

Bryn Mawr College
Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr
College

Graduate School of Social Work and Social
Research Faculty Research and Scholarship

Graduate School of Social Work and Social
Research

1981

*Review of Parenting in an Unresponsive Society:
Managing Work and Family*, by Sheila B. Kamerman

Leslie B. Alexander
Bryn Mawr College, lalexand@brynmawr.edu

[Let us know how access to this document benefits you.](#)

Follow this and additional works at: http://repository.brynmawr.edu/gsswsr_pubs

 Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

Custom Citation

Alexander, Leslie B. Review of *Parenting in an Unresponsive Society: Managing Work and Family*, by Sheila B. Kamerman. *Social Service Review* 55 (1981): 507-509.

This paper is posted at Scholarship, Research, and Creative Work at Bryn Mawr College. http://repository.brynmawr.edu/gsswsr_pubs/14

For more information, please contact repository@brynmawr.edu.

Book Reviews

Parenting in an Unresponsive Society: Managing Work and Family. By Sheila B. Kamerman. New York: Free Press, 1980. Pp. x+196. \$13.95.

There is no more crucial or complex area in the study of contemporary American families and family policy than the intersection between work and family life. In *Parenting in an Unresponsive Society*, Sheila Kamerman, a distinguished family-policy scholar, well known as the author, with Alfred Kahn, of a cross-national study of social services for children and families (*Family Policy: Government and Families in Fourteen Countries* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1978]), provides an extremely readable and perceptive analysis of how mothers with at least one preschool child manage work and family responsibilities at the same time. Despite the fact that combining the roles of worker and parent is increasingly the modal experience for adult women in the United States, and even for women with preschool children, there has been little information detailing exactly how this Herculean task is, in fact, being accomplished. In this slender volume, Kamerman assumes this ambitious task with considerable success.

The book, divided into seven chapters and an epilogue, begins with a careful delineation of current labor force trends and developments among American women. Chapter 2 outlines the study process in some detail. Two hundred and five working mothers, all with at least one preschool child, were intensively interviewed on two occasions, about six months apart, in the following areas: general background, work information, child care, household management, recreation and socialization, obtaining advice, and formal and informal neighborhood resources. In addition, the instrument used for the second wave of interviews included a "use-of-time schedule" for a work day.

This purposive sample, recruited with the help of a range of public and private agencies in an undisclosed northeastern suburban county (within commuting distance of New York City), varied considerably in terms of the following: race (black and white), socioeconomic status (professional vs. non-professional), family form (female headed or two parent), and pattern of mother's labor force participation (continuity of work vs. reentry to work). Over 90 percent of the mothers worked full time and almost all worked outside the home.

Based on these interview data, which are presented in the form of fascinating vignettes, daily logs, tables, and excerpts from interviews, chapters 3–6 cover the following broad areas: child-care arrangements, how child care and house-

Permission to reprint a book review printed in this section may be obtained only from the author.

hold tasks are shared, problems at work, and family support systems and community resources. Chapter 7 reviews the study findings, reinforcing the need for policy attention in the areas of female-headed families; improved fringe benefits, particularly paid maternity leave and paid sick leave when children are ill; expanded options for toddler and infant care; and more flexibility in the workplace, in the form of flexitime, part-time employment and shared jobs. The Epilogue, based on material gathered as part of a six-country study of child-care policies and programs, presents illustrative material on child-care coverage in France, which has about the same female labor force participation rate as the United States and the most comprehensive child-care-service coverage of all Western countries, and Sweden, whose female labor force participation exceeds the U.S. rate and whose child-care-service coverage, while less extensive, is judged to be of the highest quality.

There is much to praise in this book. The study group is large and varied, with no false claim toward representativeness made. It also succeeds, as intended, in generating a number of questions for more intensive subsequent investigation. The areas covered in the interviews are most appropriate and comprehensive. The overall presentation is extremely lucid and engaging, and buttressing factual data with fascinating interview excerpts results in an extremely engrossing and lively presentation. Any working mother with a preschool child will find much that is familiar and will take comfort in the recognition that working and mothering is a Herculean job, involving a multiplicity of responsibilities, complicated arrangements, and a constant juggling of time and tasks. There will be comfort in the acknowledgment by most of the study group that the day is never long enough to get work and family responsibilities accomplished; that fatigue is a constant problem; that even though most husbands do help in varying degrees with household and child-care tasks, the major responsibility still rests with the mother; and that most work environments are relatively unyielding in relation to parent-related benefits, such as paid and lengthy maternity leaves and use of sick days when children are ill.

Chapter 3, on child-care arrangements, is particularly enlightening and, in my opinion, is the best part of the book. Beginning with a discussion of the limitations of current statistical data on child-care facilities in the United States, Kamerman provides a fascinating description of the number and diversity of child-care arrangements in the study group. In spite of the desirability of continuity in child care, long espoused by child-care experts, almost three-fourths of the families used two or more types of care on a regular basis, and almost two-thirds of the families experienced some change in child-care arrangements between the first and second interviews, which were only about six months apart.

Surprisingly, despite what seemed to be major drawbacks, most of the study sample reported overall satisfaction with child-care arrangements. One of the most consistently difficult child-care problems was the "linkage problem"—for example, getting a child from home to a preschool program if the mother had to leave for work before the program began. Recognition of this critical problem raises two additional issues. First, although there is a widespread feeling that child-care arrangements present the biggest difficulty for mothers of preschool children, recognizing the linkage problem challenges the facile assumption that child-care concerns end when children enter first grade. Second, parents of children of all ages may be forced to compromise on quality child care precisely because of linkage difficulties.

Although the section on policy recommendations presented nothing new or startling, the recommendations did not seem sterile and pat, because the reader had been given some glimpses into the daily lives of people in areas

where the lack of certain programs and policies is keenly felt and apparent.

Despite its considerable appeal to a wide professional and lay audience, the study does have some limitations. First, given its scope, the book is rather slim and is cursory on some points. For example, although child care and household-task division are reasonably covered, the section on the working lives of these women is extremely cursory and lacks sufficient comparison between the results of this study and others in existence.

The other limitations are more technical, relating to the study as a research report. There is insufficient detail in the description of the study sample with regard to recruitment into the study, and insufficient details about the sample itself. For example, the range of ages of the study-group women and their spouses, as well as of all children in the families, is not provided. Information about ethnicity and religious affiliation is also not given. Although the range of occupations of the women is given, we do not know how many were in specific occupations, nor do we know details about the occupations of the fathers. How was social class determined? Because of the large and varied sample, the study will attract a lot of attention, making these omissions more troublesome. In this same vein, inclusion of the research instruments in the Appendix would also have been very useful. Although lack of financial resources understandably precluded interviewing the fathers, questionnaire data could have been collected. While Kamerman readily acknowledges the necessity of obtaining data from fathers, the failure to obtain even minimal questionnaire data seems a real missed opportunity, particularly since the increasing participation of fathers in both household and child-care activities is underscored.

Last, although this failing is certainly not unique to this study, there was no attempt at either new theoretical development or at linking these study findings to existing theory about dual-worker and female-headed families, meager though it is. As a first step, it would have been helpful if the research questions generated by this study were enumerated in the summary. Given the wealth of data collected, too little attention was paid to the research implications of this study for future investigation.

At the same time, however, it is recognized that more technical and detailed reports from this study will undoubtedly appear in other forums. Because of the richness of the data, I, for one, would strongly urge such additional publication.

Leslie B. Alexander
Bryn Mawr College

Alley Life in Washington: Family, Community, Religion, and Folklife in the City, 1850-1970. By James Borchert. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980. Pp. 384. \$18.95.

Just before and especially after the Civil War, Washington, D.C., homeowners sought to increase their incomes by constructing small, cramped living quarters on the alleys behind their homes. In time, well over 100 alleys came to be occupied by such housing, and increasingly they became the living quarters of poor blacks, some of them making their first move into urban life. By 1892 over 19,000 people lived in these alleys, and while a few remained almost entirely white, 90 percent of the inhabitants were black. The alleys achieved a horrendous reputation among Washingtonians for their lawlessness and disorderliness. There were continuous efforts to stop their construction and rid the city of what were seen as centers of vice and self-destruction. But it was not until