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Kurt Osborne

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Book Review

Reshaping the Work-Family Debate: Why Men and Class Matter by Joan C. Williams



Reviewed by: Kurt Osborne*

Williams, Joan C. *Reshaping the Work-Family Debate: Why Men and Class Matter*. Harvard University Press, 2012, 304 pp., \$18.95 paperback.

Joan Williams is well known in the interdisciplinary field of work and family research, contributing to work-life law and awarded the Gustavus Myers Outstanding Book Award (U.S. Department of Labor) for her earlier work, *Unbending Gender* (2000). Her new book, *Reshaping the Work-Family Debate*, builds on her previous work, and reframes the work-family discussion by shifting the foci to gender norms in the workplace and social class. These new frames become the central goals of the book as she tries to show how masculine work norms create much of the impetus for work-family conflict, while also attempting to instruct Progressives on how they can attract the working class to their political side in trying to bring about social change.

Williams arranges this book into three different sections. The first section is comprised of the first two chapters showing some of the myths surrounding work-family conflict, as well as illustrating the impact work-family conflict can have on the lives of workers and their families. The first chapter includes an in-depth look at the media coverage of the "opt-out revolution,"

* Kurt Osborne; e-mail: kurt.osborne@my.und.edu

demonstrating how traditional gender norms associated with work and the family are strengthened by flawed media coverage of women leaving the workplace due to personal choice. What the media fails to show is that the workplace is structured to put women in inflexible and disadvantageous situations, which may push them out of the workplace.

The second chapter builds on the structural problems inherent with the American workplace, showing how the lack of flexibility can negatively impact fathers as well as mothers. Williams focuses on the fact that working class and upper middle class families face many of the same work-family conflicts, but the working class does not have the economic resources or the job flexibility available to the upper middle class with which to cope with work-family related problems. This lack of resources and job flexibility creates a situation in which working class parents must make a choice about which will face discipline or discharge for caring for the children.

Williams makes a convincing argument as to why businesses and unions should care about work-family issues. Her argument is that addressing work-family issues will lead to several benefits, including improved consumer and workplace safety, improved employee commitment, reduced turnover, and enhanced productivity. With those reasons in mind, Williams offers some steps to improve on common work-family issues, including creating multiple types of leave for workers with unavoidable family conflicts, creating family-responsive overtime systems, and offering reduced hours and flexible work options. Williams believes unions and businesses taking these steps would realize the listed benefits, as well as ease some of the work-family burden felt by working class families.

The second section of this book examines masculine workplace norms and redirecting feminist theory. Beginning with Chapter 3, Williams focuses on masculine workplace norms creating a negative environment for men and women, in which neither can truly conform to the

norms and live up to the established ideal. The structure of masculine norms produces a 1960's workplace and "ideal worker" norm, one which men are expected to live up to in today's society. Men are also expected to live up to the "ideal worker" concept in the realm of fatherhood by providing financial security, sheltering, and food for the family, but not performing seemingly emasculating childcare responsibilities. According to Williams' argument regarding masculine workplace norms, failure to live up to the "ideal worker" concept equates to failure as both a man and a father. Further, the masculine nature of workplace norms creates gender stereotypes for women limiting their ability to advance, while attempting to conform to those norms is perceived negatively.

In the fourth chapter, Williams calls for a reshaping of feminist theory, and introduces what she calls *reconstructive feminism*. Reconstructive feminism aims to deconstruct and decouple gender norms from worker identity. Her example is the replacement of the selfless mother and breadwinner models with that of the balanced worker. Doing this would create an environment where women and men can embrace both work and family. To further her elaboration of reconstructive feminism, Williams provides an in-depth examination and critique of other forms of feminism, which she views as producing conflict among each other and distracting from the real issues associated with gender in the workplace and home.

In the third section of the book, Williams discusses class and how cultural differences create a class gap. The author then offers suggestions for how Progressives may bridge this gap to unite these divided groups to effect social change. The final two chapters point out the differences between the upper-middle class and what Williams terms the "Missing Middle," a combination of the middle and working class, citing "elitist" access to resources such as education, cultural capital, food, leisure, and religion as differentiators out of the reach of the Missing Middle. She goes on to explain how class conflicts have played central roles in such

hotbed topics as abortion, welfare, affirmative action, and gay marriage. She speaks to the need for Progressives to change their behavior to address the concerns of the working class and recruit them to bring about work-life legal reform.

The strongest part of the book was Williams' analysis of the masculine gender norms of the workplace and how those harm not just women, but also men. Much of the work-family related scholarship focuses on the impacts on women (Livingston and Judge 2008). Williams argues that how men are affected by workplace norms is an important part in the examination of and solutions to work-family conflict. Convincing men of the need to deconstruct the masculine workplace norms and breaking the concept of the ideal worker will be integral in creating a coalition capable of bringing about large-scale changes in policy.

The final chapters on class were disappointing. Based on the subtitle of the book, *Why Men and Class Matter*, one would think Williams would make more of an attempt to link social class with work-family difficulties. She touches on such topics occasionally but there is no in-depth treatment of how social class impacts work-family conflict. Instead, she focuses on how the upper-middle class is creating a gap between themselves and the "Missing Middle," but Williams fails to systematically link this gap and the factors causing it to work-family conflict. Most of her suggestions appear to be false tactics to sway public opinion over to a party simply by having Progressives not publicly engaging in the "class acts" that promote their class privilege. This does not explain how conservatives have been able to win the trust of the working class despite similar "class acts," such as George H.W. Bush not knowing the price of milk prior to his election, or the fact his son was the owner of the Texas Rangers. Another solution Williams proposes is moving away from issues such as abortion, gay marriage, welfare, and other such hot topics that have made up many of the talking points of recent elections. I

do not believe moving away from those topics is necessary; however, I do think additional emphasis should be placed on work-family issues.

Williams was very ambitious with this book, and I think she succeeded in her discussion regarding masculinity in the workplace and the need to address that as a central component of work-family conflict. I had high expectations for the chapters concerning social class, and feel Williams missed a chance to examine a link between work-family conflict and social class. I applaud Williams for undertaking this difficult and ambitious task and hope it can lead to positive discussion. While I do not necessarily agree with her methods for Progressive recruitment of the working class, I believe it will spark discussion and lead to new ways of forming coalitions for social change. Additionally, this book would be very useful to those unfamiliar with work-family conflict and how that conflict is shaped by workplace gender norms. Feminist theories would find the middle chapters particularly helpful, while policymakers and lobbyists would find some merit in social class bridging strategies of the final chapters.

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