

# *Industrial & Labor Relations Review*

---

*Volume 61, Issue 3*

2008

*Article 81*

---

## Changing Rhythms of American Family Life

Suzanne M. Bianchi\*

John P. Robinson†

Melissa Milkie‡

\*,  
†,  
‡,

pation; providing needy workers who have not recently been on welfare with some of the work support benefits that are currently available only to those transitioning from welfare; expanding the EITC; and broadening participation in rental housing supports.

Timothy J. Bartik

Senior Economist  
W.E. Upjohn Institute for  
Employment Research

*Changing Rhythms of American Family Life.* By Suzanne M. Bianchi, John P. Robinson, and Melissa Milkie. New York: Russell Sage, 2006. 249 pp. ISBN 978-0-87154-136-9, \$37.50 (cloth).

In *Changing Rhythms of American Family Life*, Suzanne Bianchi, John Robinson, Melissa Milkie, and their collaborators draw on historical time-use data collections and their own recently collected time-diary data to examine how women's increasing participation in the work force affected the time use of American parents and children between 1965 and 2000. This is an ambitious study in what it covers: parental time use and subjective feelings about time, children's time use, relationships between mothers', fathers', and children's time use, and cross-national comparisons of parental time with children. Surprisingly, Bianchi et al. show that parents spent at least as much time interacting with their children in 2000 as in 1965. They managed to do so by increasing their reliance on multi-tasking and by incorporating children into adult leisure activities.

The authors' demonstration of the creative ways parents have restructured their lives to maintain interaction time with children even as their own time has become increasingly squeezed—by, most notably, the increase in women's paid work hours—is a significant contribution to the literature. Mothers greatly reduced time spent on housework, but not time spent in child care. How did they maintain time with children? First, even as a culture of intensive mothering has increased expectations of maternal time with each child, the number of children in the home decreased over the period. And while rising maternal employment meant that families were busier, the authors show that in addition to performing less housework, women were increasingly multi-tasking to maintain time with children. Men also contributed to the increase in child care time. Fathers' time contributions in the less "fun" aspects of child

care—clothing, bathing, and feeding—modestly increased over the time period of the analysis, from 2 hours per week to 7. Most provocative is the authors' surprising finding that parents were maintaining time with children by including children in parental leisure-time activities. Parents shifted from adult-only activities to activities that incorporate children. This shift may have important implications for understanding parental engagement in community life, and may point to a fruitful explanation of declining parental involvement in adult-focused activities such as voluntary and charitable causes, as recently documented in other research.

Related to the incorporation of children into adult leisure may be women's reports of too little time with their husbands (though the men in this study did not express this sentiment). This points to another strength of this study—its presentation not only of data on time trends, but also of information on how individuals feel about time use. Not surprisingly, women (especially single mothers) felt more stressed about time than men did—although fathers reported experiencing greater time shortages with children than mothers did. The authors' investigation of men's and women's subjective perceptions of busy-ness and time constraints gives context to the study's time diary data.

Another innovative and fascinating analysis in *Changing Rhythms of American Family Life* is the authors' investigation of correlations between men's and women's activities using the unique interconnected diaries of mothers and fathers within the same family (Chapter 6). Among the interesting results are strong positive correlations in child-care provision, suggesting that men and women often jointly spent time with their children, in contrast to trading time off against each other. The finding that men did not significantly fill in for women's decreases in unpaid work is further evidenced in the finding that the more the wife worked for pay, the more her husband slept or watched TV. Employed women, unable to depend on their husbands to make up for their lost household-work hours, increasingly purchased external services for that purpose.

The increase in men's household hours, which is frequently discussed by the authors, was large in percentage terms, but only because the men's initial contributions were so low; in fact, these small upticks in unpaid work did not fully compensate for declines in the unpaid work of women, particularly that of employed women. This can be found in the comparative analyses presented, as well, where the separate graphs for men and women juxtapose men's small increases against

women's large decreases. For example, between 1960 and 2000, the half-hour increase in French men's time spent performing child care did not nearly counter-balance the nearly 50% decline in French women's hours devoted to that responsibility. This seems at odds with the authors' claim that time with children increased for men and women in all countries over the period.

Of the book's claims, the one most liable to generate controversy may be the contention that the data do not support arguments of a second shift being disproportionately borne by women. The authors base this conclusion primarily on evidence of gender equality in the total work hours (paid and unpaid) of husbands and wives. But where one would most expect to find the second shift imbalance is between full-time working women and full-time working men in households with couples—and yet the only analyses in the book that disaggregate the data by the employment status of mothers are those in Chapter 5. This choice by the authors seems particularly surprising given the background question of how increasing maternal employment has affected maternal time with children. Where the authors limit the analysis to employed women, they do find evidence of an inequitable distribution of the second shift onto women: employed mothers averaged a 71-hour week, compared to 52 hours for non-employed mothers and 64 hours for fathers. If employed mothers had been further disaggregated into part- and full-time employment, the authors might have found even longer workweeks among full-time employed mothers, which would further support the second shift argument.

Even if total hours are the same for men and women, this measure does not capture intensity of effort. Although this limitation is endemic to the time diary method and is not at all the fault of the authors of this book, its presence necessitates caution in making claims about equitable workloads. If women are more likely than men to multi-task, they might be working harder and doing more of the second shift, even when total hours appear equivalent. While time diary methodologies offer excellent quantitative data on activities, they may undercount the complex and multiple uses of time. For example, the worrying, planning, and problem-solving involved in child- and household-related tasks are not captured in an activity diary in which the main activity recorded might be driving, sleeping, personal care, or leisure. If women disproportionately do the problem-solving, such a diary may undercount their second shift work and also play into the "overestimates" of household task time in stylized questions regarding time use.

All of this begs the question of power and choice between men and women in "deciding" what their relative contributions to paid and unpaid work will be. Even where total hours of work are equal when one adds paid and unpaid work together, does this finding signal equality when one sees such a strong gendered pattern persist? Those two patterns in combination may, on the contrary, indicate gender inequality in power and choice in terms of decisions about who does the money-producing and care-producing work. Do women really have the marital and economic bargaining power to choose more paid work, particularly when men do not step in to make up the lost care-giving work of employed women? There is no revolution in the home in terms of men's domestic hours to parallel the gender revolution in paid work hours. The authors do briefly discuss these issues of power and choice in the last chapter of the book.

Clearly, this is a provocative and important book that contains a wealth of new information regarding the changing time use patterns in American families. In addition to being a new resource for family scholars, sociologists, demographers, and policy-makers, among many others, the data and arguments presented in this book—especially in conjunction with the new releases of the American Time Use Surveys—are sure to inspire additional research into American time use.

Michelle J. Budig

Associate Professor of Sociology  
University of Massachusetts  
Humboldt Fellow and Guest Researcher,  
Max Planck Institute of  
Demographic Research

*Economic Inequality and Higher Education: Access, Persistence, and Success.* Edited by Stacy Dickert-Conlin and Ross Rubenstein. New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2007. 272 pp. ISBN 978-0-87154-320-2, \$35.00 (hardcover).

In recent decades, economic inequality in the United States has increased dramatically. Thomas Lemieux demonstrated in "Increasing Residual Wage Inequality: Composition Effects, Noisy Data, or Rising Demand for Skill?" that a substantial portion of the increase in economic inequality can be traced to an increase in the returns to higher education (*American Economic Review*, 96:3, June 2006). Given these facts, it is important to study whether students from low-income families are attending and graduating from college. If there