Session for the Society for the Anthropology of North America

"Families that we live with, Families that we live by: Current U.S. Research on Middle-class Working Families"

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PANEL ABSTRACT

Although there is a long history of examinations of family life in America by cultural anthropologists, we have relatively few examples of direct ethnographic engagement in everyday life with the troubles, contradictions and quandaries that confront those who claim the moral center of U.S. society, the middle-class. Building on previous work in this important area, this session presents current fieldwork on the American middle-class at a time of economic dislocation, reduced social mobility and turmoil over the very nature and definition of both work and family.

In the landmark, Sources of the Self, Charles Taylor (1989) describes how contemporary notions of the person have grown out of earlier models transformed by the changing practices within which individuals must engage as they negotiate often conflicting obligations and expectations of work and family life. Ethnographic studies by scholars including Katherine Newman (1988;1993), Barbara Ehrenreich (1989), Kathryn Dudley (1994), and Arlie Hochschild (1997) have helped us understand the means by which a rift, or structural lag (Moen 2001) between middle-class expectations preserved in the prevailing notion of an American dream that promises upward mobility in exchange for hard work, on the one hand, and the present economic reality and uncertainties of restructuring and deindustrialization on the other, provides the dynamic tension required to precipitate social and cultural change in the form of new meanings and roles for work, family and community in shaping personal identity. Scholars such as cultural historian John Gillis (1996) point to how, in this broad context of change, the family takes on unprecedented cultural significance. The family becomes pivotal in mediating tensions and contradictions that are basic to a political and economic system based on values of competition, immediate gratification and amoral calculations concerning persons and things.

While the myths, rituals and icons of the families of America past were provided by religion and community, today they are largely self-generated. Individuals not only live with families, they depend on them to do the symbolic work that was once the dominion of religious and communal institutions. In this way, working families represent themselves to themselves as they would like to think they are. Through presentation of current work in the ethnography of everyday life, this session explores contemporary pressures, forces and conditions that shape the lives of working families in the United States while considering how these alter the subject and categories of our inquiry. Although the papers collected here represent diverse topics, our common thread is the tension we observe between the family that people live by, an imagined family constituted through myth and ritual and set apart as an image of the good, and the family they live with which is caught in the push and pull of everyday struggles of individuals in pursuit of a livelihood. From the suburbs, exurbs and landfills of Michigan to the mines of Montana, this session pulls together current ethnographic research on middle-class working families in the Heartland of America.

SESSION ABSTRACTS

Brian Hoey (U of Michigan)

New Frontiers of Work and Family: Making Meaningful Work in the 'Flexible' New Economy

Ethnographic research introduced in this paper examines the impact on working families of social and structural transitions which have taken place over the past three decades in the United States. Through narratives of starting over told by corporate refugees, this paper explores the moral meanings of work at a time of profound change precipitated by global economic restructuring. The author interprets forms of starting over, such as urban to rural migration or the decision to leave a well paying job in order to begin a home business, as different ways for personally negotiating tension between the experience of material demands in pursuit of a livelihood within the flexible New Economy and persistent cultural conventions for the good life. This paper draws on two different projects conducted in the Midwest among the middle-class, those who claim the moral center of U.S. society. While one project involves "life-style migrants" to rural areas of Northern Michigan, the other concerns "free-agent" entrepreneurs in the Detroit metropolitan area. The paper contributes to our understanding and appreciation of (1) the translation of trans-local forces into the everyday lives of families living and working within particular places with unique histories; (2) how people strive to make work not only a livelihood but also but part of a life that is meaningful to them; and (3) how people in the course of everyday life contribute to change even as they are constrained in different ways by the particular context within which they must live their lives.

Lara Descartes (U of Connecticut)

Creating and Maintaining Middle Class Family Life in a Small Town

Interview and ethnographic data collected in a semi-rural middle class town in southeastern Michigan reveal why parents choose to live in this specific locale and how their work and family lives are shaped by the community's size, infrastructure and character. Ideals of a middle class lifestyle and ideologies of where and how best to raise middle class children are seen to create specific challenges for parents as they make decisions about where to live, how to divide paid and unpaid family labor, and how to utilize family time resources. Transportation issues are particularly salient in reinforcing traditional gender roles. Topics of analysis include childrens' school and extracurricular activities, parents' career trajectories, commuting distances, and the availability of local middle class jobs.

Andrew Whitelegg (Emory U)

Despite their consistent physical and psychological dislocation, flight attendants work hard to maintain a normative construction of the ideal family unit. Indeed, those with families often claim the profession's flexibility allows them to be better family members. This paper explores the contradictions and paradoxes behind these assertions, and assesses the family flight attendants live "with" rather than "by." The family flight attendants live with is one in which mothers, especially, are riven with guilt at being so often away from home. They construct families that deviate substantially from the nuclear ideal in which childcare is delegated to other family members or to the (male) spouse. When at home flight attendant mothers overcompensate for their absences as they are often convinced that "delegated childcare" has not been performed correctly. They strive to conform to gendered roles. When away from home, they mix guilt at missing key moments in their children's

development with secret elation at having time and space to themselves. The net result is a highly contradictory lifestyle, representing an extreme version of the temporal and spatial pressures placed upon many American families. Research for the paper comes in the form of interviews and focus groups with nearly a hundred working and former American flight attendants, conducted over the past three years.

Jessica Smith (U of Michigan)

I Work Here So My Kids Won't Have To: Mining Families Re-imagine the American Dream

The mining industry provides a valuable perspective from which to analyze how working families differently imagine the families they live by in response to changing work conditions. In its earliest stages, the industry explicitly incorporated family structures into everyday work practices through the institution of apprenticeship. In tandem with the proliferation of major transnational corporations, personalized work relationships between fathers and sons have been largely replaced by those between unrelated managers and workers, who now work "for" and not "with" their families at home. My fieldwork in Wyoming open pit coal mines sheds light on the processes by which families negotiate competing conceptions of work and family success. What does it mean for men and women to be good parents, when being good workers takes them away from the everyday lives of their children? What does it mean for miners to live "middle class" lifestyles, when corporations have cut off opportunities for upward mobility and entrenched them in stereotypically dirty, "blue collar" work? In response to these conditions, many miners encourage their children to pursue college degrees shunned during their own youth. Despite their efforts, many children choose to follow their parents into the mines. In my research, I place the miners' visions of families they live by within the context of major transformations in workplace organization, the place of blue collar work in the national labor market, and the entry of women into non-traditional workplaces.

Josh Reno (U of Michigan)

Working as Kinwork: The Conflicted Presents and Hopeful Futures of Middle Class Americans in a "Dirty" Profession

Under present conditions of deindustrialization and flexible accumulation, many Americans struggle to achieve the middle class standards of living attained during the previous fordist era. For some of southeastern Michigan's residents, the increasing importation of out-of-state waste has made possible unique opportunities to preserve middle class ideals. At a landfill in Detroit’s rural periphery, recent Canadian contracts offer a reliable, though controversial, source of employment. Unlike farming or construction work, both professions that a number of landfill employees have worked in the past, waste work offers a fixed and sizable income as well as opportunities for professional advancement. But such prospects come at considerable social cost. In a context where one’s adult status largely depends on profession, working with waste signifies blue collar or altogether unskilled labor. Waste workers therefore must learn to reconcile the stigmatized service they perform with their aspirations for socio-economic success. In this paper I will argue that members of the struggling middle class, such as waste workers, primarily deal with such contradictions through “kinwork” at the workplace and at home. By imagining dirty work as an investment in hoped-for, “clean” futures for their children and themselves, they attempt to overcome the divide between what they do and who they aim to become. The overlap and

contradiction between class and status is discussed as they emerge in the contemporary U.S., as well as in current social theory.

Conrad Kottak (U of Michigan) DISCUSSANT