the dual-earner/dual-caregiver model—particularly the earner component—whether that means increasing their hours at work if high-quality care is provided, or welcoming fathers and other loving adults into the parenting endeavor. In practice, though, it may instead mean continuing to work more, as contemporary mothers do, without reducing their own hours in child care (Bianchi et al., 2006). Or it may mean, as it has in some European countries, switching to a 1.5-earner model, in which men work full time and women remain in the part-time workforce for the duration of their childrearing years. Finally, it may mean that mothers will adapt to publicly provided child care slowly and in ways that reproduce both class and gender inequalities. If well-off women can “buy their way out” of working full-time, or can supplement or replace publicly provided child care with privately purchased services aimed at enhancing their children's cognitive and social development, can a national child-care program succeed? The question I raise, then, is not the ubiquitous “Can men mother?” (Risman, 1998); rather, it is the somewhat more complex, “Can/will women father?”

THE INTENSIFICATION OF “INTENSIVE MOTHERING”

Never before in American history have the daily lives of so many mothers been so at odds with beliefs about children's needs. Previous historical periods, such as the mid-to-late nineteenth century, or the period immediately following the Second World War, produced large amounts of mother-centric childrearing advice, but these ideological phases were in line with the homebound behavior of a plurality of mothers. Today, although 70 percent of US mothers work outside the home, prevailing beliefs about childrearing are, if anything, even more firmly based on the ideal of the ever-present, continually attentive, at-home mother. Scholars agree that contemporary child development research, advice books, parenting magazines, and general cultural sentiment have converged to raise the bar on expectations for moth-

ering young children so high that even full-time, at-home mothers would be hard-pressed to meet them. For working mothers, these expectations, which require the presence of a full-time mother as the primary caregiver, are by definition impossible to meet. Nevertheless, as Hays (1996) convincingly shows, while the ideology of intensive mothering is at odds with the market rationality usually associated with the successful worker, this ideology holds sway among working mothers and at-home mothers alike.

Based on her analysis of childrearing literature, and of both middle- and working-class mothers' interpretations of that literature, Hays defines “intensive mothering” as “child centered, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor intensive, and financially expensive,” and points out that “the task of child rearing is considered primarily the responsibility of the mother” (Hays, 1996: 69). Although authors of contemporary childrearing manuals make efforts to include fathers, and often use the gender-neutral term “parents,” they direct their advice almost exclusively to mothers, and suggest that “consistent nurture by a single primary caregiver is crucial,” ideally for the first three years of a child's life (Hays, 1996: 53). Further, according to these experts, a good mother is “not a subject with her own needs and interests” (Bassin et al., 1994: 2). Therefore, a belief in the value of intensive mothering inherently supports both the ideal of nuclear family self-sufficiency and of the gender inequities inherent in this ideal. Intensive mothering also places working mothers squarely in the crosshairs of two incompatible ideals: the unencumbered worker and the ever-present mother.

In the years since Hays published her analysis of the effects of childrearing advice on mothering practices, early childhood development researchers have produced new ideological strands that combine to create notions of child perfectibility, and the attendant need to produce the perfect child. In 1980, Jerome Kagan stated with some prescience that “the question of how to rear the better baby is so glamorous, so attractive to Americans and so fraught with emotionalism, that it invites judgments and ungrounded speculations” (quoted in Hulbert, 2003: 313). As it turned out, 1997 was the halcyon year for that prediction. The release of the first findings from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development’s (NICHD) attachment study, the publication of the Families and Work Institute’s Rethinking the Brain: New Insights into Early Development, and the Clinton administration-sponsored Carnegie Corporation program, Starting Points, which focused on the birth-to-three period, all occurred that year. They also all produced the same result: media hysteria about mothering.
found that 80 percent of mothers aged between eighteen and twenty-nine preferred to stay home (Public Agenda, 2000). The general public seemed to concur. A separate poll, conducted the same year, indicated that 75 percent of Americans surveyed agreed that children already spent too much time in child care or with babysitters, and 80 percent of Americans agreed that while "it may be necessary for the mothers to be working because the family needs money, it would be better if she could stay home and take care of the house and children" (Washington Post, 2000). Rather than leading to discussions of how to maximize the benefits of quality child care, the cultural fallout from the NICHD attachment studies and the new claims in neurology added fuel to already-heated debates on the effects of maternal employment on child development, representing a worst-case scenario for advocates of gender-equitable policies: research intended to reassure the public and invite support for publicly funded child care instead raised the stakes for mother-only care.

In evaluating the cultural impact of the child development research leading into the twenty-first century, it is important to assess critically both their research design and the framing of research questions. As Max Weber pointed out, scientific researchers use the methodological tools at hand to solve problems that are socially and culturally relevant to their historical period (Weber, 1949). In this case, the movement of mothers of young children into the paid labor force is the socially relevant historical problem, and tools such as the "strange situation test" and new techniques in neuroscience are the favored tools to hand. In child development research, questions are repeatedly framed in terms of the effects of maternal absence on cognition, emotional stability, and social adjustment. The prevalence of this kind of framing is significant. It creates normative discourse around early childhood development that is predicated on the mother-care/other care binary. Findings based on this narrow research frame are then transmitted to the general public through an upsurge in advice books and magazine articles aimed at anxious mothers. In light of the staying power of the mother-care/other-care binary, it is not clear that the proposals suggested by Gornick and Meyers would reshape child development research or popular culture in ways that would help families move beyond this binary into a model of childrearing that embraces the presence of other caring adults.
MOTHERS INTERPRET IDEOLOGY: PUTTING CULTURE INTO ACTION

How do mothers interpret and implement current childrearing discourses? Here I draw on Michele Lamont's (1992) perspective on the impact of culture on social action. She rejects ideological determinism, but also tempers the "voluntaristic" view proposed by "tool kit" theorists (Swidler, 1986, 2001):

[The multicausal explanation I propose takes into consideration how remote and proximate structural factors shape choices from and access to the tool kit—in other words, how these factors affect the cultural resources most likely to be mobilized by different types of individuals and what elements of tool kits people have most access to given their social positions. (Lamont, 1992: 135)

Mothers, therefore, will interpret dominant childrearing ideologies based on their exposure to these discourses, and based on their ability to implement the dictates of experts. They will also filter the dominant childrearing ideologies through their own cultural and class backgrounds, their aspirations for their children, and their own experiences of being mothered. Still, since childrearing ideologies are as ubiquitous as they are unrealistic, most mothers must at least take them into account and "be accountable" to them (West and Zimmerman, 1987).

In the US cultural context, intensive mothering ideologies are a powerful motivator. This does not mean that all mothers automatically enact this ideal. It means that the attitudes and actions of mothers, and the responses of public opinion to mothers, take this ideology into account. Research on social class and intensive mothering indicates that, while not all US mothers have the resources to fulfill the ideals of intensive mothering, most are aware of the ideal and use it as a standard to which they compare their own mothering practices. Hays (1996) interviewed both middle-class and working-class mothers, and found that they held themselves equally accountable to the ideology, even if they were not always able to enact it. As she notes,

Working-class, poor, professional-class, and affluent mothers alike nearly all believe that childrearing is appropriately child-centered and emotionally absorbing. And, practically speaking, this common attitude means that they understand that good childrearing requires the day-to-day labor of nurturing the child... and placing the child's well-being ahead of their own. (Hays, 1996)

The distinction between mothers of different classes is not in how much they feel responsible for being home, but, as will be discussed below, in how much flexibility they can afford and in how much they can supplement their own care with enrichment activities and childcare services.

The working-class and middle-class working mothers interviewed by Anita Garey also stressed "doing motherhood" in a way that emphasized "maternal visibility" and "being in the mother-appropriate place at the mother-appropriate time" (Garey, 1999: 29, 32). These symbolic expressions emphasize the women's awareness of being "in interaction with dominant-culture conceptions of mother-appropriate activities, and [their understanding that] it is as mothers that their actions are assessed" (Garey, 1999: 26-27). The strategies working mothers used included working the night shift so that they could be at home and available during the day, or taking time off from work to attend a school outing. Garey points out that

in going on the field trip, a mother is also indicating to herself and others that she is the kind of mother who acts to keep her child safe, or the kind of mother who is involved in her child's education, or the kind of mother who is not too busy to do her part to support school activities. (Garey, 1999: 29)

These examples indicate the power of intensive mothering as a cultural context in which even mothers who lack the financial resources, time, flexibility (or sleep) to approximate the at-home mother will go to great lengths to produce the image of the at-home mother. They produce the image because, in addition to being accountable to others, they are accountable to themselves and to the ideal of motherhood they hold.

In other studies, women interpreted the content of intensive mothering in class-based ways, but held themselves no less liable for its enactment. The single mothers Margaret Nelson interviewed, for instance, reinterpreted intensive mothering as "practical motherhood":

Each woman makes central to her account of mothering the efforts that go into simply keeping her children alive and safe. Each woman also highlights the extra challenge incurred because of limited human and financial resources. As they do, the women acknowledge that their efforts might compete with, and occasionally cause them to diminish the range of what they believe their children deserve. (Nelson, 2003: 128)
What these women felt their children deserved was the time, attention, and "emotion work" that intensive mothering entails. While they acknowledged that they had good reason not to provide that intensity of care, they were left with feelings of guilt, inadequacy, and uneasiness. This sense of accountability held true regardless of social class. Further, other work suggests that working-class mothers may be more drawn toward home because unfulfilling and low-paying jobs may cause them to identify more closely with motherhood than with working as a primary role (see Gerson, 1985; van Wel and Knijn, 2006).

In my own study of professional-class working mothers in dual-earner families, I found mothers to be deeply attached to the intensive mothering ideal. I found this surprising, because initially I had believed that women who had broken the glass ceiling surely would have left outmoded mothering ideologies behind. Not so. For example, Jessica, a corporate consultant, and the highest earner in my study, was responsible for 80 percent of the family income. And yet, she explained that even though her husband was an actively involved parent, and even though Anabel, the caregiver they employed, was the "dream au pair," she intended to leave her job. Jessica described a deep, deep hurt that even to this day, Sammy wants Anabel, or he wants Jack, and I’m third. And I worry. I feel like, ‘Is our relationship ever gonna recover from that? Is he ever gonna be more mommy-oriented? I hope so.

Jessica felt that she was failing on two fronts—she was no longer the unencumbered worker that her "male-pattern career" demanded, and she was not the omnipresent mother that the stacks of advice books she read told her she should be.4 Feeling inadequate as a mother was the norm in the 60 child-care arrangements I studied, and anxiety over being adequate as a mother played out in my respondents' mothering practices and in their work–family balancing strategies.5

These findings also raise questions about how mothers would adapt to sharing the primary parent role with fathers or with child-care providers. Over half of the mothers I interviewed had second-shift-sharing husbands. Yet this created more, not less strain in family life. Significantly, those mothers with husbands who had more flexibility at work and were able to stay home more sometimes envied the time their husbands had at home. Other mothers felt threatened when a child preferred "daddy" to them. Some of fathers' second-shift work frequently entailed helping mothers have quality time with their children. Suzanne, a corporate executive, expressed envy because her husband had more time at home with the baby when she was first born because he was in school. He did not have the responsibility of being the primary caregiver—the nanny had that responsibility—but he did have, as Suzanne noted, the "at-homeness" that she missed:

Well, my husband's been in sort of a unique situation in that he was in school when Lindsay was born, and so for a year and a half, kind of had that at-homeness, and he's just transitioned into working and he, uh, keeps on joking that he'd like to stay home. I told him that's not an option [laughs].

Suzanne gratefully acknowledged that her husband often did the cooking in the evenings, in order to give her "face time" with their baby, since she had the more demanding work schedule. However, when they discussed the possibility that one of them might take time off from work, she made it clear that she considered it her turn to be at home with Lindsay, and her chance to catch up on the "face time" she had missed.

This kind of behavior has been termed "emotional hoarding" (Hochschild, 1989) as well as "maternal gatekeeping" (Allen and Hawkins, 1999; Gaunt, 2008), and is viewed as a barrier to gender-equitable parenting. Research on maternal gatekeeping defines this behavior as: "a) a reluctance to relinquish family responsibility by setting rigid standards; b) a desire to validate maternal identity; and c) differentiated conceptions of family roles" (McBride et al., 2005: 362). Some of this literature takes a "blame the victim" approach toward mothers. Still, it does demonstrate that the more salient motherhood is to a woman's identity, the more likely she is to expect motherhood to be her sole domain.

Research on mothering identities indicates that mothering is a more powerful aspect of identity than either marital status or occupation (Rogers and White, 1998). As Susan Walzer's (1998) study of men and women preparing for parenthood indicates, the social-psychological process of becoming a motheand "thinking about the baby" in itself increases the salience of both gender and maternal identities. Among the time-deprived professional-class mothers I interviewed, the increased importance women accorded their maternal identity also arose from insecurity regarding the mother's place in the child's psychological life. Among working-class women, a lack of stimulation or nourishment at work may increase the salience of maternal identity. In either case, I would argue that anxiety concerning maternal identity is a potential barrier to equal uptake of part-time work, even if
parental leave is equalized. The widespread belief in mother-only attachment—the dominant ideology among mothers across social classes—needs to be overcome in order for gender-equitable work–family balance policies to succeed.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

Scaling back at work and ramping up at home?
Current time-use data for the US and for parts of western Europe show that, regardless of whether women increase or reduce their time at work, and regardless of whether men do or do not increase their time in child care, women’s time spent in child care remains stable or increases. These findings raise concerns regarding the possibility of mothers of young children “opting out” of full-time work if part-time options become more attractive. In the US, women work part-time at rates double those of their male peers, and most do so for childcare-related reasons. Improved benefits for part-time workers would certainly better the lot of those working families who already rely on 1.5 incomes. Would it, though, lead to gender equity? Given the current ideological climate in the US and the data on current time use by American working mothers, I do not share Gornick and Meyers’ optimistic view that improved part-time working conditions will “provide incentives for more men to participate in part-time employment” (this volume: 24). Rather, I suggest that such a move, without a corresponding change in definitions of motherhood, would result in a part-time ghetto for mothers, while men and childless women would enjoy the benefits of a full-time career track.

The pull toward home for mothers is documented in recent studies of time-use diaries of dual-carer families. In the US and in selected European countries, the overall trend in the past twenty years has been toward more time with children for both mothers and fathers. What is especially significant in these findings, however, is the fact that mothers’ time with children has remained steady or increased, even though their working hours have increased dramatically (Bianchi et al., 2006). They achieve this feat by cutting back on housework, time alone with spouses, time for themselves, and sleep. In fact, among school-aged children, the differences in time spent with employed mothers versus unemployed mothers is “reassuringly small” (Bianchi et al., 2006: 156). In the US, despite working more outside the home and having fewer children inside it, working mothers have not reduced the hours they spend on child care compared to that of their own mothers. More strikingly, mothers’ time in child care continues to increase, regardless of the fact that fathers’ time in child care has also increased. In 1965, fathers reported spending about half the amount of time on it that mothers did; by 1998, this ratio had increased to two-thirds (Bianchi, 2000: 411).

The take-away message from time-use studies is that women are spending more time with fewer children, regardless of their own work hours and regardless of the parental involvement of their partners. While such findings are reassuring to demographers, they are not sufficient to reassure working mothers, who continue to report feeling guilty about not spending enough time with children. Among married women, this feeling of guilt is attributable almost exclusively to time spent at work: 47 percent of employed married mothers reported feeling guilty about depriving their children of time with them, compared to only 18 percent of at-home mothers (Bianchi et al., 2006: 133).

In the US, would changes in the structure of work significantly change working mothers’ attitudes toward and time investment in caring for their children? Trends in Europe are suggestive. In the EU, laws have been passed that offer part-time workers job quality (wages, career development, benefits) commensurate with that of full-time workers. Since the enactment of these laws, part-time workers have been significantly more likely to be women. In 2001, the EU average for female part-time employment was 35 percent and the male rate a mere 6.2 percent. Further, the majority of this part-time work is described as voluntary. While there are vast discrepancies in the amount of part-time work in different EU countries, the EU in general has witnessed overall increases in part-time employment rates, and in all of the countries with the highest rates the majority of workers are female (Buddelmeyer et al., 2004). Women in the US already work part-time at higher rates than men, and mothers with children under age six work part-time at higher rates than any other group of women: “By far the modal experience, at least for a married mother of a preschooler, is to be working either less than 35 hours per week or not at all” (Bianchi 2000: 407–8).

What might the European experience tell us about the impact of mothering ideologies? How much do what others frequently term “traditional cultures of care” shape the part-time employment strategies observed on the other side of the Atlantic? The Netherlands passed a law in 2000 that gives all employees the right to request reduced working hours, with the hope that this policy would a) aid working families and b) create more gender-equitable parenting (see Morgan, this volume). Since the passage of that law, 86 percent of
partnered working mothers have worked part-time. "Among dual-earner couples, with young and school-aged children, a one-and-a-half earner family (the man works full-time, the woman part-time) is the most dominant type" (van Wel and Knijn, 2006: 634). In van Wel and Knijn's research, this was not only the dominant form of work–family arrangement—among all but the most educated group of women, it was deemed the most desirable. Why? The nature of Dutch mothers' participation in part-time labor "is not determined currently by external obstacles but by a cultural factor: the care culture" (van Wel and Knijn, 2006: 648). In this study of 1,285 Dutch mothers, the "care culture" is defined as the extent to which women feel that home and child care are more important to them than paid employment. Findings from studies like these raise the possibility that progressive policies with respect to part-time work may have the unintended consequence of producing a new stage in the evolution of dual-earner families: the emergence of a 1.5-earner or "neo-traditional" family form (Moen, 2003; van Wel and Knijn, 2006).

There is some hope for progressive developments in the fact that well-educated women are not satisfied with staying in part-time work roles. Significantly, although 55 percent of the highly educated women in the Netherlands study lived in 1.5-earner families, 50 percent of them viewed a dual-earner family as their ideal (van Wel and Knijn, 2006). Whether they could act as the leading edge of cultural change that would lead to more equitable division of full-time and part-time work remains to be seen. In the US context, women already "relinquish the goal of equality with men in the workplace, in favor of more hours at home when their children are young," even though most reduced-hours employment is underpaid and insecure, and carries poor benefits (Bianchi et al., 2006: 175). What is clear is that family-friendly policies like these part-time work regulations need to be explicitly aimed, not just at helping families meet caregiving needs, but at achieving gender equity in the home and in the workforce as a public good.

However, even in Scandinavian countries, where work–family policies are explicitly designed to create gender-equitable working and parenting, ideologies promoting maternal sacrifice show remarkable staying power. Research conducted in Sweden demonstrates that mothering ideologies remain strong. Although working full-time is acceptable for Swedish mothers, they do so for the express benefit of their children. This discursive position also coincides with competing positions that frame the mother's well-being as existing for the good of the child, and frame motherhood as a context in which the "mother exists for the child" (Evlin-Nowak and Thomsson, 2001: 423). Further, although there is a high rate of full-time labor participation among Swedish mothers, they spend as much time as they can with their children as a way of "immunizing them" against future troubles, framing the "child's being as the project for the future" (Evlin-Nowak and Thomsson, 2001: 414–15). Even in a country with progressive work-family and child-care policies framed with an explicit gender-equity intent, mothers struggle to reconcile deep-seated beliefs about good mothering with their beliefs in the benefits of working and gender-equitable parenting.

SOCIAL CLASS, RACE/ETHNICITY, AND USE OF PUBLICLY PROVIDED CHILD CARE

Although most mothers in the US believe in the value of at-home mother-care and embrace some version of intensive mothering, how they interpret these ideologies varies by social class and race. Similarly, public attitudes toward mothers sort them into those who ought to stay home and give their children the benefit of their time and attention, and those who ought to work, and give their children the benefit of enriching activities like Head Start. This class- and race-based ambivalence about mothering is most clearly articulated when it comes to poor mothers. A survey showed that 86 percent of parents with children under age five agreed that it was more important for mothers receiving public assistance to work than to stay home with their children, even if that meant the children would be in child care (Farkas et al., 2000). Although the belief in at-home mothering is strong, so is the belief child improvement. Not long after the passage of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act, 74 percent of respondents in a Pew Research Center study favored increased spending on child care for low-income families (Sylvester, 2001). Some children, it seems, are better off with their mothers, while others would benefit from professional care, and these children are categorized by race and class. Based on these differences in expectations for middle-class, working-class, and poor mothers, two questions seem salient. First, how do these class- and race-based strains in mothering ideologies translate into individual mothering beliefs and practices? And second, what implications might these beliefs and practices have for the ways mothers would respond to the publicly provided child care proposed by Gornick and Meyers?
In answer to the first question, in the US context, we see the greatest resistance to intensive mothering coming from immigrant communities and communities of color. According to Patricia Hill-Collins (2000), mother-work among African-American women primarily involves teaching children how to cope with inequality, and ensuring family and racial survival, and inculcating a positive ethnic identity. Further, black women's mothering includes the involvement of “other-mothers”—be they relatives, friends, or neighbors—who actively participate in childrearing because it is assumed that most biological mothers will have to work to support their children. As Terry Arendell (2000: 1,199) points out, “African American mothers’ employment rates have been higher for a longer period of time and are recognized within the community as being essential to family survival.”

Likewise, Denise Segura studied the effects of ethnic culture on mothering beliefs by comparing Mexican and Chicana mothers. Her findings reinforce the significance of the at-home mother as an ideal in developed countries. The Mexican mothers she interviewed, who had migrated from Mexico as adults, were accustomed to “a world where economic and household work often merged” (Segura, 1994: 219). They did not view work and family as separate spheres, and therefore they experienced very little internal conflict in combining working and mothering. Chicanas, on the other hand, born in the US, drew on the cultural binaries of mother/worker prevalent in US culture. They therefore approached combining motherhood and employment with much greater ambivalence than the Mexicans. Her findings and those concerning African-American mothers suggest that, the more a woman frames her identity in terms of “mainstream” American cultural ideals, the more likely she is to feel conflicted over combining work and mothering.

These subcultures represent counter-hegemonic challenges to the idealized at-home mother that stem from economic need and from embeddedness in specific sub-cultures, rather than from ideological preference. In Segura's study, the more Americanized Chicanas quickly embraced the at-home mothering ideal, even if they could not afford to provide it. Likewise, in Annette Lareau's (2003) study of parenting practices among blacks and whites in the middle and lower classes, class, not race, was the decisive factor in determining parental culture. Middle-class African-American parents embraced the same activity-laden, mother-intensive practice of “concerted cultivation” as their white-class peers.

It may be that class trumps race in parenting style because long-standing and pervasive individualism in the US has given rise to “the rhetoric of competitive mothering” (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001: 26). Each family, and indeed each mother, is expected to marshal and transmit the economic, social, and cultural resources needed to reproduce or enhance children's class status. In her study of executive women, Blair-Loy found that those who “opted out” of their careers were “busily engaged in transmitting an upper-class capital to their children” (Blair-Loy, 2003: 54). By comparison, recent welfare reform laws and public opinion about welfare-to-work policies indicate that poor women should provide their children with access to middle-class cultural capital by putting them in child care where, presumably, their life skills and educational preparedness would be enhanced by care received from others. With the exception of mothers in poverty, who are expected to work, it seems clear that most mothers feel strong pressure to be at home with their children, and that pressure has significant implications for how work–family policies are likely to be implemented.

More educated mothers may also be married to higher-earning husbands who can “buy them out” of the labor force; more highly educated women also read more advice literature (Arendell, 1997); and, finally, higher education may coincide with the ways middle- and upper-class women use “mothering as a means of transferring middle-class status to children” (Johnson and Swanson, 2006: 510). In my own research with middle-and professional-class mothers and their child care providers, I found that mothers worried significantly less about their children's physical safety in their absence than they did about whether the nanny could provide appropriate intellectual stimulation, arrange social interactions with the “right” playmates, and transmit class-based cultural values. In other words, highly educated women worry about how to delegate the transmission of middle- and upper-class habits through an intermediary. This worry was a key factor in their preference for a nanny over a child care center, and was the most frequently cited reason for nanny turnover. These findings suggest that educated middle- and professional-class women may opt out of publicly provided child care in favor of scaling back to part-time work themselves, or by hiring a suitable mother-substitute to provide their children with the appropriate class-based cultural and social capital.

Differences in mothering practices across class are complex. While the bulk of research shows that mothers of all classes and races prefer to stay home with their children, middle- and upper-class mothers have the added pressure of preparing their children for a competitive school and work environment and of believing that they ought to
provide this preparation themselves—or if they cannot, that they should purchase the appropriate enrichment activities and services. At the other end of the spectrum, poor mothers are pressured to model “self-sufficiency” for their children by working outside the home, and to give their children middle-class advantages by sending them to publicly provided preschool and subsidized child care (when they can get it). This equation is similar to the ways that public education has played out in the US. Parents who can afford to do so frequently opt out of the public system in favor of private schooling, or pay for supplemental lessons. They then feel less accountable to the public school system and less likely to support it politically or financially, leaving behind families who are economically restricted and have no other options.

For the range of publicly provided preschool child-care services to avoid the fate of public schooling in America, parents of all class backgrounds would have to “buy in” to the services and to see them as more beneficial to their children’s advancement than privately provided alternatives. In my own research, mothers chose nannies over any other form of child care because they believed that a “home-centered” childhood provides the optimal environment for early childhood development. Further, they justified the significant extra cost of a nanny because they believed that one-on-one care would give their children a “leg-up” when it came time to compete for a spot in the most prestigious preschools. While these mothers clearly represent an elite minority among full-time working mothers, I would argue that it is just such elites who would need to embrace publicly provided child care. If they do not, the system of options outlined by Gornick and Meyers is likely to lack sufficient political and financial support, and to be seen as a “second-class” form of care (which, more than likely, would continue to be staffed by “second-class” workers—namely women). This dystopian possibility reproduces not only gender inequalities, but also existing class inequalities, sending public preschool care down the same sad road already traveled by US public education as a whole.

Nancy Fraser (1997) argued that men need to become more “like women are now.” Here, I raised the question of how policy and changes in ideology can encourage women to become more like men are now. If we cannot accomplish this transformation, we are likely to see even the progressive policy changes proposed by Gornick and Meyers take a decidedly regressive turn. Middle- and upper-class families could opt out of the new child-care supports either by purchasing one-on-one substitute mother-care or by “buying the mother out” of the workforce—a move that would reinforce both class and gender inequalities. In either case, the pressure to transmit middle-class habits and its attendant upward mobility will drive middle-class mothers to participate in “competitive mothering,” unless upward mobility and mother-care are somehow decoupled in the public imagination.

Garey (1999: 9) has argued that “we need a way of thinking about women’s employment that doesn’t presume a zero-sum relationship between women’s commitments to their employment and to their families.” While this may seem self-evident to some, creating that way of thinking—indeed, creating a new mothering ideology—is more difficult than one might expect. As Rosemary Crompton points out, while the ideology of masculine supremacy has been successfully challenged inside and outside of dual-earner families, “[w]hat have proved to be much more enduring, however, are deep-seated norms and cultural beliefs about what men and women are good at and how they should behave.” (this volume: 377–378) I would add that these gender-specific norms are at their most powerful in the realm of mothering. While the male-breadwinner role is on the decline, there is no similar decline in the female-caregiver role. This is due partly to the ways that women’s self-interest is continually framed in opposition to the interests of their children and to the collective interests of the family—whether in child development studies, historical accounts, or even in popular family sociology textbooks (Cherlin, 2006; Degler, 1980). Motherhood seems to be the ideological sticking point in attempts to encourage gender equity in the uptake of family-friendly policies.

Gornick and Meyers present a compelling structural view of social change: build the social supports, and change will come. Yet I believe this view underestimates the force of culture in motivating action. The persistence of American individualism, competitive mothering, and intensive mothering indicates the need for broad changes in belief systems. These are possible, but are only likely to accompany a social movement or a change in expert discourse, or both. Deborah Stone (2000) and Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2000) have both argued persuasively for a care movement. They call for mobilization around the rights of care-recipients and those of paid and unpaid caregivers across the dependency spectrum. This would be a start, but it would also have to include advocacy for the positive effects on children that result from care provided by multiple adult caregivers. This last challenge is particularly difficult, especially in light of expert advice that calls for maternal self-sacrifice as the key to producing perfect offspring. Ultimately, we need a care movement that would embrace as a positive
social good the equitable sharing of child care, not only between fathers and mothers, but also between family members and paid caregivers, and across settings. Only then will we be able to embrace family policies that do not continue to disadvantage women in the name of raising healthy children.

NOTES

1 Blair-Loy (2003). Blair-Loy breaks these into "devotion to family" and "devotion to work" schemas. While I disagree with her oversimplification of this binary (which she also views as an ideal typical analytic tool), her interpretation of how cultural schemas influence action is compelling.

2 For more on motherhood during these periods, see Ammott and Matthei (1996) and Kessler-Harris (1982). On the other hand, poor women, mothers from racial minorities and immigrant groups have always had to work to make ends meet. See, for example, Leonard (1997). The significant difference today is that middle- and upper-class women do not conform to the ideal.

3 This was a longitudinal study of over 1,000 families diversified by race and social class. Researchers followed children who were cared for at home by a parent and those who were cared for in various child-care settings. The children were followed through elementary school.

4 Interestingly, the recently released Pew Study on Women, Family, and Work found that most mothers judged themselves inadequate as mothers. The least satisfied mothers were college-educated, with 72 percent of at-home mothers in this group "less satisfied" with their mothering skills, and 68 percent of the working mothers unsatisfied. Mothers without college degrees were not pleased with themselves as mothers, but they were less self-critical than those with college degrees. In this group, 62 percent of working mothers and only 54 percent of at-home mothers reported dissatisfaction with their own mothering (Bianchi, 2000).

5 I refer to 60 arrangements because, although I interviewed eighty women (fifty child-care providers and thirty working mothers who employed them), many of the women were interviewed as worker-employer dyads. Therefore, among eighty women, there were sixty child-care relationships.

6 I am not suggesting that improved pay and benefits for part-time workers would necessarily harm the interests of women workers, who make up the majority of part-time employees in general. Rather, I question whether such a policy would lead to gender equity.

7 Time-diary data for US mothers with preschool children indicate that these mothers tend to reduce their time in paid work until their children reach school age (National Center for Health Statistics, 2000, 2006).

8 The average number of live births per woman in the US was 3.6 in 1960 and 2.1 in 2005 (Buddelmeyer et al., 2004).

9 These data vary significantly for single mothers, who must provide all the income and all the care for their families. However, since the proposed policies are designed primarily to benefit dual-earner families, I focus my discussion on the time use patterns of these families.

10 The Netherlands has the highest rates, followed by the UK, Germany, France, and Sweden, with Italy and Greece showing the lowest rates of part-time work (Buddelmeyer et al., 2004).

11 Sweden has "moderate" part-time work rates, with over 30 percent of women working part-time and approximately 20 percent of men working part-time (Pew Center for People and the Press, 1998).

12 See Farkas et al. (2000).

13 For example, 80 percent of mothers of children under age five "would prefer to stay home with children when they are young, and 63 percent of parents of young children surveyed disagree that the care and attention children get from a 'top-notch day care center' is as good as what they would receive at home from a parent."

REFERENCES


---

Further Thoughts

Janet C. Gornick and Marcia K. Meyers

In our 2003 book, *Families That Work*, we first presented our collaborative work on policies for reconciling parenthood and employment. During the course of writing our book, we understood that we were making an ambitious policy proposal, and that we had embedded it in a radical end-vision, but we did not overtly conceptualize these components as utopian.

In extending the analyses of that earlier work for this book in the Real Utopias Project series, our first task was to identify what exactly defined "our" Real Utopia. As we saw it, and still see it, our Real Utopia is defined by the end-vision of the dual-earner/dual-caregiver (henceforth, "earner-caregiver") society. The earner-caregiver society is defined by gender symmetry in work and care; by the participation of both mothers and fathers in the care of their own children; by high-quality care for all children, whether by parents or well-trained and well-compensated non-parental caregivers; and by the socialization of a portion of the costs of raising children through redistributive social policies. To advance these ends, we recommend a package of work–family reconciliation policies that we believe would, in the short run, enable individuals and families to care for their children and live more gender-equalitarian lives and, in the longer run, to increase the value that society places on caregiving work, and greatly reduce, and ultimately dissolve, the gendering of divisions of labor.

Erik Olin Wright, in his discussion of emancipatory social science, charges us to develop coherent, credible theories of the alternatives to existing institutions and social structures that would advance the goals of social and political justice. We take up this charge in this essay by organizing our comments to address two of the three criteria he