

## The Morality of Time

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Time – and especially how to allocate it between work and family life – has become an increasingly contentious topic in American politics. The common wisdom argues that a growing taste for overwork and consumerism has led Americans to neglect their families and communities in favor of long days at the office. What’s more, this argument goes, this cultural shift signals a moral decline that is harming our children and eroding civil society. While it is no surprise to hear social conservatives point to a purported cultural decline as the root of rising time squeezes, this view is not confined to the political right. Increasingly, voices on the left are also stressing a culture of overwork and excessive consumerism as the prime sources of Americans’ intensifying time pressures.

There is little doubt that a growing number of Americans are facing time dilemmas that warrant serious concern. The world of work seems to be on a collision course with the needs of families, leaving too many households facing wrenching choices between time together and economic survival. What’s more, these conflicts between time and money have fallen most heavily on women, most of whom want and need to integrate parenting with the economic, social, and emotional rewards of paid work.

It is, nevertheless, both misleading and counterproductive to attribute these new time dilemmas to the values and aspirations of ordinary Americans. As I will show, the evidence simply doesn't support the assertion that most Americans are working long hours either to indulge an outsized desire for material goods or to escape the home. Yes, most Americans appreciate the value of hard work. Women and men alike view paid employment as a means to care for others, a way to meet important personal goals, and a value in itself. But that does not mean they wish to work fifty-plus hours a week or to starve their families of time and attention. This line of argument runs the risk of blaming workers, and especially working women, for conditions beyond their control. Equally important, it lets employers off the hook for the relentless time pressures workers face in contemporary America.

The sources of rising time squeezes can be found in our social conditions, not our personal values. Accordingly, we need a moral critique of institutions, not people. Shifting the focus, however, depends on letting go of two prevailing, but largely inaccurate myths about the how and why Americans apportion time. The first says that Americans, as a whole, are working more than ever. The second sees the main culprit as an erosion of cultural values, with individual workers preferring to spend inordinate time at work to the detriment of families and communities. A closer look at trends in working time and workers' experiences shows that neither of these commonly accepted claims is true. In our study of how Americans are juggling work and family time, Jerry A. Jacobs and I have found quite a different picture.<sup>1</sup> So what is the real story?

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<sup>1</sup> In *The Time Divide: Work, Family, and Gender Inequality* (2004, Harvard University Press), Jerry A. Jacobs and I present a detailed analysis of these social trends.

## The Myth of the Average Worker

Surprisingly, the last three decades have seen little change in the length of the average workweek, which continues to hover around 43 hours a week for men and around 37 for women. Averages, however, are misleading, and the more important and telling story lies in how the lives of workers have diversified. When it comes to working time, most workers are not “average.” In fact, the labor force is bifurcating, with more workers putting in excessively long workweeks – of 50 hours or more – and others contending with relatively short workweeks of 30 hours or less. Workers find themselves increasingly divided between the overworked and the underemployed.<sup>2</sup> What’s more, this growing inequality in working time mirrors the growth in income inequality. High earning professionals and managers are thus far more likely to be putting in long days at the office, while those in less well-rewarded jobs are more likely to be struggling to find enough work to meet their families’ needs.<sup>3</sup>

Even as the bifurcation of working time has created too much work for some and too little for others, the transformation of family life has created a growing number of households who are pressed for time even if individual workers are not working more. Why? Because as marriages have become fragile and women have become ever more committed to a life outside the home, the rise of dual-earning couples and single parents has created households where all the adults work.

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<sup>2</sup> While half of all workers put in a forty hour workweek in 1970, only 40 percent do so today. Instead, the proportion putting in fifty-plus hours a week has risen from 21 percent to 27 percent for men and from 5 percent to 11 percent for women. At the other end of the spectrum, the proportion working less than thirty hours a week has risen from 4.5 percent to 8.6 percent for men and from 15.5 percent to 19.6 percent for women.

<sup>3</sup> Among professionals and managers, over a third of men and about a sixth of women work fifty or more hours a week. In contrast, among other workers, only a fifth of men and 7 percent of women put in such long hours.

In 2000, 60 percent of all married couples had two earners, while only 26 percent depended solely on a husband's paycheck, down from 51 percent in 1970. There are now more dual-earner couples than there were male-breadwinner households in 1970. Single-parent households, overwhelming headed by women, also claim a growing proportion of American households, rising from 11 percent in 1970 to 25 percent in 2000. Whatever their differences, these families share a common circumstance: they cannot call on an unpaid caretaker at home. This gender and family revolution has brought many positive changes, not the least of which is women's increased empowerment at home and at work. Amid these widespread and deeply anchored family changes, however, the workplace has hardly budged – continuing to assume that paid workers owe their allegiance to the job and can count on someone else to take care of private needs. Growing number of families are thus experiencing time squeezes even if the individuals living in them are not working more than their counterparts in earlier generations.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Despite the recent spate of articles proclaiming that new generations of women are abandoning work and careers for hearth and home, a careful look reveals that contemporary mothers, like fathers, are committed to forging lifetime ties to work. A recent Census report that employment had declined among mothers with infants received widespread attention, but a closer look reveals a different trend. The proportion of employed mothers aged 15 to 44 with children under the age of one declined from a peak of 59 percent in 1998 to 55 percent in 2002. That figure, however, remains vastly larger than the 31 percent who were in the labor force in 1976. Indeed, the same report found that mothers with children older than one look just like other women in the same age group, with 72 percent of mothers and 71 percent of childless women either holding a job or looking for one. Most mothers either remain at the workplace or return to it not long after their children are born.

## The Myth of the Work-Obsessed Worker

The second myth in need is puncturing sees workers' preferences as fueling the rise of overwork. Here, too, the evidence tells another story. In examining national surveys on workers' job experiences and outlooks, we find that most workers are experiencing a sizeable gap between their preferred and actual working time. Put simply, workers with long days on the job generally wish to work less, while those with relatively brief workweeks would like to work more. For those putting in excessively long weeks of fifty hours or more, nine out of ten women and eight out of ten men say they would prefer to work less. Most workers – men as well as women – would like to work between 30 and 40 hours a week so that they can use the rest of their time for family, friends, and themselves. This includes many workers who cannot get as much work as they want or need, as well as those who would like to trim their overly long days and weeks at the workplace. Ironically, amid the rise of “overdemanding” and “underdemanding” jobs, a shared ideal unites workers across the working time spectrum. Most aspire to work to a 35 to 40 hour week that offers a balance between meaningful, well-rewarded work and the rest of life. And while women, on average, wish to work several hours less than men, the more fundamental finding is THAT across the widening time divide, women and men are converging in their aspirations for work-family balance.

What's more, women and men both want more flexible work schedules and other family-supportive policies. When these options are offered, most make use of them. When they are not offered, most say they would be willing to trade some income to get them. Yet workers also fear that using so-called "family-friendly" policies will jeopardize their longer term work and career

prospects along with their financial security. This is a high price to pay for being an involved, responsible parent, and it continues to leave women especially disadvantaged.

In short, the rise of overwork does not reflect worker preferences. Instead, it represents a growing mismatch between job demands and reward structures, which equate work commitment with time spent at the workplace, and workers' needs and desires to balance work with a satisfying personal life in both the short and longer runs.

### The Politics of Time

While time squeezes are real and spreading, the prevailing image of work-obsessed Americans neglecting their families is ill-founded and politically counterproductive. The more accurate story is that neither women nor men want to be forced into either-or dilemmas that pose untenable choices between work and family time. Most workers want to build lives that allow them to integrate satisfying work with commitment to their families.

Yet the options confronting Americans today make it a decidedly uphill struggle to achieve a reasonable balance between time at work and time for the rest of life. Most adults, and especially women, are contending with “damned if you do and damned if you don’t” alternatives, in which working too much and not working enough are deemed equally suspect.<sup>5</sup> While our political culture extols both “the work ethic” and “the ethic of care,” our social policies have failed to provide the structural supports that would allow a balance between the two. Criticizing workers for their failure to accomplish what verges on the impossible only adds insult to injury.

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<sup>5</sup> This situation takes an especially ironic form in the insistence that impoverished single mothers leave their children to take poorly paid jobs and that more affluent mothers relinquish promising careers to care for their children.

Equally important, the image of the work-obsessed American shifts our attention away from the failure of our social institutions to meet new family needs. And it implies that workers, and especially women workers, are responsible for the very circumstances that are making their lives so difficult. In place of images of ordinary people with values that need realigning, we need to focus on how irreversible changes in the nature of jobs and the structure of families have created new time divides among American workers, new time dilemmas in American families, and a growing disconnection between the needs of workers and the structure of jobs.

A critique of institutions, rather than individuals, also offers a way to build more inclusive political coalitions across our new time divides – including the underemployed as well as the overworked, men as well as women workers, and the time poor as well as the income poor. The good news is that across family, gender, and class divides, Americans share a set of common – and laudatory – values, including a desire for work-family balance in their personal lives and a desire for equitable sharing in their relationships with others. These aspirations can form the basis of a political coalition that brings together apparently disparate groups to forge genuinely progressive resolutions to new time dilemmas. Such resolutions depend on rethinking the organization of work and child care to foster both family support and gender equality. Achieving these goals will be difficult, but refusing to moralize when it comes to people’s private choices about how to allocate time would be a good place to begin.