Anthropologists and Middle Class Working Families: Framing the Context of Inquiry

[paper delivered in AAA Session]
Entering the Public Arena:
the Anthropology of Working Families
For the 2002 Anthropological meetings,
the SVCP team organized a session twith a different format.
Their session consisted of a single paper that was used as
a springboard to launch a panel/general discussion of
anthropologists studying American work and families.

Session Abstract

Research into the lives of middle class working families has been encouraged by the American Anthropological Association through development of a formal research agenda and coordination of interest by media, government and grantors. The subject is of widespread interest beyond anthropology, and curiosity about the latter's potential contributions has been persistent. Such curiosity has been reflected in significant funding by, for example, the National Science Foundation and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation. Funding has supported individual research projects, as well as research and training centers in which anthropologists are prominent as directors. Results of the research are emerging, as are issues of the context within which projects and centers operate. This session brings together some of the participants to discuss these larger issues by drawing upon their own experiences as researchers and directors, as well as their preliminary research findings.

Four sets of interrelated issues frame the session. First, what are our obligations to grantors, media and the discipline, and to the families, communities and organizations that are the objects of our research? For example, what are the priorities of grantors and how do they constrain and enlarge our inquiries? What are the potential uses and misuses of our research, and what are the limits to our responsibilities? Second, what is the role of anthropology in the study of middle class families? Specifically, what are our potentially distinctive contributions and what are our limitations? What theoretical and practical outcomes are emerging? How can concerted, funded research into middle class working families affect the discipline of anthropology? Third, what are the implications of contributing to a public discourse that promotes issues of work and family? How, for example, do we work with a media that is itself constrained by assumptions about anthropology, "interesting" data, and a "good story"? What are the implications for our own writing? How do we engage other disciplines and fields with lengthy research traditions in work and family issues? Finally, what are the implications of anthropologists' contributions for public and private policy, and how do we produce findings that are familiar and useful to such policy makers? How is our research relevant to families that try to cope with and utilize the myriad policies that affect their lives?

The session is organized around one paper that frames an exchange of ideas by and among discussants who have engaged these issues in their research projects on work and family (Kottak and Tannen), and in their roles as center administrators (Bookman, Fricke and Shore). The session goal is to link research findings and administrative experiences to date with issues that are salient both to the anthropology of work and families, and to anthropology's future in public discourse.

Draft Paper

Anthropologists and Middle Class Working Families: Framing the Context of Inquiry [1]

C. N. Darrah, J. A. English-Lueck and J. M. Freeman
Department of Anthropology, San Jose State University
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1. Introduction

American society has undergone profound change since large numbers of women began entering the workforce in the 1970's. Although the resulting changes in workplaces and homes have been profound, other changes, too, have occurred. The combination of industrial restructuring, flat household incomes, disrupted labor markets, and economic insecurity have resulted in an increase in dual earner households (Osterman, Kochan, Locke, & Piore 2001: 6-10; Overbey & Dudley 2000: 1). This change has coincided with waves of government deregulation that have "empowered" individuals to make more decisions about health care, finance, utilities and education, among other familiar domains. Simultaneously, personal computers, the Internet and World Wide Web, sundry personal digital assistants, and cellular phones have dramatically changed how work and home are connected, and how families navigate space and time (Overbey & Dudley 2000: 1).

In response to these changes, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation created its program on Working Families, the goal of which "is to understand how dual-earner families can meet the demands of their three jobs: the first job of caring for their families, and their other two paid jobs."2 An important component of the program has been the creation of Centers on Working Families at UC Berkeley, Cornell, Emory, Michigan, University of Chicago, MIT and UCLA. Several Centers, notably the Center for the Ethnography of Everyday Life (Michigan), the Center on Myth and Ritual in American Life (Emory), and the Center on Everyday Lives of Families (UCLA) have been located in anthropology departments and are directed by anthropologists. Anthropologists also play prominent roles in other Centers, and the Foundation has also directed grants toward other anthropologists to describe the everyday lives of middle class working families by using ethnographic methods. Accordingly, anthropologists are not merely peripheral participants in this research agenda, but rather have been central to defining and redefining the study of middle class working families.

The impetus to involve anthropologists in the study of work and family, a field often associated with human resources practitioners and "work-life" professionals, was not to render the discipline more visible, but rather to bring its perspectives and methods to the field. Foundation Program Director Kathleen Christensen argued (personal communication 2002) that the middle class is the unmarked reference group that is tacitly used as a model for research and policy decisions about family, welfare, and the participation of women in the workforce. Precisely because most Americans identify or hope to identify with the middle class, understanding tacit assumptions about middle class families and work moved to the center of the research agenda. Anthropology provided a relatively untapped reservoir of scholars well suited to pursue the agenda. There is a disciplinary history of looking at norms and value structures, of explicating multiple perspectives, of questioning taken for granted assumptions, and of carefully describing quotidian experiences and practices. Thus, both the specific methods of ethnography and the more elusive sensibilities of anthropologists were attractive.

The largesse of the Foundation has certainly benefited specific anthropologists and, hopefully, the discipline at large. Yet the story that has unfolded is marked by costs, as well as benefits, and by ambiguity as well as clarity. While some features of anthropology have been freely incorporated and supported, others, such as the importance of cross-cultural comparison have not been as firmly embraced. The very skeptical stance toward received wisdom that is taken by many anthropologists can be refreshing in the abstract, but downright uncomfortable when the veracity of fundamental categories is challenged. Anthropologists, too, can be uneasy about their own participation in a research agenda that seeks practical results, that is centered on the United States, and that is about the mainstream rather than the marginal.

The incorporation of anthropology within the study of work and families remains embryonic. While there is evidence that a wider public has been captivated and engaged via media coverage, it is too early to tell whether this reflects the novelty of anthropologists driving grain threshers or hanging out in high-tech companies, or the generation of insights that can reframe civic discourse. What is clear is that by participating in this research agenda, anthropologists are thrust into the public arena, sometimes willingly and other times reluctantly. This paper argues that how we engage each other in these ill-defined public arenas may well be as consequential for the discipline as are the empirical research and analyses of working families. The remainder of the paper explores some of the emerging consequences of this engagement. First, it reviews the tension between generating theoretical knowledge and knowledge that has practical implications. Often expressed as the distinction between basic and policy research, this formulation can obscure as much as it reveals and the search for alternative formulations persists. Second, it discusses the mandate to make knowledge accessible in both our own writing and that of the journalists who have a seemingly insatiable desire for stories of anthropologists on the loose among the middle class. Third, the paper comments upon the engagement (or reengagement) with anthropology itself that participation in this research stimulates. What anthropology is and what it should be are questions that underlie both public engagement and professional careers; they are sharpened through the process of studying and proclaiming about "us." The paper closes with a reflection on the very nature of public arenas after a year of tumultuous events that alter the very fabric of everyday life and the place of families and work in it.

2. Practical Consequences

The Working Families Program is consistent with several different models of research, yet it seemingly exists in the interstices between them. Its goal is to promote understanding of the situations of contemporary working families, and as such it is consistent with research projects that have as their goal the collection of as much empirical data about a phenomenon as possible. In fact, an important early stimulus to anthropological involvement was its capacity to generate heretofore unavailable data. The goal of understanding is also consistent with research in which theoretical premises are tested and broader generalizations are formulated.

Despite the goal of better understanding, the larger context of both empirical and theoretical research models is the hope that current public policies that are based on inadequate or poorly conceptualized data can be changed for the better. Again, an important impetus for studying the middle class is that assumptions about it have tacitly shaped much federal and state legislation. And the Foundation is explicit about the practical basis for its support of programs. For example, the Working Families Program description explains that "most of the federal employment and labor law that governs today's relations between employer and work were forged for the full-time, full-year male workers of the past. Many opportunities exist for improvements" (Christensen n.d.: 1). This is a call not just for empirical or theoretical research, but rather for research that will ultimately, and by paths left unspecified, inform and shape public policy. How to accomplish this is a subject both of recurring rumination among anthropological work-family researchers and of discussions between them and the grantor.

Discussions among the anthropologists suggest that few if any are self-proclaimed "policy people." In fact, most accepted Foundation funding in order to pursue research agendas consistent with empirical or theoretical models. Perceived pressure to do otherwise may be interpreted as a call to enter the seemingly foreign and ill-charted landscape populated by policy makers. The assumption here is that research findings should somehow be directly relevant to specific policies, as if the latter are responses to findings and not political bargaining. The assumption is that of a policy analysis model in which the researcher's role is to provide to the policymaker information that the latter, for whatever reason, lacks or cannot otherwise obtain (Yanow 2000: 1). This model is consistent with the understanding that policy: (1) rests on the exercise of authority by decision makers; (2) implies a basis of expertise both in defining the problem and in what can be done about it; and (3) implies an order and coherence that underlies universal application (Colebatch 1998: 7). It is this latter conceptualization of policy analysis in which researchers establish expertise that is then associated with specific courses of action that is both feared and eschewed by many anthropologists of work and family.

One fear is that the focus on policy goals can come into conflict with other research priorities, such as conducting broadly empirical inquiry or developing general theory. Indeed, specific empirical or theoretical projects may lead to conclusions that are inconsistent with any grantor's explicit policy priorities. These conflicts can strain relationships between grantor and grantee, leading researchers to clarify and reassess their own research priorities. Another fear is that research findings could be used to promote shortsighted policies that have not been well thought through. And it is also possible that such research might be used to promote policies that are not in the interests of the very families on which it is based.

Perhaps a deeper issue is the effect of agenda-driven research on inquiry. Such agendas can come to define what is relevant and, of course, irrelevant to an issue. They underlie assumptions about the "efficient" production of knowledge and can come to shape the conceptualization of issues so they can be efficiently investigated. They keep us "on track," but ironically our most creative insights often occur when we abandon those tracks and follow our hunches or the admonitions of those we study.

Such concerns about constraints placed on free inquiry or the inappropriate use of research findings are undoubtedly real and reflect core disciplinary values. Yet they may also reflect ambivalence by anthropologists about their roles in a research agenda where findings are explicitly to be used to affect the world. Empirical and theoretical research models, too, may ultimately support actions with which the researcher may or may not agree, but the connection to action is explicit and direct in the policy analysis model. It draws the anthropologist into a world of action over which he or she has scant control, one which can challenge our self-constructions as moral actors who are above the truck and barter of policy formulation.

Ironically, the actual processes of policy formulation typically render the connection between research and policy ambiguous (Kingdon 1984); it is seldom a direct response to specific research. Although testimony before Congress makes for good theater, policy is developed primarily by staffers who have their own ideas about problems and courses of action. There is thus little room for stunning research findings to alter trajectories of policy development, many of which have extremely lengthy histories. The real pitfall is that our research will be selectively mined to support preexisting arguments, where the entire set of findings might have different, even contradictory implications.

There is a middle ground, however, between empirical and theoretical research, and ultimate policy results. Here the goal is not research that drives policy recommendations, but rather the production of insights whose practical implications can be delineated and debated. The result is a change in civic discourse, of topics of conversation, that ultimately contributes to a shift in policy agendas. The influence is more subtle than that of

trying to influence elected officials or their staffers, and its effects will not be experienced for years or decades. The assumptions are less those of problem solving and rational decision-making, than of long-term, continuous engagement and "garbage can" models of decision making in which persistence and timing are primary (March & Olsen 1979). The means are less access to the supposed levers of power than to documenting the lives of real people, providing them with a context that is broadly meaningful, and disseminating the results. The hope is to enter the public arena in order to affect discourse, but also the myriad of smaller and fragmented arenas in which policy is formulated, including the practices of individual families, the policies of employers, and those of local government units, such as municipalities, counties and states.

3. Accessible Knowledge

Anthropologists studying working families, either through Centers or separately funded projects, enter the public arena by communicating about their research. If changing the civic discourse about families and work is a Foundation goal, then working with journalists and writing broadly accessible books, articles and reports are the means by which it is accomplished. Anthropologists are not merely scholars producing for other experts but rather they are thrust into a public scholarship that entails disseminating findings, ideas and even practical advice to the public. Doing so can require considerable investment of time and energy in creating an infrastructure characterized by good production values, such as appealing acronyms and logos, concise and accessible newsletters, and sophisticated websites. Public lecture series, documentary films, and local and national news conferences are other ways the public is engaged.

Dealing with the media is especially important, both because of its importance in disseminating information and the trepidation with which many of us engage journalists. While an initial fear is that of being misquoted, the latter is only a manifestation of the larger issue of producing an interesting story, at least from the journalist's perspective. Further complicating matters, the journalist often believes he or she knows that story prior to contacting the anthropologist. Our role is often to provide interesting cases or quotes that validate a preexisting story, and not to enjoin the journalist to take a voyage of discovery that is launched from our research. In fact, seldom is a story merely a condensed translation of our research findings, but rather it fits bits and pieces—"sound bites"—into preconceived categories. The issue is thus typically less one of misquotation, than of "mis-contexting," as accurate quotes are misinterpreted. We may lament this lack of due respect to the months or years we have invested in developing our story, but railing against it will change little. Understanding how interesting stories are defined and developed is a useful alternative approach. Sometimes this is formalized, as when a Center supports a director of communications to facilitate media communications or it offers training sessions to provide its scholars with the skills and knowledge to deal effectively with media. Other times, the "training" simply results from talking about mistakes made.

Regardless, the prudent anthropologist is compelled to employ tactics to facilitate beneficial relationships with the media. These include understanding the agendas of the journalists to whom we are talking and to either respond to them, to correct them, or to educate them as to both what is really important about our research, as well as to reframe for them an interesting story. Another skill is to simplify our story in a way that does not distort the implications of our research. Doing so is not a trivial task. One reporter from a higher education journal once remarked to us that he preferred simplistic but certain "factoids" to the contingent and complex arguments that often emerge from cultural anthropology. Anthropologists were, he reflected, asking people to attend to more than one idea at a time and he doubted they would be willing or able to do so.

A final tactic is to come to the interview with carefully selected examples or stories that are vivid but which also communicate clearly by example the kinds of information we are trying to disseminate. Journalists

are often interested in concrete stories or examples that are easy to write with, rather than in abstract discursive explanations. Providing the examples and the commentary about what they exemplify provide a way to get our stories out with minimal distortion, while simultaneously providing the journalist with useful material for his or her story. Still, we must remember that journalists rely on experts with formal credentials—like anthropology professors—to legitimate their stories. Avoiding stories that are trivial, lead to unfortunate stereotyping, or otherwise misrepresent the situations that we study not only prevents embarrassment, but it reflects our ethical obligations to those we study.

Despite our efforts, we can still become part of stories in spite of ourselves. Much reportage in today's print journalism is based less on interviews than on reporters' access to useful websites, rich with updated postings, that serve as convenient sources for articles. One can be the cited source for an article without ever speaking to a journalist or even being aware of the article. Being able to even trace how we enter the public arena is thus itself a challenge that requires technical expertise many anthropologists lack.

A further consequence of entering the public arena is that we may ourselves become the story. Sometimes, the novelty of anthropologists studying soccer moms, attending family reunions, or jotting notes while accompanying one of "their" family members on a business trip is just too tempting; we become the story. Such stories can be a novel, even unsettling experience for some anthropologists who are themselves used to writing the story. These stories may be read by the very people we are studying, and so how we are represented to them becomes a matter of public record and fodder for water cooler conversations. How we are represented and how the families we study respond to those representations thus becomes part of the data. The classic Vine Deloria (1969) stereotype of the anthropologist as a gangly, pith helmeted community invader becomes replaced by that of a laptop toting "professional voyeur," poking his or her nose into the mundane secrets of arranging carpools and managing a personal digital assistant.

Despite the trepidation with which many of us participate in these stories, there are also benefits to be gained. Indeed, most of the researchers we have spoken with express a deep commitment to rejuvenating anthropology through engaging the public rather than just our fellow professionals. Coverage of us gives people a picture of anthropologists that makes the discipline more comprehensible.

Working with journalists is not, to be sure, entirely a one way street on which we provide them with information and hope they do well by us. Although many of us have had unpleasant experiences with journalists, we have also come to view others as colleagues whose assessment of our research can provide valuable clues as to what our story really is. Journalists can shed light on what about our data will interest or excite the public. Even when insightful, collegial journalists are not forthcoming, the repeated inquires of others can help us shape what we want people to know about our research. For example, the authors repeatedly encountered reporters during the late 1990's whose story was that Silicon Valley was on the edge of both the San Andreas Fault and the future, where lives were spinning wildly out of control. Such lives surely existed, but we had encountered few in our research. More common were stories of ordinary people trying to get through hectic everyday lives that were not so different from those elsewhere. We have thus tried to correct the popular picture of Silicon Valley through our writings and our dealings with journalists, sometimes successfully, sometimes not.

In addition to pointing us to our own stories, either intentionally or unwittingly, journalists can also serve as corrective to the academic tendency toward jargon and obfuscation. Anthropology has been increasingly burdened by arcane language and internally directed critiques of theoretical orientation, both of which limit the capacity to engage a broader public, much less the attention of policy makers. Good journalists remind us that we should be able to communicate in vivid and clear language the implications of our research. This is as true for our writing as academics as for our writing as public scholars.

4. Engaging Ourselves

While Engaging Others If the study of working families thrusts anthropologists into a somewhat unfamiliar terrain marked by interactions with media and concern for the practical implications of our work, it also challenges our very definitions of the discipline and of ourselves as practitioners. We do not simply engage new audiences from the position of being anthropologists, for we are compelled to reexamine ourselves as anthropologists. While anthropologists have certainly studied families and U.S. society, doing so simultaneously is unusual in the discipline. The families we have studied are more often from other societies, and our studies of North America have often treated marginalized or exceptional populations as their subjects. Such populations are, of course, defined vis-à-vis a mainstream that is itself seldom studied, and middle class working families historically define much of that mainstream.

Thus, the Foundation-sponsored research on working families necessitated a significant culture change by asking anthropologists to study themselves. Even though anthropologists have long taken pride in their studies of the mainstreams of other societies, many approach the mainstream of their own with fear and perhaps even loathing. Although the psychology of anthropologists is well beyond the scope of this paper, it is possible that some anthropologists are attracted to the discipline precisely by the seeming permission it grants them to transcend identification with any particular culture, including that of middle class working families. We need not delve far into popular psychology to hypothesize that the mandate to "know thyself" through the study of middle class working families can be a jolt to scholars long trained and rewarded to study "the Other," however defined.

Furthermore, research within the American middle class sharpens our awareness of our own moral compass and sense of self. While such awareness is part of any fieldwork, it is especially compelling when the people studied are intimately bound up with our own identities. This moral dimension is broader than that of ethics, but rather it deals with the fundamental sense of who we are and what it means to live our lives in good ways. Such fieldwork allows us in-depth knowledge of alternative ways we could be and live our own lives, and this knowledge can be both simultaneously liberating and unsettling. Yet to deny its immediacy is to deny our own humanity and to imperil our ethnographic practice.

Involvement in work-family research has also forced anthropologists to engage other disciplines with different research models that have long research traditions in the field. Although the Foundation expected anthropologists to provide new insights, the contributions of those other disciplines have been significant and we always face the danger of naively reinventing the wheel. Anthropologists are not universally qualitative researchers, but most Foundation-funded ones have seen their greatest potential contributions as following from that approach. Although much of contemporary anthropology is focused on theory and theorizing, it is our capacity for ethnographic documentation that is arguably our greatest asset. Our stories of real people and events can put a human face on grand social trends and theoretical abstractions for ordinary people and policy makers, too. Skillfully used, they shatter stereotypes and render any received view of social reality more complex, thereby shattering simplistic, universal solutions to supposed problems. Yet if ethnographic documentation is our greatest contribution, it places us at loggerheads with both those within the discipline who see theory development as the preeminent goal of anthropology and with researchers from different traditions who see us at best as providers of interesting anecdotes and who are downright suspicious of our penchant for "complexification".

We, too, have much to learn from work-family scholars of different disciplines. Our strengths are necessarily linked to our limitations. Our samples are often small and atypical; indeed, we may challenge the

very notion of "typicality." We may draw strong and unwarranted conclusions from an atypical sample of families. The possibility of collaborating with quantitatively sophisticated survey researchers can help to characterize our populations. Even anthropologically oriented Centers may use resources to support seminars, public lectures and other presentations that bring together scholars from other disciplines, thereby mitigating the effects of anthropological parochialism.

Support for work-family research therefore engages us with anthropology and other disciplines in ways that require us to think deeper about ourselves and our own commitments to the discipline. It can result in curious sympathies, as when we find some of our interdisciplinary partners are far more ecumenical and supportive than some fellow anthropologists. It can make us more sharply delineate the distinctive contributions of anthropology, while simultaneously making it more interesting to work outside the discipline. And it can transform our assumptions about the very purpose of anthropological fieldwork and writing in our lives.

Finally, Foundation-supported research on middle class families thrusts us into relationships with a grantor that both enable and constrain the research we conduct. The collaboration takes both anthropologists and the Foundation into new terrain and mutual discoveries still abound. The authors' research project with dual career middle class families in Silicon Valley was the first support of ethnographic fieldwork through the Working Families Program, and the Center for the Ethnography of Everyday Life at the University of Michigan the first anthropologically-oriented Center; both were initiated only in 1998. Mutual education has been largely successful, but the need for it is continuous. The San Jose State team, for example, was surprised to be warned that a potential criticism of its proposal was that of the cost of research per family. This was anticipated and successfully resolved by arguing that the appropriate numerator was not the number of families (12), but the potential number of interactions and relationships that would be captured through fieldwork. Center directors have had to explain the supposed relatively low scholarly output as measured by number of publications. This "output gap" represents a clash between the realities of ethnographic research with its lengthy field and analysis phases, the years spent "mining" field notes, and models of scholarly productivity influenced by the capacity of other disciplines to quickly generate findings.

It is the very strengths of anthropological inquiry that can give rise to misunderstandings. Traditional anthropological holism underlies ethnography's distinctive characteristics of concrete documentation and inductive analysis, and it encourages the ethnographer to look far afield from familiar, customary domains of work and family. It is an anthropological dictum that tracing connections between a phenomenon under scrutiny and its larger contexts is prelude to deeper understanding. We accept that this dictum can lead us to intellectual dead ends, but it is also the inspiration for many of our most profound insights. Above all, those insights happen when we are guided by the people we study and not by a priori categories and assumptions. This skepticism toward received views is what allows us to fulfill our cherished, if sometimes unwelcome, function of redefining the initial assumptions about what we are studying. For example, one result to date of anthropological involvement in work-family research has been to deconstruct the categories of work and family, and to challenge metaphors of juggling or balancing that are used to conceptualize the relationships between these supposedly discrete domains (Darrah, English-Lueck & Freeman 2002). Such critique is common enough in anthropology and it has been well received by the grantor. The response has not been one of dismay, but rather a challenge to suggest better alternative conceptualizations, to delineate their implications, and to get on with explaining them to the public.

5. Essential Indulgences

If the study of middle class working families thrusts us into the public arena, that arena is significantly different than it was only a year ago. The events of September 11 brought home to many Americans, including middle class working families, that the problems they potentially face transcend those of chauffeuring children to lessons or checking the Internet for the coolest products at the best prices. A look abroad reveals that we are not universally loved, nor is the antipathy just that of jealously or envy.

Just as September 11 reminded us of vulnerability to external enemies, so did the collapse of Enron and the ensuing financial scandals remind us of internal threats to everyday life and the carefully laid plans of middle class families for retirement and their children's futures. Photos of the burning World Trade Center undoubtedly engage us more than those of suited accountants being led away in handcuffs, but the potential impact on middle class families is arguably as powerful. Regardless of the conclusions we draw, the public arena of today is vastly different from when our research agendas were formulated.

Internal and external threats to an ambiguous yet compelling "American way of life" raise questions about what is part and not part of that life, and what it even means to defend it. That way of life, of course, has been largely defined by images of middle class family life. The tragic events of a year ago caused many people to, at least temporarily, rethink their careers and everyday lives; family, many proclaimed, was what really mattered in the good life. Yet our fieldwork reveals that dealing with family is usually as much about the nature of community. In particular, many tasks in the busy lives we have documented are made necessary because of the nature of the communities in which they are lived, so that lone individuals must strive to provide that which neighborhoods, towns and institutions once did. Any turn toward family thus provides a window onto communities that are the collective enactment of a way of life that is celebrated by some and reviled by others.

The events of the past year compel us to ask whether the study of middle class working families is worthwhile, or an indulgence left over from gentler times. Such an argument is easy to make, yet we believe that the events of the past fifteen months only reaffirm our need to better understand families, which serve as the metaphoric "shock absorbers" in an era of new economic realities and a government that empowers us to take of ourselves. From this perspective, the study of middle class working families is not a luxury but a necessity.

Consider the case of Enron. Soon after the extent of that debacle was reported in the media we began reading accounts of the lost pensions and ruined retirements of Enron employees. These were soon followed by commentaries suggesting that the employees had only themselves to blame; after all, there had been sufficient warnings that things were not right and so they should have taken steps to avoid the impending disaster. They got, in other words, what they deserved. When we reflected on how the families we studied would have acted in the same situation and with the same information, we agreed they would have done nothing. The problems were not those of denial or greed, but rather of sheer busyness. These families are the products of decades of deregulation and the proliferation of consumer choices, so they live in a sea of requisite information, but without the time or ability to make sense of it. No one is watching out for them; they are empowered to do so for themselves, regardless of interest or aptitude (Darrah 2002). The case of Enron thus suggests that the plight of families might be less about work and family, than about a much broader social transformation that has quietly altered the fabric of everyday life.

As this paper is written, the potential for war with Iraq is palpable and it, too, reminds us that life can suddenly change. Talk of weapons of mass destruction, significant American causalities and the inevitable loss of civilian life, and the prospect of rebuilding a country with minimal support from former allies are juxtaposed

with the World Series and Monday Night Football, the fall television schedule, and preparing for the holidays. Such contradictions can be jarring, but ironically they underlie our claim that studying middle class working families in the U.S. is more important than ever. Families remain the social arenas in which events large and small are interpreted and ultimately acted upon. They are where sense is made of those contradictions and absurdities, and where short and long term plans are made and modified. They are where disparate experiences and fragments of information—"the news"—are translated into daily life. From decisions about whether to travel (and if so, where) to choices about appropriate ways to celebrate Halloween in an era when fright and terror take on new immediacy, families are engaged in rearranging their moral universes as the tectonic plates of everyday life shift. How they do so will have enormous consequences for images of the American way of life and the country's connections to the world. As such, the study of working families is not an indulgence, but rather a necessity. How such families, including those we have studied, will fare under new exigencies compels us to examine and reexamine them.

6. Endnotes

[1] The authors gratefully acknowledge the generous support of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation for the Centers for Working Families. We also acknowledge the Foundation's support for the ethnographic study of everyday life, including support for our own study of dual career middle class families in Silicon Valley.

[2] The idea for this session and paper grew from a conversation between Darrah, Tom Fricke and Bradd Shore. The authors gratefully acknowledge the contributions of Fricke and Shore to our thinking, as well as those of Kathleen Christensen of the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation.

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