The Emotional Geography of Work and Family Life
FROM The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work
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In the past two decades Americans who are employed full-time are working more and more hours, despite their support for “family values” and a belief that parents need to spend more time with their children. The apparent contradiction is addressed by Arlie Hochschild in this essay that preceded her book The Time Bind. On the basis of fieldwork with many working parents, she provides an analysis of how people manage both their time and emotions. This leads to some interesting insights about the possible future of work and family.

Over the last two decades, American workers have increasingly divided into a majority who work too many hours and a minority with no work at all. This split hurts families at both extremes, but I focus here on the growing scarcity of time among the long-hours majority. For many of them, a speed-up at the office and factory has marginalized life at home, so that the very term “work-family balance” seems to them a bland slogan with little bearing on real life. In this chapter, I describe the speed-up and review a range of cultural responses to it, including “family-friendly reforms” such as flextime, job sharing, part-time work and parental leave. Why, I ask, do people not resist the speed-up more than they do? When offered these reforms, why don’t more take advantage of them? Drawing upon my ongoing research in an American Fortune 500 company, I argue that a company’s “family-friendly” policy goes only as deep as the “emotional geography” of the workplace and home, the drawn and redrawn boundaries between the sacred and the profane. I show how ways of talking about time (for example, separating “quality” from “quantity” time) become code words to describe that emotional geography.

A WORK-FAMILY SPEED-UP

Three factors are creating the current speedup in work and family life in the United States. (By the term “family,” I refer to committed unmarried couples, same-sex couples, single mothers, two-job couples and wage-earner-housewife couples. My focus is on all families who raise children.) First of all, increasing numbers of mothers now work outside the home. In 1950, 22 per
cent of American mothers of children eighteen and under worked for pay; in 1991, 67 per cent did. Half of the mothers of children age one year and younger work for pay.

Second, they work in jobs which generally lack flexibility. The very model of “a job” and “career” has been based, for the most part, on the model of a traditional man whose wife cared for the children at home. Third, over the last 20 years, both women and men have increased their hours of work. In her book *The Overworked American*, the economist Juliet Schor argues that over the last two decades American workers have added an extra 164 hours to their year’s work—an extra month of work a year. Compared to 20 years ago, workers take fewer unpaid absences, and even fewer paid ones. Over the last decade, vacations have shortened by 14 per cent. The number of families eating evening meals together has dropped by 10 per cent. Counting overtime and commuting time, a 1992 national sample of men averaged 48.8 hours of work, and women, 41.7. Among young parents, close to half now work more than 8 hours a day. Compared to the 1970s, mothers take less time off for the birth of a child and are more likely to work through the summer. They are more likely to work continuously until they retire at age 65. Thus, whether they have children or not, women increasingly fit the profile of year-round, lifelong paid workers, a profile that has long characterized men. Meanwhile, male workers have not reduced their hours but, instead, expanded them.

Not all working parents with more free time will spend it at home tending children or elderly relatives. Nor, needless to say, if parents do spend time at home, will all their children find them kind, helpful and fun. But without a chance for more time at home, the issue of using it well does not arise at all.

**COOL MODERN, TRADITIONAL, WARM MODERN STANCES TOWARD THE SPEED-UP**

Do the speed-up people think the speed-up is a problem? Does anybody else? If so, what cultural stances toward gender equity, family life and capitalism underlie the practical solutions they favor? If we explore recent writing on the hurried life of a working parent, we can discern three stances toward it.

One is a cool modern stance, according to which the speed-up has become “normal,” even fashionable. Decline in time at home does not “marginalize” family life, proponents say, it makes it different, even better. Like many other popular self-help books addressed to the busy working mother, *The Superwoman Syndrome*, by Marjorie Schaevitz, offers busy mothers tips on how to fend off appeals for help from neighbors, relatives, friends, and how to stop feeling guilty about their mothering. It instructs the mother how to frugally measure out minutes of “quality time” for her children and abandons as hopeless the project of getting men more involved at home. Such books call for no changes in the workplace, no changes in the culture and no change in
men. The solution to rationalization at work is rationalization at home. Tacti-
itly such books accept the corrosive effects of global capitalism on family life
and on the very notion of what people need to be happy and fulfilled.

A second stance toward the work-family speed-up is traditional in that it
calls for women’s return to the home, or quasi-traditional in that it acquiesces
to a secondary role, a lower rank “mommy track,” for women at work. Those
who take this sort of stance acknowledge the speed-up as a problem but deny
the fact that most women now have to work, want to work, and embrace the
concept of gender equity. They essentialize different male and female “na-
tures,” and notions of time, for men and women—“industrial” time for men,
and “family” time for women.

A third warm modern stance is both humane (the speed-up is a problem)
and egalitarian (equity at home and work is a goal). Those who take this ap-
proach question the terms of employment—both through a nationwide pro-
gram of worksharing, (as in Germany), a shorter working week, and through
company-based family friendly reforms. What are these family-friendly re-
forms?

- flextime; a workday with flexible starting and quitting times, but usu-
ally 40 hours of work and the opportunity to “bank” hours at one time
and reclaim them later;
- flexplace; home-based work, such as telecommuting;
- regular or permanent part-time; less than full-time work with full- or
pro-rated benefits and promotional opportunities in proportion to
one’s skill and contribution;
- job sharing; two people voluntarily sharing one job with benefits and
salary pro-rated;
- compressed working week; four 10-hour days with 3 days off, or three
12-hour days with 4 days off;
- paid parental leave;
- family obligations as a consideration in the allocation of shift work
and required overtime.

Together, worksharing and this range of family-friendly reforms could
spread work, increase worker control over hours, and create a “warm mod-
ern” world for women to be equal within. As political goals in America over
the last 50 years, worksharing and a shorter working week have “died and
gone to heaven” where they live on as Utopian ideals. In the 1990s, family-
friendly reforms are the lesser offering on the capitalist bargaining table. But
are companies in fact offering these reforms? Are working parents pressing
for them?

The news is good and bad. Recent nationwide studies suggest that more
and more American companies offer their workers family-friendly alternative
work schedules. According to one recent study, 88 per cent of 188 companies
surveyed offer part-time work, 77 per cent offer flextime of some sort, 48 per cent offer job-sharing, 35 per cent offer some form of flexplace, and 20 per cent offer a compressed working week. (But in most companies, the interested worker must seek and receive the approval of a supervisor or department head. Moreover, most policies do not apply to lower-level workers whose conditions of work are covered by union contracts.)

But even if offered, regardless of need, few workers actually take advantage of the reforms. One study of 384 companies noted that only nine companies reported even one father who took an official unpaid leave at the birth of his child. Few are on temporary or permanent part-time. Still fewer share a job.

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INSIDE A FORTUNE 500 COMPANY

Why, when the opportunity presents itself, do so few working parents take it? To find out, I set about interviewing managers, and clerical and factory workers in a large manufacturing company in the northeastern United States—which I shall call, simply, the Company. I chose to study this Company because of its reputation as an especially progressive company. Over the last 15 years, for example, the Company devoted millions of dollars to informing workers of its family-friendly policies, hiring staff to train managers to implement them, making showcase promotions of workers who take extended maternity leaves or who work part-time. If change is to occur anywhere, I reasoned, it was likely to be within this Company.

But the first thing I discovered was that even in this enlightened Company, few young parents or workers tending elderly relatives took advantage of the chance to work more flexible or shorter hours. Among the 26,000 employees, the average working week ranged from 45 to 55 hours. Managers and factory workers often worked 50 or 60 hours a week while clerical workers tended to work a more normal, 40-hour, week. Everyone agreed the Company was a "pretty workaholic place." Moreover, for the last 5 years, hours of work had increased.

EXPLANATIONS THAT DON'T WORK

Perhaps workers shy away from applying for leaves or shortening their hours because they can't afford to earn less. This certainly explains why many young parents continue to work long hours. But it doesn't explain why the wealthiest workers, the managers and professionals, are among the least interested in additional time off. Even among the Company's factory workers, who in 1993 averaged between eleven and twelve dollars an hour, and who routinely competed for optional overtime, two 40-hour-a-week paychecks with no overtime work were quite enough to support the family. A substantial
number said they could get by on one paycheck if they sold one of their cars, put in a vegetable garden and cut down on "extras." Yet, the overwhelming majority did not want to.

Perhaps, then, employees shied away from using flexible or shorter hour schedules because they were afraid of having their names higher on the list of workers who might be laid off in a period of economic downturn. Through the 1980s, a third of America's largest companies experienced some layoffs, though this did not happen to managers or clerical workers at this company.

By union contract, production workers were assured that layoffs, should they occur, would be made according to seniority and not according to any other criteria—such as how many hours an employee had worked. Yet, the workaholism went on. Employees in the most profitable sectors of the Company showed no greater tendency to ask for shorter or more flexible hours for family reasons than employees in the least profitable sectors.

Is it, then, that workers who could afford shorter hours didn't know about the Company's family-friendly policies? No. All of the 130 working parents I spoke with had heard about alternative schedules and knew where they could find out more.

Perhaps the explanation lies not with the workers but with their managers. Managers responsible for implementing family-friendly policies may be openly or covertly undermining them. Even though Company policy allowed flexibility, the head of a division could, for reasons of production, openly refuse a worker permission to go part-time or to job-share, which some did. For example, when asked about his views on flextime, the head of the engineering division of the Company replied flatly, "My policy on flextime is that there is no flextime." Other apparently permissive division heads had supervisors who were tough on this issue "for them." Thus, there seemed to be some truth to this explanation for why so few workers stepped forward.

But even managers known to be cooperative had few employees asking for alternative schedules. Perhaps, then, workers ask for time off, but do so "off the books." To some extent, this "off the books" hypothesis did hold, especially for new fathers who may take a few days to a week of sick leave for the birth of a baby instead of filing for "parental leave," which they feared would mark them as unserious workers.

Even counting informal leaves, most women managers returned to full-time 40- to 55-hour work schedules fairly soon after their 6 weeks of paid maternity leave. Across ranks, most women secretaries returned after 6 months; most women production workers returned after 6 weeks. Most new fathers took a few days off at most. Thus, even "off the books," working parents used very little of the opportunity to spend more time at home.

Far more important than all these factors seemed to be a company "speed-up" in response to global competition. In the early years of the 1990s, workers each year spoke of working longer hours than they had the year before, a trend seen nationwide. When asked why, they explained that the Company
was trying to "reduce costs," in part by asking employees to do more than 
they were doing before.

But the sheer existence of a company speed-up doesn't explain why em-
ployees weren't trying to actively resist it, why there wasn't much backtalk. 
Parents were eager to tell me how their families came first, how they were 
clear about that. (National polls show that next to a belief in God, Americans 
most strongly believe in "the family.") But, practices that might express this 
belief—such as sharing breakfast and dinner—were shifting in the opposite 
direction. In the minds of many parents of young children, warm modern in-
tentions seemed curiously, casually, fused with cool modern ideas and prac-
tices. In some ways, those within the work-family speed-up don't seem to 
want to slow down. . . .

WORK AND FAMILY AS EMOTIONAL CULTURES

Through its family-friendly reforms, the Company had earned a national 
reputation as a desirable family-friendly employer. But at the same time, it 
wasn't inconvenienced by having to arrange alternate schedules for very 
many employees. One can understand how this might benefit a company. But 
how about the working parents?

For the answer, we may need a better grasp of the emotional cultures, and 
the relative "draw" of work and family. Instead of thinking of the workplace 
or the family as unyielding thing-like structures, Anthony Giddens suggests 
that we see structures as fluid and changeable. "Structuration," Giddens, [au-
thor of New Rules of Sociological Method] tells us, is the "dynamic process 
whereby structures come into being." For structures to change, there must be 
changes in what people do. But in doing what they do, people unconsciously 
draw on resources, and depend on larger conditions to develop the skills they 
use to change what they do.

With this starting point, then, let us note that structures come with—and 
also "are"—emotional cultures. A change in structure requires a change in 
emotional culture. What we lack, so far, is a vocabulary for describing this 
culture, and what follows is a crude attempt to create one. An emotional cul-
ture is a set of rituals, beliefs about feelings and rules governing feeling which 
induce emotional focus, and even a sense of the "sacred." This sense of the sa-
cred selects and favors some social bonds over others. It selects and reselects 
relationships into a core or periphery of family life.

Thus, families have a more or less sacred core of private rituals and shared 
meanings. In some families what is most sacred is sexuality and marital com-
munication (back rubs, pillow talk, sex), and in other families the "sacred" is 
reserved for parental bonds (bedtime cuddles with children, bathtime, meals, 
parental talk about children). In addition, families have secondary zones of 
less important daily, weekly, seasonal rituals which back up the core rituals. 
They also have a profane outer layer, in which members might describe them-
selves as "doing nothing in particular"—doing chores, watching television, sleeping. The character and boundaries of the sacred and profane aspects of family life are in the eye of the beholder. "Strong families" with "thick ties" can base their sense of the sacred on very different animating ideas and practices. Families also differ widely on how much one member's sense of the sacred matches another's and on how much it is the occasion for expressing harmony or conflict. Furthermore, families creatively adapt to new circumstances by ritualizing new activities—for example, couples in commuter marriages may "ritualize" the phone call or the daily e-mail exchange. Couples with "too much time together" may de-ritualize meals, sex, or family events. Furthermore, families have different structures of sacredness. Some have thick actual cores and thin peripheries, others have a porous core and extensive peripheral time in which people just "hang out." But in each case, emotional culture shapes the experience of family life.

Emotional cultures stand back-to-back with ideas about time. In the context of the work—family speed-up, many people speak of actively "managing time, finding time, making time, guarding time, or fighting for time." Less do they speak of simply "having" or "not having" time. In their attempt to take a more active grip on their schedules, many working parents turn a telephone answering machine on at dinner, turn down work assignments and social engagements, and actively fight to defend "family time."

One's talk about time is itself a verbal practice that does or doesn't reaffirm the ritual core of family life. In the core of family life, we may speak more of living in the moment. Because a sacred activity is an end in itself, and not a means to an end, the topic of time is less likely to arise. If it does, one speaks of "enjoying time," or "devoting time." With the work-family speed-up, the term "quality time" has arisen, as in "I need more quality time with my daughter," a term referring to freedom from distraction, time spent in an attitude of intense focus. In general, we try to "make" time for core family life because we feel it matters more.

In the intermediate and peripheral zones of family life, we may speak of "having time on our hands, wasting or killing time." In the new lexicon, we speak of "quantity time." In general, we feel we can give up peripheral time, because it matters less. More hotly contested is the time to participate in a child's school events, help at the school auction, buy a birthday gift for a babysitter, or call an elderly neighbor.

With a decline in this periphery, the threads of reciprocity in the community and neighborhood grow weaker. By forcing families to cut out what is "least important," the speed-up thins out and weakens ties that bind it to society. Thus, under the press of the "speed-up," families are forced to give up their periphery ties with neighbors, distant relatives, bonds sustained by "extra time." The speed-up privatizes the family. The "neighborhood goes to work," where it serves the emotional interests of the workplace. Where are one's friends? At work.
Although the family in modern society is separated from the workplace, its emotional culture is ecologically linked to and drawn from it. Both the family and workplace are also linked to supportive realms. For the family, this often includes the neighborhood, the church, the school. For the workplace, this includes the pub, the golf club, the commuter van friendship network. A loss of supportive structure around the family may result in a gain for the workplace, and vice versa. Insofar as the "periphery" of family life protected its ritual core, to a certain degree for working parents these ties are not so peripheral at all.

A gender pattern is clear. Because most women now must and for the most part want to work outside the home, they are performing family rituals less. At the same time, men are not doing them very much more. Together, these two facts result in a net loss in ritual life at home.

At the same time, at some workplaces, an alternative cultural magnet is drawing on the human need for a center, a ritual core. As family life becomes deritualized, in certain sectors of the economy, the engineers of corporate cultures are re-ritualizing the workplace. Thus, the contraction of emotional culture at home is linked to a socially engineered expansion of emotional culture at work.

WORK LIKE A FAMILY, AND FAMILY, FOR SOME, LIKE WORK

At a certain point, change in enough personal stories can be described as a change in culture, and I believe many families at the Company are coming to this turning point now. Pulled toward work by one set of forces and propelled from the family by another set of forces, a growing number of workers are unwittingly altering the twin cultures of work and family. As the cultural shield surrounding work has grown stronger, the supportive cultural shield surrounding the family has weakened. Fewer neighborhood "consultants" talk to one when trouble arises at home, and for some, they are more to help out with problems at work.

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THE MODEL OF FAMILY AS A HAVEN IN A HEARTLESS WORLD

When I entered the field, I assumed that working parents would want more time at home. I imagined that they experienced home as a place where they could relax, feel emotionally sheltered and appreciated for who they "really

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1. [This refers to Christopher Lasch's examination of the American family in his book Haven in a Heartless World.]
are." I imagined home to feel to the weary worker like the place where he or she could take off a uniform, put on a bathrobe, have a beer, exhale—a picture summed up in the image of the worker coming in the door saying, "Hi honey, I'm home!" To be sure, home life has its emergencies and strains but I imagined that home was the place people thought about when they thought about rest, safety and appreciation. Given this, they would want to maximize time at home, especially time with their children. I also assumed that these working parents would not feel particularly relaxed, safe or appreciated at work, at least not more so than at home, and especially not factory workers.

When I interviewed workers at the Company, however, a picture emerged which partly belied this model of family life. For example, one 30-year-old factory shift supervisor, a remarried mother of two, described her return home after work in this way:

I walk in the door and the minute I turn the key in the lock my oldest daughter is there. Granted she needs somebody to talk to about her day. The baby is still up... she should have been in bed two hours ago and that upsets me. The oldest comes right up to the door and complains about anything her father said or did during the evening. She talks about her job. My husband is in the other room hollering to my daughter, "Tracy, I don't ever get no time to talk to your mother because you're always monopolizing her time first before I even get a chance!" They all come at me at once.

The unarbitrated quarrels, the dirty dishes, and the urgency of other people's demands she finds at home contrast with her account of going to work:

I usually come to work early just to get away from the house. I go to be there at a quarter after the hour and people are there waiting. We sit. We talk. We joke. I let them know what is going on, who has to be where, what changes I have made for the shift that day. We sit there and chitchat for five or ten minutes. There is laughing. There is joking. There is fun. They aren't putting me down for any reason. Everything is done in humour and fun from beginning to end. It can get stressful, though, when a machine malfunctions and you can't get the production out.

Another 38-year-old working mother of two, also a factory worker, had this to say:

My husband is a great help (with caring for their son). But as far as doing housework, or even taking the baby when I'm at home, no. When I'm home, our son becomes my job. He figures he works five days a week, he's not going to come home and clean. But he doesn't stop to think that I work seven days a week. . . . Why should I have to come home and do
the housework without help from anybody else? My husband and I have been through this over and over again. Even if he would pack up the kitchen table and stack the dishes for me when I'm at work, that would make a big difference. He does nothing. On his weekends off, I have to provide a sitter for the baby so he can go fishing. When I have my day off, I have the baby all day long. He'll help out if I'm not here . . . the minute I'm here he lets me do the work.

To this working mother; her family was not a haven, a zone of relief and relaxation. It was a workplace. More than that, she could only get relief from this domestic workplace by going to the factory. As she continued:

I take a lot of overtime. The more I get out of the house, the better I am.
It's a terrible thing to say, but that's the way I feel!

I assumed that work would feel to workers like a place in which one could be fired at the whim of a profit-hungry employer, while in the family, for all its hassles, one was safe. Based as it is on the impersonal mechanism of supply and demand, profit and loss, work would feel insecure, like being in "a jungle." In fact, many workers I interviewed had worked for the Company for 20 years or more. But they were on their second or third marriages. To these employed, work was their rock, their major source of security, while they were receiving their "pink slips" at home.

To be sure, most workers wanted to base their sense of stability at home, and many did. But I was also struck by the loyalty many felt toward the Company and a loyalty they felt coming from it, despite what might seem like evidence to the contrary—the speed-up, the restructuring. When problems arose at work, many workers felt they could go to their supervisors or to a human resources worker and resolve it. If one division of the Company was doing poorly, the Company might "de-hire" workers within that division and rehire in a more prosperous division. This happened to one female engineer, very much upsetting her; but her response to it was telling:

I have done very well in the Company for twelve years, and I thought my boss thought very highly of me. He'd said as much. So when our division went down and several of us were de-hired, we were told to look for another position within the Company or outside. I thought, "Oh my God, outside!" I was stunned! Later, in the new division it was like a remarriage. . . . I wondered if I could love again.

Work was not always "there for you," but increasingly "home," as they had known it, wasn't either. As one woman recounted, "One day my husband came home and told me, 'I've fallen in love with a woman at work. . . . I want a divorce.'"
Finally, the model of family-as-haven led me to assume that the individual would feel most known and appreciated at home and least so at work. Work might be where they felt unappreciated, "a cog in the machine"—an image brought to mind by the Charlie Chaplin classic film on factory life, Modern Times. But the factory is no longer the archetypical workplace and, sadly, many workers felt more appreciated for what they were doing at work than for what they were doing at home. For example, when I asked one 40-year-old technician whether he felt more appreciated at home or at work, he said:

I love my family. I put my family first . . . but I'm not sure I feel more appreciated by them (laughs). My 14-year-old son doesn't talk too much to anyone when he gets home from school. He's a brooder. I don't know how good I've been as a father . . . we fix cars together on Saturday. My wife works opposite shifts to what I work, so we don't see each other except on weekends. We need more time together—need to get out to the lake more. I don't know . . .

This worker seemed to feel better about his skill repairing machines in the factory than his way of relating to his son. This is not as unusual as it might seem. In a large-scale study, Arthur Emlen found that 59 per cent of employees rated their family performance "good or unusually good" while 86 per cent gave a similar rating to their performance on the job.

This overall cultural shift may account for why many workers are going along with the work-family speed-up and not joining the resistance against it. A 1993 nationally representative study of 3400 workers conducted by the Families and Work Institute reflects two quite contradictory findings. On one hand, the study reports that 80 per cent of workers feel their jobs require "working very hard" and 42 per cent "often feel used up by the end of the work day." On the other hand, when workers are asked to compare how much time and energy they actually devoted to their family, their job or career and themselves, with how much time they would like to devote to each, there was little difference. Workers estimate that they actually spend 43 per cent of their time and energy on family and friends, 37 per cent on job or career, and 20 per cent on themselves. But they want to spend just about what they are spending—47 per cent on family and friends, 30 per cent on the job, and 23 per cent on themselves. Thus, the workers I spoke to who were "giving" in to the work-family speed-up may be typical of a wider trend.

CAUSAL MECHANISMS

Three sets of factors may exacerbate this reversal of family and work cultures: trends in the family, trends at work, and a cultural consumerism which reinforces trends in the family and work.

First, half of marriages in America end in divorce—the highest divorce rate
in the world. Because of the greater complexity of family life, the emotional skills of parenting, woefully underestimated to begin with, are more important than ever before. Many workers spoke with feeling about strained relationships with stepchildren and ex-wives or husbands. New in scope, too, are the numbers of working wives who work “two shifts,” one at home and one at work, and face their husband’s resistance to helping fully with the load at home—a strain that often leaves both spouses feeling unappreciated.

Second, another set of factors apply at work. Many corporations have emotionally engineered for top and upper middle managers a world of friendly ritual and positive reinforcement. New corporate cultures call for “valuing the individual” and honoring the “internal customer” (so that requests made by employees within the Company are honored as highly as those by customers outside the Company). Human relations employees give seminars on human problems at work. High-performance teams, based on co-operation between relative equals who “manage themselves,” tend to foster intense relations at work. The Company frequently gives out awards for outstanding work at award ceremonies. Compliments run freely. The halls are hung with new plaques praising one or another worker on recent accomplishments. Recognition luncheons, department gatherings and informal birthday remembrances are common. Career planning sessions with one’s supervisor, team meetings to talk over “modeling, work relations, and mentoring” with co-workers all verge on, even as they borrow from, psychotherapy. For all its aggravation and tensions, the workplace is where quite a few workers feel appreciated, honored, and where they have real friends. By contrast, at home there are fewer “award ceremonies” and little helpful feedback about mistakes.

In addition, courtship and mate selection, earlier more or less confined to the home-based community, may be moving into the sphere of work. The later age for marriage, the higher proportion of unmarried people, and the high divorce rate all create an ever-replenishing courtship pool at work. The gender desegregation of the workplace, and the lengthened working day also provide opportunity for people to meet and develop romantic or quasi-romantic ties. At the factory, romance may develop in the lunchroom, pub, or parking lot; and for upper management levels, at conferences, in “fantasy settings” in hotels and dimly lit restaurants.

In a previous era, an undetermined number of men escaped the house for the pub, the fishing hole, and often the office. A common pattern, to quote from the title of an article by Jean Duncombe and Dennis Marsden, was that of “workaholic men” and “whining women.” Now that women compose 45 percent of the American labor force and come home to a “second shift” of work at home, some women are escaping into work too—and as they do so, altering the cultures of work and home.

Forces pulling workers out of family life and into the workplace are set into perpetual motion by consumerism. Consumerism acts as a mechanism which maintains the emotional reversal of work and family. Exposed to advertise-
ments, workers expand their material “needs.” To buy what they now “need,” they need money. To earn money, they work longer hours. Being away from home so many hours, they make up for their absence at home with gifts which cost money. They “materialize” love. And so the cycle continues.

Once work begins to become a more compelling arena of appreciation than home, a self-fulfilling prophecy takes hold. For, if workers flee into work from the tensions at home, tensions at home often grow worse. The worse the tensions at home, the firmer the grip of the workplace on the worker’s human needs, and hence the escalation of the entire syndrome.

If more workers conceive of work as a haven, it is overwhelmingly in some sense against their wishes. Most workers in this and other studies say they value family life above all. Work is what they do. Family is why they live. So, I believe the logic I have described proceeds despite, not because of, the powerful intentions and deepest wishes of those in its grip.

MODELS OF FAMILY AND WORK IN THE FLIGHT PLAN OF CAPITALISM

To sum up, for some people work may be becoming more like family, and family life more like work. Instead of the model of the family as haven from work, more of us fit the model of work as haven from home. In this model, the tired parent leaves a world of unresolved quarrels, unwashed laundry and dirty dishes for the atmosphere of engineered cheer, appreciation and harmony at work. It is at work that one drops the job of working on relating to a brooding adolescent, an obstreperous toddler, rivaling siblings or a retreating spouse. At last, beyond the emotional shield of work, one says not, “Hi honey, I’m home,” but “Hi fellas, I’m here!” For those who fit this model, the ritual core of family life is not simply smaller, it is less of a ritual core.

How extensive is this trend? I suspect it is a slight tendency in the lives of many working parents, and the basic reality for a small but growing minority. This trend holds for some people more than others and in some parts of society more than in others. Certain trends—such as the growth of the contingency labor force—may increase the importance of the family, and tend toward reinstalling the model of family as haven, and work as “heartless world.” A growing rate of unemployment might be associated with yet a third “double-negative” model according to which neither home nor work are emotional bases, but rather the gang at the pub, or on the street.

But the sense of sacred that we presume to be reliably attached to home may be more vulnerable than we might wish.

Most working parents more deeply want, or want to want, a fourth, “double-positive” model of work-family balance. In the end, these four patterns are

2. [The contingency labor force is those employees who work on a short-term contractual basis or are hired as temporary workers.]
unevenly spread over the class structure—the “haven in a heartless world” more at the top, the “double-negative” more at the bottom, the “reverse-haven” emerging in the middle.

Each pattern of work and family life is to be seen somewhere in the flight plan of late capitalism. For, capitalist competition is not simply a matter of market expansion around the globe, but of local geographies of emotion at home. The challenge, as I see it, is to understand the close links between economic trends, emotional geographies, and pockets of cultural resistance. For it is in those pockets that we can look for “warm modern” answers.