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Sloan Network Encyclopedia Entry

Societal Cultural Models of Work and Family: An International Perspective (2005)

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Date: September, 2005

Culture provides the meanings of gender, work, family, and work-family conflict. How shall we conceptualize societal cultures for work-family research? This article reviews some of the literatures on this issue and suggests directions for future research.

Basic Concepts and Definitions

Culture can be studied at different levels of analysis. Our article addresses broader cultural structures at the levels of the society, sub-society, and nation-state.¹ Societal cultures vary by race, ethnicity, social class, and region.

Many work-family scholars refer to societal culture as part of a broader comparative analysis. For Example, Walby (2001) defines **gender regimes** “as composed of a set of inter-related domains of employment, unpaid work, the state, male violence, sexuality and culture” (p. 17). Including culture in the study of a nation’s gender regime illuminates the diversity of gender relations and avoids a “materially reductionist” analysis (p.17). Walby argues that western countries fall on a continuum between the domestic gender regime, in which women are excluded from the labor market and the state, to the public gender regime, in which women are included in these public domains although not yet on equal terms with men.

¹ In the *Sloan Work and Family Encyclopedia*, culture at the level of the organization is reviewed in Andressi and Thompson’s entry on “Work-Family Culture, while Shafiro and Hammer’s review, “Work and Family: A Cross-Cultural Psychological Perspective,” focuses primarily on the individual level of analysis.

Pfau-Effinger moves the literature forward by analytically distinguishing culture from other aspects of the national context. She studies the historical emergence of different **cultural models**, which are the “typical societal ideal representations, norms, and values regarding the family and the societal integration of women and men” (Pfau-Effinger, 2004 p. 382). These models provide descriptive and prescriptive guiding images of the gendered division of labor and the relationships between generations. Pfau-Effinger identifies five different cultural models in western European history: the family-economy model in which wife and husband work interdependently on the family farm or business; the housewife and male breadwinner marriage with its separate public and private spheres; the part-time female career and male breadwinner marriage; the dual breadwinner model with external child care, and the dual breadwinner model with partner-shared childcare (2004; 1999).

Other scholars examine specific cultural definitions of U.S. institutions. Hays (1996) defines the **ideology of intensive motherhood** as the normative model of the emotionally absorbing, expert driven, child centered care that a mother gives her fragile children. Informed by Sewell (1992), Blair-Loy views social structure as composed of two dimensions: material resources fueling the patterned activities of institutions; and virtual **schemas** or frameworks for understanding and evaluating self and society. In contrast to scholars who view schemas as cognitive maps that order perceptions (e.g. Bem, 1983; DiMaggio, 1997), Blair-Loy (2003) argues that schemas defining highly charged institutions provide normative evaluations and evoke intense emotions as well as order cognition (see also Gerson, 2002). The **devotion to family schema** defines the U.S. white, middle-class nuclear family for women, while the **devotion to work schema** defines the professional career structures of firms (Blair-Loy, 2003). These cultural forms are resonant and powerful whether or not women are employed (Blair-Loy, 2003; Garey, 1999; Hays, 1996).

Regimes, cultural models, and schemas are taken-for-granted, reinforced by other social structures such as firms and the welfare state, and continually re-enacted in people’s everyday practices. Yet despite their tenacity, people and institutions with sufficient resources may challenge these cultural forms and create change.

Importance of the Topic to Work-Family Studies

Throughout the industrialized world, scholars, workers, employers, and the public are concerned about workers’ struggles to juggle work and family responsibilities and obligations (Blossfeld & Hakim, 1997; Haas et. al., 2000; Lewis et. al., 1992; O’Reilly & Fagan, 1998; Parcel & Cornfield, 2000). Changing workforce demographics, such as increases in female labor force participation and dual-earner and single-parent households, have helped generate this concern. “Many labor economists describe the influx

of women into paid work as the single most influential change in the labor markets of industrialized countries in the postwar period" (Gornick, Meyers & Ross, 1998: 35).

Despite shared international concerns, countries vary in how they address issues of work and family. Cultural differences in the meaning and structure of the institutions of work, family, and gender shape state and organizational policies and peoples' ability to utilize them. Societal cultural models are the frameworks through which legislators, managers, workers, and family members interpret their world. They define what people consider as work-family problems and clarify who is responsible for offering solutions, whether that is the individual worker, the family, the community, the employer, or the state. Cross-national approaches can elucidate the taken-for-granted assumptions that may remain hidden in single-country studies. Further, different national policies are associated with national differences in women's workforce participation, gender earning gaps, gender segregation and women's and children's well being (Gornick & Meyers, 2003; Stier, Lewin-Epstein & Braun, 2001). The analysis of societal cultures and how they shape people, organizations, and policies is essential in the design of more effective work-family arrangements around the globe.

State of the Body of Knowledge

Our understanding of how national context shapes the meanings of gender, family and workplace as well as how it affects policy is under-developed in the work-family literature (Perry-Jenkins, Repetti & Crouter, 2000). Although "research shows us that work is defined and experienced very differently across societies and cultures" (Kossek and Lambert, 2005, p. 5), many work-family studies neglect culture as an analytic category. In much cross-national work, including studies of welfare regimes (e.g. Esping-Andersen, 1999; Gornick & Meyers, 2003; Sainsbury, 1994), cultural models have not been distinguished analytically from other aspects of the national context.

Yet a growing body of research is now addressing these issues explicitly (Acker, 1999; Blair-Loy, 2003; Duncan & Pfau-Effinger, 2000; Haas et. al., 2000; Hays, 1996; Hirdman, 1991, 1998; Lewis et. al., 1992; Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher, & Pruitt, 2002; Wharton & Blair-Loy, 2002, 2005; Williams, 2000). The cultural forms that have received the lion's share of scholarly attention are those described as "western" (Ely & Meyerson, 2000), but often actually characterize North America or the U.S. white middle class. However, recent developments in European literature delineate cross-national and local cultural variations within the industrialized western world. Simultaneously, the growing participation of women in developing countries in the formal labor market • now dominated by multinational firms • raises new questions, such as how extended families experience and shape work-family conflict. This section examines four themes in the literature: societal cultural differences in models of family and work, gender regimes and contracts, extended families, and organizational practices.

Cultural models of family and work

The ideology of the separation between the private and public spheres, which characterizes the U.S. white middle class, creates obstacles to women's equality (Arendell, 2001; Ely & Meyerson, 2000; Hays, 1996; Lorber, 1994; Rapoport, Bailyn, Fletcher & Pruitt 2002; Williams, 2000). Scholars have studied the distinctly cultural aspects of these obstacles. The ideology of intensive motherhood (Hays, 1996) and the devotion to family schema (Blair-Loy, 2003) provide a model for a woman's valuable and emotionally rewarding life: providing single-minded, emotionally absorbing care to her fragile and sacred children. This cultural model helps define the meaning of family and children for women regardless of their employment status (Garey, 1999; Hays, 1996). When family needs become urgent, these ideologies may trump women's career dedication (Blair-Loy 2003).

Similarly, the U.S. schemas of work and the "ideal worker" are among the factors that make it difficult to balance work and family (Acker, 1992; Rapoport et. al., 2002; Williams, 2000). The schema of work devotion mandates a traditionally male worthwhile life: dedicated allegiance to one's career as a calling (Blair-Loy, 2003). The organization of market work around the ideal worker, who takes little or no time off for childbearing or rearing, defines the good jobs in the labor market. When work is structured in this way, caregivers often cannot perform as ideal or devoted workers (Williams, 2000). This understanding of the ideal worker characterizes not only U.S. corporate culture but also the way management and organizational theories conceptualize work (Acker, 1990). However, there is variation in these cultural models across societies.

For example, different conceptualizations of the centrality of work in people's lives and in providing meaning to these lives lead to differences in workers' attitudes toward working overtime and part-time. In the U.S. the overtime culture is only rarely challenged among professionals and managers (Blair-Loy & Jacobs, 2003; Jacobs & Gerson, 2004; Moen, 2003), and many workers in the general population put in more hours than they would prefer (Clarkberg & Moen, 2001). Yet in other cultures, long hours are less normative (Perlow, 2001). Local cultural conceptualizations of working time may explain some of the wide differences Stier and Lewin-Epstein (2003) found in workers preferences of working time in 22 industrialized societies. (See also Heymann, Earle & Hanchate, 2004). For example, in Japan activists have spurred a social movement against corporate demands for long overtime hours in part by popularizing the concept of *karoshi*, or death by overwork (Morioka, 2005).

Cultural understandings of part time work also vary across national and local boundaries. Based on comparative study of 15 European countries, Bang and her colleagues (2000) argue that women's part time work may be infused with negative or positive meanings depending on whether part time jobs are viewed as rendering women into a "reserve army" or as constructed specifically to meet women's

needs. In Britain and the Netherlands, part time jobs are seen as family friendly. Hence, their incumbents are better integrated into the labor market than are part time employed women in Finland and Italy (Bang et. al., 2000).

Societal variation in cultural models of family and gender affects how child care is perceived. In Germany, where the male breadwinner/female housewife contract still prevails, many people believe it is harmful for pre-school children to be away from home and mother all day. This cultural understanding justifies the limited hours of public day care institutions (Pfau-Effinger, 2000 p. 265). In societies with more egalitarian understandings, care provision for children under three years old by reliable nannies or in state supervised day care centers is viewed as normative and even preferred. The higher their occupational status, the more Swedish men and women support having children under three years cared for in public day care centers (Bjornberg, 2000). Similarly, in Israel, family members and reliable nannies are viewed as legitimate supplementary caregivers (Izraeli, 1992).

Moreover, societal cultural differences affect whether and how women experience work-family conflict. Comparing Israeli and American successful career women at midlife, Lieblich (1987) finds that despite similarities in their work and family obligations, the Israeli respondents are less worried, more content, and less emotionally anxious about leaving their children in the care of others than are the American respondents. Lieblich concludes that the family oriented values in Israel provide a better support system and wider legitimacy for employed motherhood than do the individualistic and competitive values in the U.S.

Gender regimes and contracts

While the research discussed above recognizes that cultural models vary across time and place, a detailed classification of western, let alone global, work-family contracts or regimes is still in its infancy. Haas et. al. (2000) argue that "notwithstanding differences in laws, policies, and social environments, a "gender contract," or set of beliefs and practices emphasizing women's family care giving responsibilities, exists in many countries."

However, longitudinal and cross cultural studies show that these contracts or regimes are diverse. Walby (2001) places western countries on a continuum between the domestic gender regime, in which women are relegated to the private sphere, to the public gender regime, in which women participate in the labor market and the state. Similarly, other scholars discuss how societal models of the appropriate gender division of labor are instantiated in particular gender contracts across time and over space. Hierdman (1990) first developed the notion of gender contracts to explain the transformation of the gender division of labor and the normative family model in 20th century Sweden. (See also Lewis, 2001).

Building on Hierdman's work, Duncan and Pfau-Effinger (2000) delineate different cultural models of the family, which define particular gender contracts, or practical arrangements between the sexes. For example, a family-economy cultural model instantiates a gender contract, in which men and women cooperate in the family economy in farming or skilled trades. Children are socialized as members of the family economic unit and the notions of childhood as an institutional period and the intensive motherhood ideology do not exist. Far from being relegated to the past, this gender contract still characterizes many parts of Greece, Italy and Spain. The authors demonstrate the independent effect of these cultural models in explaining national differences between European countries and regions in cases where institutional and economic factors cannot provide sufficient explanation. Individuals, parties, associations and social movements act in any historical phase on the basis of the cultural context of ideas. Actors use this cultural context to shape their discourses, interactions, conflicts, and compromises. At the same time, they reproduce, modify or change these cultural models (Duncan & Pfau-Effinger, 2000:266-7). Gender contracts are always under transformation, in part due to economic change, state action and the development of welfare regimes (Crompton, 1998, 2001; O'Connor et. al. 1999; Pfau-Effinger, 2004). In a socio-historical study of Finland, Germany and the Netherlands, Pfau-Effinger (2004) concludes that the economic and social strength of the urban bourgeoisie helped determine whether or not the housewife/male breadwinner contract became the dominant family form in a given society at a given point in time.

The local gender contract may precede and shape the development of the local welfare regime. Within a dual breadwinners contract, Bang, Jensen and Pfau-Effinger (2000) identify three historical cultural models: the dual breadwinner/state career model; the dual breadwinner/dual carer model; and the dual breadwinner/ marketized female caregiver model. In the first model, caring for children is seen as primarily the responsibility of the welfare state rather than the family (e.g., as in Sweden). In the dual breadwinner/dual-carer model (e.g., as in the Netherlands), childrearing is the responsibility of the family and the family economy consists of an equal distribution of domestic labor and wage labor between female and male heads of household. This model requires that domestic labor be financed by a family wage or by a state transfer system. In the third model, the dual earner/marketised female carer model, such state caring or transfer systems are culturally unacceptable (as in the U.S. and U.K). Yet whenever childcare outside of the nuclear family is necessary, the family is seen as responsible for organizing and paying for market childcare. In sum, different cultural models of state responsibility in relation to family well-being and gender equality help shape the development of particular state policies (Bang et. al., 2000).

Societies also vary in their cultural assumptions about employers' responsibility for employees' work-life balance. In the U.S., firms' voluntary adoption of work-family policies is justified by the business case and by equal opportunity arguments (Kelly, 1999; Rapoport et. al., 2002). Yet in England, Australia and New

Zealand, collective bargaining with the labor unions helped introduce these policies (Wood, 1999; Wood, Menezes & Lasasosa 2003).

The type of justification seen as legitimate affects the organizational policies adopted in different societies. In contrast to many U.S. firms, some Israeli employers view caring for family needs as their social responsibility. In a study comparing Israeli firms and Israeli subsidiaries of American firms, Frenkel (Forthcoming) finds that in the Israeli subsidiaries of American firms, work-family policies are presented as part of the organizational business logic (business case logic), aimed at increasing productivity and reducing absenteeism. In contrast, the Israeli subsidiaries emphasize the policies' contribution to employee well being rather than their effect on the bottom line. Furthermore, Israeli subsidiaries are less likely than their American parents to associate policies with gender equity (Frenkel, forthcoming), a finding echoed in the case of Indian subsidiaries of American firms (Poster, 2005).

Extended families

Despite growing attention to different cultural conceptualizations of the family, most work-family studies assume Euro-American, heterosexual, two parent families, whose primary family obligation is to care for children and, to a lesser extent, older parents. However, in many societies, the extended family provides care for young children. For example, in the former Soviet Union, child rearing by grandparents, sometimes far away from the parents' residence, is a common and accepted arrangement. And in many Chinese societies, the extended family is a robust institution buttressed by ties of regular visits and transfers of care and financial support (Joplin et. al., 2003; Zhan & Montgomery, 2003).

Research on western societies documents how families from particular racial and ethnic backgrounds create multigenerational collectives and cross-household alliances to share family responsibilities (Stack & Burton, 1993). For example, the British Jewish mothers studied by Tananbaum (1997) utilized networks of kin and community as "other mothers" for their children. In her study of Latina and white employed mothers in Albuquerque, New Mexico, Lamphere et. al (1993) find that the Latino extended family structure gives Latina mothers more access to relatives for child care, compared to white mothers. This domestic support may, in turn, transform the division of labor in the Latino family in comparison to pre-migration patterns.

Yet the extended family model may also exacerbate work-family conflict, especially for women. For example, the strong ties of family support in Chinese societies are also intense ties of family obligation to parents and adult siblings. When the elderly require special care, daughters-in-law, daughters, and sons are expected to be their caregivers (Lan 2002; Zhan & Montgomery, 2003). Similarly, Baljit Kaur et. al. (1998) finds that the extended family obligations of employed South Asian women interfere with their professional responsibilities and consume their non-work time and weekends. The careers of these

women benefit from having clear boundaries between work and home. Policies such as telecommuting and flextime, which blur the work-home boundary, would likely pose problems for Chinese and South Asian women because they would make them appear available for extended family care giving during their work days.

Societal culture and organizational practices

Some studies address the interactions among organizational practices and societal culture. One research strategy studies international sites within a single multi-national firm (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002, 2005; Perlow, 2001). This design allows national differences to emerge among professionals doing similar work for one organization. A similar research strategy is to study cross-national differences among workers in similar firms within the same industry (Frenkel, 2004; Poster, 2005).

Perlow's (2001) study of software engineers in four countries working for the same multi-national firm illustrates how national differences in understandings and practices lead to different outcomes. While the software engineers in the U.S. work very long hours, this is not typical in the workplaces she studied in China, India, or Hungary. Instead, Perlow finds significant variation in work-time standards and norms. She argues that these differences stem from the way work is coordinated in each country, and these coordination norms are partly shaped by the national context.

Poster (2005) found that similar software firms in the U.S. and in India offered distinctive work-family policies. The American firm offered flexible arrangements such as flextime and telecommuting, while the Indian company offered material supports such as paid maternity leave and on-site child care. Although employees in each firm would likely have appreciated a broader range of policies encompassing both flexibility and material support, each company's policies were constrained by managers' cultural assumptions regarding what was "normal" or beneficial to employees (Poster 2005).

Wharton and Blair-Loy (2002; 2005) used a multi-level model to study finance professionals working for the same division of the same firm in the U.S., England, and Hong Kong. These three areas share many traditions and policies, including a laissez-faire ideology, weak state support for employed mothers, and similar norms about individual responsibility for handling work and family obligations (Aryee et al 1999, Brannen & Moss 1998, Chan & Lee 1995, Gornick et al 1998). Despite these similarities, Wharton and Blair-Loy find that bankers' levels of work-life conflict vary by national context, even net of individual workplace and family characteristics. Hong Kong bankers express more work-family conflict and greater interest in working part-time than their co-workers in the U.S. and England. The authors suggest that, due in part to the influence of a Confucian world view, the extended family is a more robust and greedy

institution in Hong Kong than in the more individualistic U.S. and England. Hong Kong bankers count the cost of time away from family engagements greater and thereby perceive more work-family conflict than their counterparts in other countries.

Yet Frenkel (2004) criticizes studies that assume workers import *a priori* societal models of gender into the firm. In a study of work-family discourse among parents in the Israeli hi-tech industry, she argues that workers do not necessarily bring cultural identities of motherhood and fatherhood from the society into the workplace. Instead of or in addition to this importation, workers construct their identities as workers, mothers, and fathers by intra-organizational gender performance, such as by discussing work-family issues with co-workers and by using (or avoiding) work-family policies.

Implications for Research

Space does not allow us to discuss measurement issues, but they can be vexing in cross-national studies of culture. We also need more research on cultural conceptualizations among people in non-western societies, on racial and ethnic minority groups within particular nations, and on families with the fewest socio-economic resources.

Further, we hope that scholars will continue to study how cultural models interact with global change. Walby (2000) studies the effects of EU policies on transformation of gender regimes in Europe. She finds that EU-sponsored economic restructuring interacts with the local gender regimes, leading to varied effects in different countries and different spheres. Cultural models of gender, work, and family shape how global forces affect the transformation of work-family arrangements in each society. At the same time, these cultural models are also changing. More systematic research is needed on these issues.

Another research question concerns whether and how societal cultural models are converging. The work and family devotion schemas, which legitimate long work hours and the separation of work and family spheres, are particularly salient in the U.S. Yet professionals in many industrialized nations are exposed to U.S. business practices and ideologies, and the U.S. model may be growing more dominant with globalization (McDowell, 1997; Ralston, Gustafson, Cheung, & Terpstra, 1993). In contrast, international organizations like the EU, ILO, and UN view Scandinavian-style state and organizational policies as most beneficial to families and are promoting these policies around the globe.

Finally, we note that different individual, corporate, and state actors have varying degrees of power with which to develop and impose their cultural understandings of appropriate family roles and reasonable workplace practices. We call for more studies explicitly linking cultural models with social structures of power and material resources.

Implications for Policy

Although the number of dual-earner families has risen in all industrialized nations, countries vary in the ways they address work-family conflict, in part due to differences in societal cultures. Understanding these issues becomes more pressing as more companies straddle national boundaries. Recognizing the importance of cultural models of gender, work and the family in shaping peoples' attitudes and actions around work-family issues has important practical consequences for the construction of state and organizational policies. When considering new policy, local cultural understandings of work and family responsibilities should be taken into consideration. For example, in societies where adults spend much time entertaining extended family members, telecommuting might be a poor solution for work-family conflict. Working from home could increase the pressure on women to deal with family issues during the time they wish to focus on their work. In societies in which the extended family is viewed as the preferred resource for childcare, corporate day care centers might be less useful than family leave for caring for ill relatives. Diverse workplaces will show variation in these cultural understandings, and employees would most benefit from a large array of work-family arrangements among which to choose. Managers in multicultural and transnational organizations will be more effective if they understand variations in work-family cultural assumptions and understandings.

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** Indicates that the authors have flagged this publication as a recommended reading for the topic.*