

Review of Three Books on Work and Family

Putting Work in Its Place: A Quiet Revolution.

Peter Meiksins and Peter Whalley. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002. 208 pp. \$25.00.

Gender and Home-Based Employment.

Charles B. Hennon, Suzanne Loker, and Rosemary Walker, eds. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2000. 248 pp. \$67.00.

Work and Family—Allies or Enemies? What Happens When Business Professionals Confront Life Choices.

Stewart D. Friedman and Jeffrey H. Greenhaus. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. 288 pp. \$30.00.

Work-family relations have attracted growing interest from organizational researchers. This attention has generally been directed to one of two areas. First, many organizational researchers have been interested in understanding employers' practices, particularly in the area of work-family policy adoption and implementation. A second literature focuses on employees' attitudes and behavior regarding work and family. Though this research has revealed that many workers desire change and that employers have grown increasingly willing to accommodate it, we know very little about alternative ways of organizing work and their consequences for work-family relations.

The three books reviewed here each speak to this latter issue. In doing so, some common themes emerge about the possibilities for and consequences of change. The first concerns the issue of choice and power; people's ability to reconfigure their work lives to make more room for other life activities depends largely on the resources available to them. Economic resources are important, but they could also include intangibles, such as possession of scarce skills or other kinds of bargaining power with an employer. As Meiksins and Whalley's book suggests, resources such as these are especially necessary for those making unconventional work choices.

While resources affect people's ability to act, the choices they make in the areas of work and family may be harder to explain and predict. That gender shapes the kinds of work and family choices people make is indisputable, however. Gender thus plays a central, though not always explicit role in the books reviewed here. Many of the women in these books hardly fit traditional gender stereotypes: they are business owners, computer professionals, and high-level managers. In the end, however, their work and family lives—as well as the way they make sense of those lives—look different from their male counterparts.

Despite these common themes, the three books are quite different in their aims, intended audience, and styles. Of the three, *Putting Work in Its Place*, by Meiksins and Whalley, seems most designed to appeal to a wide audience, including researchers, students, workers, and employers. Meiksins and Whalley used snowball-sampling techniques to identify technical professionals in Chicago and Cleveland who have chosen to reduce their working time. Beyond these criteria, the authors deliberately avoided any additional restrictions on

Book Reviews

the occupations, work hours, and family configurations of the people eligible to be interviewed. In part, this reflects the authors' interest in depicting, as much as possible, the diverse ways that some technical professionals are attempting to "customize" their work arrangements. Their goal is to portray options and strategies for "putting work in its place," rather than displaying one particular type of alternative work organization.

Meiksins and Whalley's larger objective is twofold. First, their book provides an up-close look at people who have deliberately and self-consciously chosen to go against conventional norms about work hours. For Meiksins and Whalley, these women and men are rebels of sorts, and the authors want readers to understand why and how they have been able to achieve this status. Related to this is a second and perhaps more important part of the authors' agenda: "By looking closely at the motivations, strategies, and practices of these successful technical professionals who have managed to customize their own work-time arrangements . . . we can offer successful examples to others" (p. 4). At least part of the inspiration for *Putting Work in Its Place*, thus, is the desire to tell others that change is possible and how it can be achieved.

The book's style is consistent with these goals; the writing is accessible and designed to appeal to non-academics. The authors invoke the relevant scholarly literatures on work and family throughout the book but do not ground their analyses in any particular theoretical perspective. Instead, the book's chapters are organized to explore various facets of their subjects' somewhat atypical work situations, including their motivations for choosing to work less, the meaning of work and family in their lives, and the issues they face as they attempt to sustain customized work arrangements. The final chapter takes up the practical issues more explicitly, as the authors conclude with a primer on how to go about reconfiguring one's work hours and what obstacles might appear along the way.

Although academics are not the book's primary audience, *Putting Work in Its Place* deserves organizational researchers' attention. Those familiar with the work-family literature should find the authors' analyses intriguing, especially in those areas in which they challenge taken-for-granted ideas. In particular, the book attempts to debunk two commonly held beliefs about people who attempt to gain more control over their work lives. One belief is that people who choose to work less than the norm are only weakly committed to their jobs and professional identities. The counterpart to this idea is the belief that women who reconfigure their work lives do so because their central life interest is family.

In contrast to the first belief, Meiksins and Whalley argue that a strong commitment to work does not require a standard employment arrangement. Their subjects' ability to craft a professional identity independent of a particular firm or employer supports this point. The technical professionals they interviewed were not so much trying to deemphasize their career as to redefine it, stripping it "of its necessary

assumptions of greedy time demands and organizational ladder climbing" (p. 46). For some, this redefinition involved becoming self-employed as an independent contractor, while others redefined their professional identities while still working part time for a corporate employer.

The women in Meiksins and Whalley's sample were not only seeking to reinvent the idea of career; many were also attempting to redefine the meaning of domesticity and family life. Not all of the women they interviewed were working mothers, and some did reconfigure their work in order to pursue non-family-related activities. Nevertheless, the working mothers more than the fathers in their sample were at least initially motivated to work less so that they could give more time and attention to their children. The authors reject the notion that these working mothers were following a traditional script, however. As they explain, "Whereas 'traditional' women value family over work, part-time technical professionals value both work and family. They value their ability to enjoy the benefits of both, and have deliberately *chosen* to do both. The identities these women are constructing for themselves are often new assemblages, made up of bits and pieces of the old cloth" (p. 54). But, despite these comments, gender plays a central role in the work and family lives of these technical professionals. For instance, only a few working fathers in the sample chose to reduce their work hours to spend more time with their children, and these fathers were ones with unusual family arrangements (e.g., single fathers with custody of their children). In addition, when married women worked part time or at home, they retained primary responsibility for domestic tasks. In some cases, one consequence of spending fewer hours at paid work was an increase in the amount of time and responsibility required at home.

While Meiksins and Whalley believe they have found true pioneers on the work-family frontier, my view is somewhat more mixed, in part because of the distinctiveness of the workers they interviewed. As they acknowledge, even performing part-time work, the technical professionals in their sample were highly paid, having marketable skills in high demand from employers. These characteristics loom large in the book as factors that explained their subjects' willingness and ability to pursue a more independent employment path. A more important factor tempering my enthusiasm about the reconfigured work lives portrayed in this book, however, concerns the role of gender. The technical professionals Meiksins and Whalley interviewed may have been rewriting the rules about the workplace, but they were hardly rebels at home. Despite the authors' attempts to show that the women they interviewed were atypical in their goals and desires, gender exerted a powerful force on the patterns the book describes.

These conclusions were reinforced by Hennon, Loker, and Walker's edited volume, *Gender and Home-Based Employment*. Though completely different in its intended audience, the subject matter of this book overlaps somewhat with Meiksins and Whalley's account. *Gender and Home-Based Employment* is a relatively specialized volume, targeting an

Book Reviews

academic audience. It should appeal most to researchers specifically interested in home-based workers or those working with the survey data that inform several of the chapters. The eight chapters draw mostly on quantitative data to examine different aspects of home-based employment. The papers cohere fairly well, as they are linked by a shared definition of home-based employment and, for four of the chapters, a similar data source.

This book defines home-based employment broadly; it includes "work done for income in one's home, on one's premises, or emanating from the home/premises with the worker's having no office or consistent workspace elsewhere" (p. 2). Unlike Meiksins and Whalley, the contributors to this volume do not pay particular attention to people who work less than a standard work week, though many home workers do work reduced hours. More important, none of the contributors depict their subjects as pioneers or rebels, despite their atypical work arrangements. While some types of home work or other non-standard employment arrangements may represent positive alternatives to current forms of work, as Meiksins and Whalley argue, *Gender and Home-Based Employment* downplays this potential. What emerges from this volume is that home-based work per se does not solve many of the work-family problems associated with more conventional work arrangements. Many of the home workers Hennon et al. studied were motivated by a desire to align work more closely with other life activities. And, as several of the contributors note, home-based work is often presented as a way to lessen work-family conflict and is viewed as especially beneficial for mothers. The data provided in this volume challenge these beliefs, however. For example, in chapter 6, Mills, Duncan, and Amyot explicitly test the relationship between women's work location and their levels of work-family conflict. They find no difference between the amount of work-family conflict experienced by home-based women and those employed outside the home, net of other factors. Work-family conflict is better predicted by the total amount of hours women worked, not their work location.

Further, the studies in this book underscore the distinctiveness of professional, managerial, or technical work. People in these occupations, whether working at home or not, have resources and flexibility unavailable to most workers. Even when they work at home, they have more in common with professional, managerial, and technical workers employed outside the home than with other home-based workers. For example, in chapter 4, Hunts et al. examine how female and male home workers organize their households, including their childcare arrangements. They found that home workers in professional, managerial, and technical jobs were more likely than other home workers to purchase childcare. Their finding that home-working women in professional, managerial, and technical jobs did not conform to the stereotype of the woman who works at home so as to be able to care for her children is consistent with Meiksins and Whalley's account. While Meiksins and Whalley viewed the female technical professionals in their sample as forging new identities that combined the role of mother and professional, however, Hunts et

al. interpret their findings differently: "It could be that the demands of managerial/professional/technical home-based employment were such that simultaneous care of children were impossible, or it could be that the role of simultaneously being 'mother' or 'father' and 'professional' simply did not go hand-in-hand compared to other occupations" (p. 108).

Given the book's title, it is not surprising that gender differences receive significant attention in Hennon, Loker, and Walker's volume. The overwhelming conclusion of this research is that gender differences in the motivations, experiences, and consequences of home work are as great, if not greater, than those among other types of workers. These findings challenge the conventional wisdom that women are facing fewer barriers to success as home-based workers than as full-time employees in a central work site. Women home workers are presumed to be able to avoid the glass ceiling and other problems associated with employers' hiring and promotion practices. They are also assumed to be more productive than other women because they are better able to integrate work and family. As Rowe et al. (chap. 3) show, however, "home-based self-employment does not guarantee women an escape from the influence of gender in the workplace, particularly in realized income" (p. 67). Similarly, as noted above, female home workers are no less likely than other employed women to experience work-family conflict.

Are solutions to people's work-life troubles to be found by working fewer hours in a conventional job or working at home (or from home)? The appeal of these strategies derives from the alternatives they provide to the standard employment pattern of full-time work at a centralized location. The problem, however, as Meiksins and Whalley show implicitly and Hennon, Loker, and Walker show directly, is that reconfiguring work without attending to other realms creates its own set of problems for people, especially women. Other life activities, especially those associated with family and children, contain their own challenges and demands, and these become all the more significant as work recedes in importance.

Work and Family—Allies or Enemies? further explores the possibilities for change in people's work lives. This book is based on the results of surveys received from over 900 business school alumni. The response rate was only 29 percent, however, which raises some questions about the overall validity of the findings. Information about the response rate, as well as other details associated with the sample, measures, and statistical findings all appear in appendices. This undoubtedly was done to increase the book's appeal to a non-scholarly audience. Researchers are likely to find this structure less useful, however, as it makes it harder to assess the significance of the authors' claims.

Like Meiksins and Whalley, Friedman and Greenhaus have a primarily prescriptive agenda. Their book is designed to encourage self-reflection among business professionals concerned about work and family and make a plea to employers to attend more closely to these issues. Despite the limitations of the data, the book provides a clearly written and

Book Reviews

often insightful discussion of how work and family shape one another and the factors that influence their interaction. The authors' larger message is that work and family can be allies, but this requires both increased self-awareness and changes in how work is organized. In laying out the rationale for this argument, Friedman and Greenhaus offer several interesting observations about the relations between work and family life.

The book's nine chapters examine different aspects of business professionals' work and family lives. While their respondents' goals were diverse, the larger patterns they assumed were not surprising. For example, men were more likely than women to make careers the central focus of their lives, while women were more likely than men to be among those prioritizing family life. Slightly fewer than one-third of the business professionals surveyed were committed to both career and family, and it is the members of this group that Friedman and Greenhaus suggest were most satisfied with their lives.

After presenting these differences, the book explores other aspects of people's careers and family lives, with a focus on mapping the relationships between these realms. Particularly interesting are the chapters on children and partners. While both groups are directly implicated in other household members' career and family choices, neither has received much systematic attention from work-family researchers. Though Friedman and Greenhaus's cross-sectional data limit their ability to address causality, their findings raise issues worthy of further research. For example, they find that high psychological involvement in one's career is associated with lower personal support from partners. They suggest that partners are less willing to support those who are psychologically preoccupied with work than those who simply work hard or work long hours.

One of the book's key themes is its departure from those who see time spent at work as the primary source of the problems between work and family. For these researchers, the real issue is "the psychological interference of work with family and family with work" (p. 6). One specific result that relates to this idea is Friedman and Greenhaus's finding that the amount of time spent at work or with their children did not predict people's feelings about their performance as parents, their satisfaction with their childcare arrangements, or their kids' health and school performance (as reported by parents). While having too little time was a problem for the business professionals they studied, reducing work hours was not sufficient to reduce people's stress or increase their feelings of balance between family and work.

Instead of recommending that people work less, Friedman and Greenhaus's research leads them to advocate greater authority and flexibility for workers. In their view, work-family integration is only possible when people have the resources to control when, where, and how they work. Their belief that part of the solution to work-family conflict lies in creating more empowered workers is consistent with Meiksin's and Whalley's account: control and flexibility at work are important preconditions for integrating work and family life. Yet

these job characteristics are relatively scarce, much more likely to be found among those at the highest levels of organizations than those at the bottom. If Friedman and Greenhaus are correct, however, creating more pioneers of the sort Meiksins and Whalley portrayed requires fundamental changes in work organization, not simply a greater number of family-friendly policies.

Another important theme in *Work and Family—Allies or Enemies?* involves the authors' emphasis on workers' choices and priorities. This focus seems driven more by the authors' prescriptive orientation than by an overarching theoretical perspective. Nevertheless, Friedman and Greenhaus's insistence on attending to people's values, desires, and feelings about how they live and work is a useful corrective to research focusing only on work and family time. If alternatives are to be envisioned and explored, we need to know more about people's priorities and the forces that shape them. As Friedman and Greenhaus note, however, gender is an important subtext to this discussion. Not only do women have fewer choices than men when it comes to career and family, but their lives look different from men's in almost all respects. The divide between the genders, in the authors' view, "is a divide as great as the divide between career and family themselves" (p. 9). In the end, this is what most unifies the three books reviewed here. They all explore the possibilities for change and encourage alternative ways of working. To varying degrees, however, each also shows how these alternatives, their desirability, and people's opportunities to create them are gendered in fundamental ways. Thus, while these books are useful for calling attention to change and what it might look like, they also reveal the intractability of the gender order and its role in organizing work and family.

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Other Reviews

Economics Meets Sociology in Strategic Management.

Joel A. C. Baum and Frank Dobbin, eds. Stamford, CT: JAI Press, 2000. 410 pp. \$82.50.

Sometimes it seems as if the field of strategic management is like a country that has no foreign policy or standing army and yet is periodically overrun by the armies of bordering states, viz. the disciplines of economics and sociology. What is it that attracts their attention? How much is strategy really worth dominating? Is the field perceived to be truly provocative or just an annoyance to be subjugated? Whatever the answers to these questions, it seems clear that over the past two decades the incursions of economists and sociologists into strategy have improved it substantially as a research discipline. So further argumentative behavior on all sides should be welcomed.

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