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Futurist Book Group Discussion

Changing Rhythms of American Family Life

by Suzanne M. Bianchi, John P. Robinson and Melissa A. Milkie
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Synopsis of the June 2007 meeting of the Futurist Book Group (Washington DC Chapter); summarized and reviewed by Ken Harris

The book addresses as objectively as possible how parents and their minor children spend their time and how their time use has changed over the past 40 years. The authors use data from time use diaries on which to base their conclusions. The diaries cover all daily activities of those surveyed including market work (i.e., work for pay), leisure, and personal and family care activities. The authors present data separately for married fathers and mothers with minor children and for single mothers with minor children. Besides several chapters on parents' use of and feelings about time, there is also a chapter on children's time use. Some **FUTUREtakes** readers, especially ardent feminists who believe that women are unfairly burdened with both paid work and household management, may take sharp issue with conclusions in the book. Nevertheless, it will be of general interest to anyone interested in social trends and of particular interest to those interested in aspects of behavior (e.g., time spent in television watching).

Of no surprise is the authors' finding that the nature of motherhood has changed, principally because mothers do far more market work than they used to do. In a large urban area like Washington DC where there are plenty of professional career women, one might think that most married women work for pay full-time or even longer than the standard 40-hour week. Not so, say the authors. The average number of hours American women spend on market work per year remains less than full-time because some women do no market work and others work part-time or take time off to meet their children's needs. Women's market work histories are far more episodic than men's.

What is surprising, considering media images of overburdened mothers, is that despite spending far more time on market work, mothers are not spending significantly less time with

their children. They are maintaining and even strengthening relationships with their children because they are spending much less time on housework and fathers are pitching in and doing much more routine housework including routine childcare. Fathers are also becoming far more involved in their children's lives. The main reason this is so, say the authors, is that technology and convention have given parents far more choice over when to have children. Consequently, children are more cherished, and parents are in a better position to give them the care they think they ought to receive. Also parents are increasingly attuned to the dangers children face in the modern world in their absence.

The book exposes stresses in American family life in two major ways. First, the chapter on children's time use says that 34 percent of those surveyed wished their mothers would be less stressed and tired and 28 percent wished the same for their fathers. Only 10 percent of the children actually wanted more time with their mothers and 16 percent wanted more time with their fathers. Second, the amount of time members of married couples spend with each other declined 26 percent between 1975 and 2000.

The authors take strong issue with the feminist contention in books such as *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* by Sharon Hays and *The Price of Motherhood* by Ann Crittenden that married mothers are unfairly burdened because they must work a second shift doing housework after a full day of market work. On the basis of the time diaries, the authors reach three important conclusions contradicting the traditional feminist view:

- In the past, a specialization ('separate spheres') argument dominated the time allocation literature, especially in economics. Mothers specialized in the home, fathers in the market. Specialization seems to be giving way to much more similar time allocations of mothers and fathers, although it certainly has not disappeared, as we have discussed.
- Among all parents (as discussed in chapter 3), the average total workload is almost equal, with married mothers averaging 65 hours and married fathers 64 hours per week. These equal overall workloads are found despite marked gender differences in paid versus unpaid work with fathers performing 34 percent of housework and 33 percent of childcare in contrast to 64 percent of market work. In hourly terms, mothers averaged 19 fewer weekly hours of market work than fathers, but 13 hours more of housework and shopping and 6 more hours of child care.
- A final important comparison is that among couples where both are employed full-time, there is remarkable gender equality in total workloads, with mothers averaging 68 hours per week compared with 67 hours for fathers.

And, what does the future hold? While the authors find far more gender equality in family division of labor existing today than in the idealized 1950s, they doubt that full gender equality is in our future, at least not for a very long time, because parents fall into gender-specialized roles once a child arrives. They settle on a pattern of gender-specialized activities when the children are young and find it difficult to re-negotiate such patterns when the children leave the nest. Children observe them in these specialized roles and perpetuate them as adults.

Because everyone around the table could relate personally to the issues raised by the authors, discussion of this book was one of the liveliest the group has had in its 3-year history. The statistics shed light on matters important to us all. Read the book and see for yourself!

POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):

- *This book was written from a US standpoint. To what extent are the authors' observations valid in other parts of the world, and what are the long-term implications for families there?*
- *In "chronological challenged" societies characterized by long work days and ever-lengthening commutes that limit family time, will more people opt for a different lifestyle, with different priorities (e.g., more family time and leisure time) in 2020 than now? Conversely, will fast paced societies become more pervasive throughout the world? What other factors will influence how people live and work?*
- *Another contributor to "chronological challenge" is diversion. It has been argued that diversions provided by television and now by Web surfing have been at the expense of family quality time. What trends or possible "wild cards," if any, will reverse this trend in the next 15 years? Also, will diversion- and stimulation-oriented societies be more pervasive or less pervasive at that time?*
- *In 2020, will more people in your part of the world choose not to have families, or will a new family pattern emerge?*