

WORKING PAPER

Media and the Work/Family Interface*

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Introduction

Ozzie and Harriet, *Leave it to Beaver*, *The Brady Bunch*: these television programs are evocative cultural referents in the United States. Demonstrating the pervasiveness of media culture, their very titles have become shorthand for specific configurations of family, gender, and work. The significance of media representations of family was also demonstrated by Dan Quayle's 1991 linkage of a decline in family values to the decision made by the single, working woman title character in *Murphy Brown* to have a child.

Contemporary media offer contradictory messages about the work/family interface. One radio call-in show host tells people their young children need a full-time stay-home parent, while another suggests that a job provides needed diversion and stimulation. TV sitcoms portray a bewildering array of family and work arrangements. Ads celebrate both the "on-the-go" modern family and the comforts of a home where a stay-home mom sees to her family's every need. How do today's parents make sense of these diverse messages? How do they use them to think about their own choices and situations?

This paper discusses preliminary research that considers such questions. We describe a project in progress that examines how middle-class parents in a growing middle-class Michigan community draw on media images and information in evaluating and justifying their own family and work responsibilities.

Background

Since the 1960s the nature of work in the United States has changed rapidly, reflecting an economy that has shifted from a manufacturing base to services and information. Many jobs are now non-union, temporary, and/or part-time, and lack fringe benefits. The cost of living has risen, as have expectations about what defines a middle class lifestyle. Such economic shifts have lessened the ability of middle class families to maintain their living standard with just one income. Today's middle class parents must find ways to earn enough to satisfy their needs (and

desires) and to care for their children, while reconciling any resultant conflicts. Families meet these challenges in different ways. Some have two working parents; others, one stay-home parent. Still others have little choice in the matter, being single parent families.

Concerns and conflicts inevitably arise over competing demands on adult time and energy. And, despite social transformations that have made it acceptable for middle class women to work outside the home, there remains the belief that it is a mother's role to care for home and children, particularly when the children are young. This ideal in turn clashes with the middle class ideology that being a successful adult means having a career, or at least a job.

Two main questions drive our research:

- 1) How do middle class families balance the competing tasks of their own paid labor and child care?
- 2) How do adults in such families think and feel about the arrangements they have come to, whether by choice or necessity?

These questions are particularly interesting when considered in conjunction with the pervasiveness of media. Media messages are cultural products that communicate norms and standards. Also, the media offer opportunities to express cultural discomfort over changes in society. According to Dow, "television programming (is) public discourse that carries important meanings for its viewers, meanings that cannot be separated from their links to the larger context in which television is created and received" (1996*xiii-xiv*)¹. This observation can be extended to other media. Inevitably, work-family issues will be raised in the media, and such information and images will be used by those who hear and view them to make sense of their own situations. Further, individuals may interpret depictions of work and family life on TV and in other media in diverse ways. Some, for example, may find reinforcement for their choices or situations in televised images. Others may, as Fiske (1989)² proposes, resist the hegemony of the "text," instead finding alternative meanings in media messages, ones that support their own life choices.

The media both reflect and help shape our concerns and worldviews. The process is not a one-way imposition of media imagery and ideology on malleable spectators. As Wober and Gunter (1988: 125) conclude, viewers interpret what they see in the light of their own preconceptions and also to reinforce such notions. It is in this sense that television influences certain (adult) beliefs³. Media consumers have free will. While they are exposed to contradictory messages, they are capable of choosing among diverse media options.

Preliminary Research on Media Messages

We have done preliminary content analysis of popular media in order to identify the kinds of messages currently being offered about work and family.

The televised hospital drama *ER* consistently has a top ten Nielsen rating. The show's characters frequently balance work-family pressures. Dr. Mark Greene, for instance, has had to take time from work to deal with his aging father. Dr. Peter Benton has had to juggle shifts in order to cope with custody issues concerning his small son. However, unlike the real-world situations of most middle-class parents, on *ER* there seems to be little difficulty and few repercussions involved in leaving work to deal with family problems. Even when Physician Assistant Jeanie Boulet quit her job to care full-time for her adopted child, she was assured that her position would be waiting should she decide to come back.

Another program often in the Nielsen top ten is *Everybody Loves Raymond*, a situation comedy featuring a traditional nuclear family. Ray Barone, the father, works as a sports writer. His wife Debra stays home and cares for their three small children. A thematic thread running through this show's plots is Debra's feeling unappreciated for her labor and Ray's lack of involvement with the children. When one of their sons was having trouble in preschool, for example, Debra told Ray that perhaps if he were around more, the child wouldn't be having problems. Ray's reply was "I should go to work, and raise the kids? And what do you do all day?" Debra apologized. On a subsequent episode, during a conflict over disciplinary techniques, Debra

advised Ray to read a (child care) book once in a while, to which he replied “I make a living; that’s why I don’t read a book.”

A single mother family is the focus of another sitcom, *Jesse*, which appeared regularly in the fall 1999 Nielsen top ten. In the 1999 premiere, Jesse confidently proclaimed herself a “superwoman,” as she began a new course of study and a new job. In the succeeding half hour, however, she forgot her son’s age, forgot to pick him up, and then quit her job in frustration. By the end of the episode Jesse regained her job, but the issue of how she would cope with her work and family responsibilities had been glossed over.

This last example highlights a media trend to present the children of working parents as disadvantaged, even endangered, by the lack of a stay-home parent. Jesse merely forgot to pick up her son. More dramatic events await such children in other programs. On the top ten drama *Law and Order*, for instance, the children of working parents are frequently either witness to, harmed by, or instigators of, criminal behavior while their parents are away from home. Non-fiction media, such as news programs, also feature stories that emphasize this message. As an example, a November 7, 1999 *60 Minutes* episode focused on Nathaniel Abraham, an eleven year old convicted of a firearm murder. After describing the crime, the story shifted to exploring the cause of the child’s actions. Viewers were pointedly told that Nathaniel’s father had left the family when the boy was small and that Nathaniel had been raised by a mother who worked the night shift, leaving him home in the care of his older siblings.

Dr. Laura Schlessinger, a popular radio host, unabashedly tells callers their young children need a full-time, stay-home parent. She labels the decision to put children in day care an act of abandonment. In the nationally syndicated newspaper column “Dear Abby,” the columnist has responded to a question about children and social problems by stating that “The majority of families these days have two working parents, and consequently many children are virtually raising themselves.⁴” Similar sentiments are expressed cynically by the editor of a small community newspaper: “If our kids are performing poorly or behaving badly, either the schools are falling down on the job, the government hasn’t allotted enough money, or the teacher has a

predisposition against the child in question. It can't possibly be that mom and dad are too busy pursuing their own ends to actually interact with the child, to converse with them, play with them, read to them, give them a sense of belonging and love.⁵"

Managing the competing demands of family and work is commonly represented in the media as a complicated challenge that stresses marriages and families. *Redbook's* Editor-in-Chief, for example, describes balancing work, family, and time for oneself as "the everyday struggle."⁶ A *Wall Street Journal* column on work and family by Sue Shellenbarger often emphasizes the need to avoid working too much so as not to jeopardize family life. "Job Stress Can Kill Marriages" is the headline of one such column.⁷

Although the media do discuss job and family responsibilities in terms of both parents, the issues surrounding work and families are frequently telescoped to working mothers, making working fathers an unmarked category. Women's magazines tend to feature mothers who have made changes in their work lives for their children. "Work at Home: How to Make the Dream Happen"⁸ is one such article. One mother who began telecommuting from home two days a week is quoted as saying "Before, I was always rushing and I was always late, either to the office or to pick up the kids. Now I'm so relaxed, my husband wants to know why I don't do this five days a week." In *Real You*, a J.C. Penney magazine, a feature article is titled "The Balancing Act: Real-Life Survival Tactics for Working Mothers that are Guaranteed to Inspire."⁹ The author describes how she worked from home when her child was young. Of three interviews featured in the article, two are with women who altered their careers when they had children. One of these women is quoted as saying "I am not a superwoman. I can't be the perfect mother, the perfect businessperson."

This negatively expressed idea of the superwoman is one that comes up frequently in media messages about working mothers. Advertisements in particular foster an image of the working mother as harried. For example, in 1999-2000 the National Cattlemen's Beef Association ran an ad in many magazines, including *Working Mother* and *Parents*, of a rubber doll female figure with all four limbs being stretched by different hands. The caption reads: "The bendable-

stretchable-pulled-in-all-directions modern mom. Go to the game. Go to the client. These days, you have to do it all.”

Preliminary Research: Pilot Interviews

In order to identify relevant work and family themes, pilot interviews were conducted with a total of fifteen parents: five men and ten women. Interview participants were recruited via word of mouth and through posted advertisements. Six of those interviewed have doctorates. Most of the others attended college. Using occupation as a rough gauge¹⁰, the informants range from lower-middle to upper-middle class. All fifteen interviewees are white; fourteen were born in the United States. There are three sets of married couples among the interviewees, but all are married. All the informants have at least one child aged ten or younger, and most have two.

All five of the male informants are employed outside the home. Four of them work full-time; and one, a writer, has a combination of part-time positions. Three of the men are married to women who work full-time outside the home. Two are married to women who work part-time, one outside the home and one inside the home.

The female informants have a wider range of employment strategies than the men do. Two of the women work full-time outside the home. Two work part-time outside the home. Three work part-time in the home. One works part-time both in and out of the home. Only two are full-time stay-home mothers. The women with the most years of education were the most likely to be working outside the home. All the women had worked at least part-time before the birth of their first child. Three women had intended to keep working after their children arrived but changed their plans due to emotional and practical difficulties caused by combining child care and paid work. One of the two full-time working mothers had searched for a part-time position but was unable to find one.

Eight of the women are married to men who work outside the home at least full-time. One is married to the writer mentioned previously. The tenth woman, who herself works outside the

home thirty hours a week, is married to a stay-home father. This is the only one of the ten women interviewed whose husband does the majority of both child care and household chores. By and large these women's husbands share child care to some extent, but the women reported doing the bulk of the housework. Two of the men interviewed, both married to women who work full-time, stated that they share both child care and housework with their wives fairly equally.

With respect to patterns of media consumption, there were some commonalities among the interviewees. Most reported regularly watching PBS television programs, particularly when viewing with their children. One or more of the Thursday night NBC programs was also popular with many of the informants, especially *ER*, *Friends*, and *Frasier*. Most of the informants read either one or more local newspapers on a regular basis, mainly to keep up to date on community news and events. Most of them listened to a great deal of radio, and many regularly listened to National Public Radio. Movies and/or videos (other than children's videos) did not play a central role in most informants' regular media consumption.

There were also group-specific media consumption patterns. The interview participants with the most years of education reported watching the least television¹¹. These same informants tended to read the most, including professional materials. The *New York Times* was popular among the most highly educated, as was *The New Yorker*. In general, these informants were the most concerned about receiving national, international, and professional news on a regular basis. They were also the most likely to use the Internet to obtain it.

Several interviewees said they deliberately avoid media that don't support their perspectives. Self-identified conservatives, for example, mentioned avoiding mainstream TV news and fictional programs they feel promote values they don't endorse. These same parents were also the most concerned about monitoring the **content** of programs their children watch. The other interviewees expressed more concern for controlling the **amount** of time their children spent watching television.

Most of the women who worked part-time or were full-time stay-home mothers regularly listened to an FM radio program called "The Breakfast Club," broadcast every weekday from six to ten a.m. The show features four men and women who lightheartedly discuss their lives and families and comment on current events. This program also offers news, weather, and soft-rock music. Four of the part-time working mothers and stay-home mothers were regular listeners of Dr. Laura Schlessinger, a nationally syndicated morality-based radio advice program¹². The part-time working mothers and the stay-home mothers tended to read home-themed magazines such as *Better Homes and Gardens*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Family Circle*, and *Good Housekeeping*. Two TV programs popular with these informants were *Home Improvement* and *Mad about You*. The relationship dynamics among the characters were mentioned as the source of enjoyment.

Most informants discounted the media's effect on themselves. The most dismissive of media impact on their own life choices and their feelings about those choices were the women who did not work outside the home. These women stated firmly that they had made their specific work-family decisions based on what was best for their family. They maintained it wouldn't matter to them what the media said, or what other people thought, because their choices would have been the same.

Few people found their own life choices reflected in the media, particularly those who value having a stay-home parent for their children. One stay-home mother of four thought the media gave little credit for maintaining a traditional family. She wished more attention were paid to traditional families. More than one of our interviewees complained about what they considered to be the normalizing effect of depicting many extramarital affairs and divorced people. They saw such media portrayals as undermining what they are trying to do with their own lives.

Our male informants, most of them married to working women, tended to be dismissive of media messages critical of working mothers. They also expressed few worries about the effects of day care on their children, although two of them did say they thought it best for children to be raised by their parents rather than by care workers. The women who worked outside the home,

however, expressed much more ambivalence about media messages concerning working mothers and stay-home mothers, as well as about the issue of day care for their children.

Not unexpectedly, interviewees tended to express views about working mothers and child care that supported the choices they themselves had made. Many of our informants--generally women who work for pay, whether inside or outside the home, or men married to working women--stated a belief that it is good for children to be raised by fulfilled people and/or to see women in roles besides care taking. On the other hand, those who had chosen to have one parent stay home full-time tended to believe it is good for children to have the security of staying at home and knowing a parent is available. However, even most of those parents have their pre-kindergarten children go to preschool at least part-time for the purpose of socialization. Having children attend day care for any other reason was often referred to by the stay-home mothers as "letting someone else raise the children." These women see such arrangements as displacement of parental responsibility. The women who work part-time or stay home full-time tend to talk negatively about both parents working if they don't absolutely have to. They see such choices as made for the sole purpose of having nicer material goods, such as expensive cars or lake cottages. Simultaneously, however, of those women, those who worked part-time were likely to mention the additional perks this allows, such as additional activities for their children and extra spending money and independence for themselves.

The women who worked part-time or stayed home full-time tended to define work outside the home as something in opposition to family life. One mother who works part-time from home, for example, when asked about why she likes the character of Grace from *Will and Grace*, replies that it's because Grace "has a career *and* a life" (emphasis added). This same woman approvingly mentioned an *ER* plot line in which Dr. Benton stopped being quite so focused on his job and began to concentrate more on his small son, because it made him "a little more human." A full-time working mother expressed similar sentiments in her evaluation of Agent Scully on the *X-Files*, the only television program she regularly views. This woman likes and identifies with Scully, but commented that she can't relate to everything about Scully, for Scully has "no life." She elaborated on this statement with the observation that Scully's brother is "a

jerk" and added that Scully's sister was killed because of Scully's job. Another woman, a stay-home mother of one, said of *Frasier* that she enjoys the program because the title character is successful; he is rich, has a fancy car, and can eat at fancy restaurants, but at the end of the day he "comes home to nothing." She defined nothing as a lack of companionship or love. She said that part of her pleasure in viewing the show is that it lets her think "I don't have to be like that! I don't have to be alone. I actually know my kid. I actually enjoy my husband."

Another theme that emerged in our interviews was a negative impression of superwomen and of media superwoman imagery. The women who work for pay either part-time from the home or not at all didn't bring this topic up, but it was raised in a number of the other interviews. A frequent comment about superwomen is that the "bar is set high" for women now: They are expected to succeed in multiple arenas. For example, a full-time working father of two, whose wife works part-time from the home, responded to a question about media presentation of working mothers as follows:

[Informant] I get the sense that a lot of working mothers are pretty highly stressed, that they're trying to juggle career expectations and kid demands all the time to the extent that they have a huge job in the kid care department and the chores. That must put a tremendous stress on these people. And my sense is that there's some desire to be a super-mom. Okay. And I personally, I think that's harmful.

[Interviewer] Is it the women who have the desire to be a supermom or the media presentation?

[Informant] I suspect it's the mothers' desires to be that based on expectations that are driven by the media to perform in this way.

A mother of a four year old and a six year old who works full-time outside the home and is married to a man who also works full-time outside the home had quite a bit to say about media imagery of superwomen and working women in general:

[Informant] I wish the media would stop portraying women as these super-organized, superwomen because the people I know are a lot closer to me. I think I'm more disorganized and more willing to say I don't care a) about the way I look, b) about the way my house looks, my car is disgusting... I think there are more people like me than

there are the people who get up and put on their business suits and drop their baby at the nanny's or have the nanny come in, and have everything running smoothly. It's like that's what we're expected to do, and it sucks. Or on the other extreme, we're expected to, "of course your children come first, so of course you wouldn't think of working once you got pregnant." It's like, well, I not only worked, I was a resident. That's the ultimate in the Bad Mom book.

(In the media) I see, either, either moms at a dead-end job because they need the money or the hard power supermoms, super-organized, makeup perfect, hair perfect.

I feel like the media's telling me I'm supposed to be this super-organized person who takes time for herself and of course makes her husband first because that's what makes the family works best ... and gets enough sleep on a regular basis and meditates and goes to church and volunteers! You're supposed to volunteer. But you're also supposed to learn to say "no"!

We're supposed to do all those things these days. Women, mothers. I've been a mom for seven years. I feel very much like "You're a mom and you're supposed to."

Another interesting theme emerged in discussions of radio talk show host Dr. Laura Schlessinger, commonly referred to as "Dr. Laura." The informants who listen to Dr. Laura tend also to be religious. They were all full-time stay-home mothers or mothers who did not work for pay unless during school hours. These interviewees spoke of their appreciation for the clarity of Dr. Laura's message and the way she lays out her advice in "black and white," with no ambiguity. These women said they felt validated by Dr. Laura and reinforced by her. They tended to share Dr. Laura's opinions on many issues already. They appreciated the affirmation of their values in hearing Dr. Laura deal with callers' problems.

A married stay-home mother of four children under the age of eight mentioned that Dr. Laura "helps me get more clear on why I would be opposed to something." She states that:

(Dr. Laura) has made me and I don't know, other people, aware that there is a reason religion should play an important role because we do need guidelines and, kind of commandments, not just suggestions, but actual commandments that we have to live by. And rules are pertinent in our society. And just kind of doing as you feel is not really, it just doesn't work.

A married mother of two school-aged children who works part-time says of Dr. Laura:

What it's done for me, ... It hasn't changed me, but it's given me the confidence to stand strong on the things that I thought were right to do for my children, but not sure if I was doing the right thing or not, or being too strict or being too out of line. I was unsure of community standards.

It's just given me a lot more confidence to say "no" to television or to say "no" to video games. I'm very cautious about what (my children) watch and when they watch it. I won't let them watch certain things any more that I might have before because other kids watch it.

In terms of work and family this woman credits Dr. Laura's influence on "my commitment to staying home for my kids and getting involved in my kids' life more." This informant's interpretation of Dr. Laura, however, is particularly interesting. Her children are actually in day care part-time, especially during the summer months. When asked what Dr. Laura would think of this, this informant said that she thought Dr. Laura would approve, because she was using day care creatively and in what she felt to be a positive manner. By this the informant meant that she looked for day care that would allow her children to participate in some kind of activity, such as swimming or horseback riding. This informant thus is using media in a complex and active way that goes beyond simple reception and affirmation. She is instead performing a reinterpretation of the "text," accepting part of the message and adapting other parts as she thinks through her own work and family choices.

Research Site and Design

The themes that emerged in our preliminary data and analysis provide guidelines for the main phase of our research, now in progress. The site selected for our project is a K-2 public elementary school in a small middle-class community in southeastern Michigan. A school was chosen as the locus for the project because, by default, all the parents of the student body are involved in balancing work and family issues.

Local professionals are now being interviewed for their perspectives on regional and community work-family transitions. These experts include social workers, After School Care program workers, counselors, the school's principal, selected teachers, and office staff.

The next stage of the research involves interviewing students' parents, who are being contacted to request their participation in the study. We plan a total of 25-50 initial interviews.

Of these interview participants, a subsample will be selected for in-depth interviewing and ethnographic observation. The latter will take place in homes and will involve firsthand observation of how parents cope with work and family demands as well as of their media consumption. The researchers will participate with families in watching television and using other media forms, and discussing their reactions to and opinions of media images, focusing on work and family issues.

Endnotes

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- ¹. Dow, Bonnie J. (1996) *Prime-time Feminism: Television, Media Culture, and the Women's Movement since 1970* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press
 - ². Fiske, John (1989) *Understanding Popular Culture* London: Routledge
 - ³. Wober, Mallory and Barrie Gunter (1988) *Television and Social Control* Aldershot: Avebury
 - ⁴. Printed in the January 11, 2000 *Ann Arbor News*.
 - ⁵. Fischbach, Dirk (2000) January 20, 2000 *Dexter Leader*
 - ⁶. Seymour, Lesley Jane (1999) January, 1999 *Redbook*
 - ⁷. Printed in the December 14, 1999 *Ann Arbor News*.
 - ⁸. Holcomb, Betty (1998) "Work at Home: How to Make the Dream Happen" *Redbook* December, 1998
 - ⁹. Milgrom, Melissa (2000) "The Balancing Act: Real-life Survival Tactics for Working Mothers that are Guaranteed to Inspire" *Real You* Spring, 2000
 - ¹⁰. If an informant had either part-time or no paid employment, the spouse's occupation was used instead for the purpose of ascribing class status.
 - ¹¹. Two of the interview participants had no televisions in their homes. One of these is a doctorate, a full-time working father of one, and the other has fewer years of formal education and is a mother of four who works part-time from home. Both cited a preference for reading as well as time constraints as reasons for their choice to not have a television.
 - ¹². For three of these women at least, this is an artifact of the interview recruiting process. Approximately half of the postings asking for interview participants advertised for fans of either Dr. Laura Schlessinger or Dr. Joy Browne to talk about their work-family experiences and the work-family messages they heard from one of those two ideologically contrasting radio hosts. Three women responded who were fans of Dr. Laura Schlessinger and one woman responded who was a fan of Dr. Joy Browne. The three Dr. Laura Schlessinger fans were either full-time stay-home mothers or part-time working mothers and the Dr. Joy Browne fan, a working mother, was the only woman with a full-time stay-home husband.