Integrative Book Review

Caroline Smith

SOCL 341

Dr. Scott T. Grether

January 8th, 2022

In SOCL 341, we read a book by Caitlyn Collins called Making Motherhood Work. This book is written in first person by Caitlyn Collins who is an assistant professor of sociology at Washington University. Collins wrote this book to explore the lives of working mothers in four different countries. Collins had in-depth interviews with 135 women from different countries to compare and contrast how life as a working mother is and the impact it has on certain aspects of life such as their families. Collins interviewed women from Germany, Sweden, Italy, and the United States. Collins chose to interview women from these countries since each of these countries represented a different regime. In Sweden, they use a social-democratic regime, in the United States they use a liberal regime, in Italy they use familial, and in Germany, they are more conservative. Collins had spent a summer in each of these countries while having in-depth interviews with mothers. Collins also became super close with her participants and got to know their spouses and children. She also was able to tag along with mothers to doctor's appointments and even helped them cook meals. This book powerfully shows how work-family conflict is the product of public policies and cultural attitudes. Collins shows how assumptions about women’s place in society, specifical beliefs about gender equality, employment, and motherhood, shape the provision of work-family support in each country. Collins argues that work-family policies operate as gendered strategies and messages that distinctly shape the “lifeworlds of motherhood*”* Collins, C. (2020). *Making motherhood work: How women manage careers and caregiving*. Princeton University Press. (p. 6).

Making Motherhood Work is broken down into seven chapters. Each of the seven chapters talks about the interviews Collins had with her participants and how they balance their family life while having a job, or what being a stay-at-home mother is like. Collins points out how different each country is when it comes to laws and rules for working mothers, and what that looks like. Collins also discussed what the mothers she interviewed wanted for their work and family life. Paid childcare, paid time off, and paid maternity leave are just a few of the things her participants discussed. Collins also states that “Social policies alone do not account for the problems of employed women with children. The larger social context, including beliefs about gender inequality, employment, and motherhood, are all critical factors for understanding and resolving the conflicts these mothers experience” Collins, C. (2020). *Making motherhood work: How women manage careers and caregiving*. Princeton University Press (p.247).

Going into detail on what each country is like when it comes to working mothers, let's start with Sweden. Chapter 2, “Sweden: ‘It Is Easy to Work and Have Kids,’' describes how Swedish mothers experience little work-family conflict and express high levels of satisfaction in their dual roles. In Sweden, mothers expect to be able to combine work and motherhood while feeling supported by a system of work-family policy supports. Chapter 3, “Former East Germany: ‘I Wouldn’t Know How to Handle Forty Hours . . . That’s No Life,’” states that mothers in former East Germany report little work-family conflict, and many express a strong orientation to part-time work. Few mothers aspire to high levels of career advancement while many mothers associate full-time work with selfishness. This chapter also states that mothers who work full-time are perceived to be putting career aspirations above their children’s well-being. Chapter 4, “Western Germany: ‘You Are a Career Whore,’ They Say in Germany,” describes why mothers in Western Germany are unhappy with the available work-family laws and policies, which they see as gender expectations. Cultural attitudes about working mothers and the “raven mother” Collins, C. (2020). *Making motherhood work: How women manage careers and caregiving*. Princeton University Press. (p. 117) is also discussed here. The shortage of work-family support, such as limited daycare hours, further reinforces what it means to be a good mother. Chapter 5, “Italy: ‘Nobody Helps Me. It Is Very Difficult in Italy,’” describes how working mothers in Italy express high levels of stress and disappointment in their government’s policy support and the support offered by Italian fathers. Chapter 6, “The United States: ‘We Can’t Figure Out How to Do It All at the Same Time,’” discusses how working mothers want and expect to combine work and motherhood but the lack of personal responsibility in the United States leads mothers to view work-family conflict as an individual responsibility.

As you can see, each country is different in the way they see policies and working mothers. Collins also mentions how in Berlin, mothers feel heavily criticized by stay-at-home mothers and the older generation, while mothers in Italy blame the government for their lack of support in working and raising children, with several mentioning the ways that “Italy is not built for children” Collins, C. (2020). *Making motherhood work: How women manage careers and caregiving*. Princeton University Press. (p. 167). The solutions working mothers have in each country are also highly dependent on the gendered work-family policies present. In Sweden, government policies, like the “gender equality bonus” Collins, C. (2020). *Making motherhood work: How women manage careers and caregiving*. Princeton University Press.

​​ (p. 33), wants mothers and fathers to split leave time equally. As a result of that, mothers expect men to participate equally in caregiving and feel they can prioritize full-time employment but not caregiving. In Germany, the implementation of work-family policy reinforces notions that women are best suited to work part-time. German mothers tend to scale back on paid work as an additional consequence. For example, German mothers are criticized for returning to work “too early” Collins, C. (2020). *Making motherhood work: How women manage careers and caregiving*. Princeton University Press. (p. 134) yet find that their marriages shift to more traditional when women take parental leave. Women in Italy and the United States resolve work-family conflict by employing forms of labor such as caregivers and housekeepers.

The main argument I see from Making Motherhood Work is that each country needs more and more policies than we expect. I think that Collins did a great job with her data using work-family conflict in four distinct social welfare regimes. Collins's data is accurate of middle-class working mothers. The effectiveness of her book was very good and shows that no place is the same and every country has things it can improve on, in this case working mothers and family life. I don't think that there were any missing parts of this book, but I think it might have been interesting to hear about another country as well. I know Collins spent her summers in different countries gathering these interviews and definitely worked hard at getting all of her data.

In this course, we have learned a lot about the coronavirus affecting families and their work lives. We read many different articles about what it was like for working parents when COVID-19 hit. One of the first articles we read was about how daycare centers closed due to the pandemic and how many mothers had to quit their jobs and become stay-at-home mothers since they had no source of childcare. We also heard about what it is like for stay-at-home fathers and how both stay-at-home mothers and fathers had to become teachers for their children's online school. All of these are examples of real things that came from COVID-19 and that put lots of strains and stress on families. Lots of families also lost their jobs due to COVID-19 and had to apply for food stamps and other money. We read an article about a mother who had a great corporate job, a steady income, and 2 small children but lost her job due to the pandemic. She discussed how hard it was to put food on the table and also care for her kids and how this stress made her act out on her children. A connection that I see the book and other class material having to the Coronavirus is that lack of childcare was mentioned both in the book and class material and was also a problem during the Coronavirus.

My conclusion of this integrative book review is that I highly recommend this book. I don't think I would have ever read this book if it wasn't for this class but I highly recommend it and learned so much. I would recommend it to any stay-at-home mother, or working mother. I would also recommend this book to any college students who are interested in sociology and want to know how work and family life go together in different areas of the world. I think that it is very informative for both parties and everyone can take something away from it. This book definitely provides a great understanding of working families and how it is affected. Overall, I really enjoyed this course and reading Making Motherhood Work, and definitely learned a lot of new things about working families!

Citation Page

Collins, C. (2020). *Making motherhood work: How women manage careers and caregiving*. Princeton University Press.

Kamenetz, A., & Khurana, M. (2021, October 19). *1 in 3 Working Families is struggling to find the child care they desperately need*. NPR. Retrieved January 9, 2022, from <https://www.npr.org/2021/10/19/1047019536/families-are-struggling-to-find-the-child-care-they-desperately-need>