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Double Jeopardy: Review Of "The Widening Gap: Why America's Working Families Are In Jeopardy And What Can Be Done About It" By J. Heymann

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BOOKS

Double Jeopardy

BY ELLEN MAGENHEIM

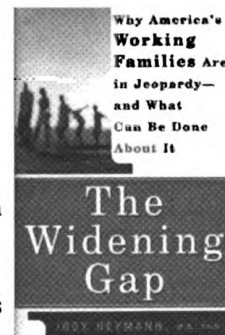
Over the last 50 years, many changes have occurred at the intersection of family and work life. Foremost among these interrelated changes are the increased participation of women—including mothers of very young children—in the labor force, the rise in the number of single parent families, and the increase in dual-worker families. These arrangements bring with them a range of changing needs.

In previous generations, mothers at home took care of children when they were very young or when they stayed home from school because of illness or school vacations. In previous generations, women at home also took care of frail or ill elderly relatives. Women were able to provide these caring services because they were not simultaneously meeting the demands of the formal labor market. Fathers, who might have helped children with homework, are now often unable to do so because of the rise in nontraditional work hours as well as constantly changing work schedules. Parents working long hours and odd shifts not only have limited time to interact with their children, they also

face the problem of finding reliable child care for young children.

In many households, these changes in family structure and work arrangements have created challenges for parents to simultaneously and successfully meet their obligations to families and employers because these new directions have not been matched by adjustments in the institutions—including schools, the workplace, and the government—which might provide support for the changing needs of working family members. This mismatch, and the myriad problems that arise as a result, are the focus of Jody Heymann's book *The Widening Gap: Why America's Working Families are in Jeopardy and What Can Be Done about It*, a disturbing examination of the problems faced by working families in America today.

At first glance, it may seem the problem is a matter of money; that is, if parents had more money, they could purchase quality child care or find a nurse to care for elderly parents. More money would help, but as



Heymann persuasively shows, it would not solve all the problems families face, which are as much a matter of time as money. For example, parents cannot get off from work to meet with a teacher, or they are at work rather than at home in the evening and can't help a child with homework.

In examining the shortages of time and money that families face, Heymann takes a broad view of how these needs change during a lifetime and how they vary across different types of families, such as those with special-needs children and those of different social and economic classes. Though some families experienced many of these problems in the past, what is new is the extent to which these stresses have become commonplace.

Heymann, who is a professor at Harvard University and director of policy for the Harvard University Center for Society and Health, builds her arguments on a vast and rich array of data, some of which were collected specifically for this study.

Statistical evidence on the

relationship between work obligations and family needs comes from the National Survey of Daily Experiences (Daily Diaries Study). The National Longitudinal Survey of Youth provides information on work schedules and benefits. Data on working conditions, work autonomy, and work-family interactions come from the Survey of Midlife in the United States. The author integrates the data from these surveys with ethnographic data collected from the Urban Working Families Study, in which more than 200 working families, child care providers, and employers were interviewed. Additional data came from the Baltimore Parenthood Study and the National Study of the Changing Workforce. The breadth and depth of these data give this book a vividness often lacking in social science analyses.

Heymann paints a portrait of parents who feel they are not able to devote themselves adequately either to work or to family. Statistical evidence revealing a lack of workplace flexibility is supplemented—and brought to life—with individual reports of the accommodations and compromises parents make to try to keep their jobs while raising their children, often in ways they find unsatisfactory on both counts.

Heymann shows how the

problems have been addressed in the past, which is mostly not at all. To a large degree families and businesses have been left to deal with these problems as best they can. Relying on individual initiative is a very American problem-solving approach; and the United States, unlike other industrialized countries, relies heavily on the private sector to meet the needs of working families. Heymann concludes that individual families are not doing a very good job of it.

Heymann suggests some solutions: lowering the age at which the government begins educating children, ensuring flexible work schedules that allow parents to participate in their children's education, and offering all-day and year-round schooling. Her discussion of potential solutions, however, reveals the book's only weakness: Heymann does not adequately consider what the tradeoffs are in pursuing her proposals and what barriers to implementation might be encountered.

On the face of it, her proposals indicate attractive new directions for policymakers and private sector leaders. And it seems reasonable to assert that, when parents have more flexibility, more workplace autonomy, better benefits, and therefore more resources, their children will benefit from their education.

But Heymann does not determine whether there is the private and public will to commit to these changes and above all to pay for them. She would have strengthened her argument by giving examples of initiatives by the private and public sectors, separately or jointly, that have helped workers simultaneously meet their needs at home and at work.

The Widening Gap integrates a range of social science approaches and analyses in a way that will be informative for readers already familiar with the literature on family and work. It should also be accessible and valuable to readers new to this topic. While her conclusions would be enriched by a clearer analysis of inherent tradeoffs, this work provides a thorough foundation upon which to conduct these political and economic arguments.■

Jody Heymann, *The Widening Gap: Why America's Working Families are in Jeopardy and What Can Be Done about It* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2000); 254 pp; cloth, \$22.40; paper, \$15.00.

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