

Inequalities in Family Life?

The Double Life of the Family: Myth, Hope and Experience

by Michael Bittman and Jocelyn Pixley

Personal values and social policies influence the arrangements family members make regarding how participation in paid work and domestic activities are apportioned. Discussions of 'choice', albeit limited to women's preferences and decisions about workforce participation, intersect with political debates about the provision of child care, family allowances and tax initiatives. This nexus between the private realm of the family and the public policy arena is at the centre of *The Double Life of the Family: Myth, Hope and Experience*.

In their book, Michael Bittman and Jocelyn Pixley propose an explanation for the perceived contradictions in modern family life between expectations of intimacy and equality and the reality of inequality between men and women's income earning and family caring roles. The authors argue that the myth of modern marriage is the belief that marriage is a union based on intimacy, affection, altruism and equality, while the reality is that it is a relationship founded on an unequal economic contract with its concomitant imbalance of power.

The inherent inequalities within family life are represented by 'the invisible world of hard labour'— the unpaid labour performed by women of cleaning, laundry, cooking, child and elder care. Such division of labour, the authors suggest, is a contemporary version of 'the old systems of servitude where women waited on men' (p.85).

Familiar and more recondite references from mythology, psychology, history, sociology, political theory and television sitcoms are drawn upon to illustrate this darker side of family life — the location of female subordination to male domination, sexual abuse, child abuse, domestic violence, depression and female poverty.

According to the authors, this 'double life' of the family rests squarely on the paradox that 'domestic work remains women's responsibility even though most people believe that housework should be shared' (p.145). They query why, given 'a broad subscription to the "new" values of gender equity, there is continued evidence that in the practical world of family life, the "traditional" sexual division of labour in the allocation of time and tasks has shown virtually no change at all'. The major question posed by the authors appears to be: 'How is a phenomenon of simultaneous conformity to the discourse of egalitarian values and to these inequitable practices to be explained?' (p.146).

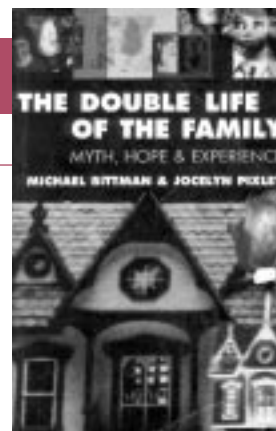
To address these issues, the authors present a plethora of statistical data on time use — how many minutes and hours a day men and women spend on child caring and domestic chores — as well as calculations on the contribution of such labour if incorporated into the Gross National Product.

Bittman and Pixley present a well articulated argument describing the negative consequences to individual family members, and society at large, of the way unpaid work (particularly the care of children) is socially organised within the context of the privatisation of the family.

They further argue that, in effect, the development of modern labour markets devalues children, and therefore the contribution of those who provide their care — the root cause of inequality within families. As long as family obligations are considered as a market liability by employers in an economic and labour environment, where the ideal employee is one that is always available and not torn between conflicting responsibilities, then women who provide the caring will continue to be disadvantaged at work and at home. In other words, women are denied full citizenry in a society where only market values are held in esteem. The authors appear to give less attention to the fact that if men take on equal caring responsibilities, similar consequences will apply.

The preference of women to care for children at home when they are young and to work part-time when they return to work, and the entrenched reluctance of men to embrace household chores, is well documented. Despite the authors' obvious wishes to the contrary, there is little Australian evidence that the majority of men are dissatisfied with their primary breadwinner role nor women, in the main, with their secondary income earning role and greater share of family caring (see Dempsey, elsewhere in this issue; Wolcott and Glezer 1995; Baxter and Western 1997). This should not be interpreted, however, to mean that men do not want to have more time with their families than often long working hours currently deny to them. The authors raise the possible need for social engineering interventions to change both men's and women's attitudes and behaviours to achieve more equal sharing of income earning and family responsibilities.

Whether maintaining these values is a viable option in an economic climate of increasing unemployment and low-wage job creation is another issue. In this con-



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text, the relationship between family policy as economic policy is elegantly constructed in this book.

The only way inequalities will be eradicated, according to the authors, is when society recognises the value of children as a 'public good' to the future of the community as employees and citizens. What they require and advocate is the public provision of child care, some form of an income during the intense child rearing years that can be credited toward the retirement years, and the availability of flexible working arrangements and parental leave to enable time with family.

Bittman and Pixley make various suggestions about how to implement these policies and practices, but they leave as many questions as answers. These are clearly the 'too-hard basket' issues to unpack in a field of global economic restructuring whose effects are felt at the national as well as personal level.

The Double Life of the Family provides a historical, theoretical, and statistical review to document the gendered behaviours that continue to define contemporary family life. The book's weakness is that much of this goes over old ground to anyone with an elementary awareness of feminist theory and criticism or more a general understanding of the history and consequences of family law on marriage and sex discrimination in employment and education. Its strength is in relating these events and figures to the concept of the 'public good' as the essential means of shifting the balance from an economic rationalist approach to a humanistic perspective of personal, family and community relationships.

References

- Baxter, J. & Western, M. (1997), 'Women's satisfaction with the domestic division of labour', *Family Matters*, no. 47, Winter, pp. 16–20.
Wolcott, I. & Glezer, H. (1995), *Work and Family Life: Achieving Integration*, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

Ilene Wolcott is a Senior Research Fellow with the Australian Institute of Family Studies. An edited version of this review appears in the December 1997 issue of *Labour and Industry: A Journal of the Social and Economic Relations of Work*.