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## ***A Precarious Balance:*** **Views of A Working Mother** **Walking the Tightrope**

**Jennifer S. Dutcher**

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*“There is no slave out of heaven like a loving woman; and, of all loving women, there is no such slave as a mother.”*  
—Henry Ward Beecher, Proverbs from Plymouth Pulpit (1887)

### **INTRODUCTION**

A paramount issue that has recently emerged in my life is the balance between family and career. I refer to career instead of the more common label for work outside the home, as anyone who is a wife and mother knows parenting and marriage are also work. Also, a career implies some sort of significant investment on the employee's part beyond work at home. The issue of a mother working outside the home is not new to me, as I was the child of an employed mother; however, as I have become a mother myself the challenges of career pursuits while maintaining focus on family have taken on new meaning. Often throughout my college career I have had occasion to address this and related topics in research papers. I see this particular paper as the culmination of my past work combined with the exciting opportunity to reflect upon my own life in a very personal

way.

As I begin to see that sociology really does pertain to real-life, I am increasingly interested in taking this analysis to the next level—to examine how larger societal and global forces affect, and in turn are affected by, my microsocial world. What might society do to make mothers' balancing act easier? What effects might improved day-care options and flexibility in the workplace have on women's capacity to work outside the home, whether for self-fulfillment or to help provide for their families? Why are women not adequately compensated, either extrinsically or intrinsically, for the most important social task there is, i.e., raising children? At what cost will these and other answers come?

Growing up in a small, rural town, I was an “A” student, athlete, officer in every school club, and prom queen. My community had seen my successes, and expected nothing less as I prepared for college. However, feeling that I was in love with a local boy, my choice to pass on the four-year private university and instead attend a local two-year college undoubtedly brought disappointment to everyone. Needless to say, the romance fizzled during my freshman year, and again my focus was on academics. Obtaining high grades in pursuit of an Associate's degree, I was offered a full scholarship by a prestigious four-year private college in the event I transfer and complete a Bachelor's degree. Seemingly not a quick study in affairs of the heart I would again choose to stay close to home, and to a special man, and turn down the scholarship to get a job and think about what I really wanted to do with my life. I must at this point interject the fact that while I felt I had again disappointed my family and community, I know this was the right decision; seven years of marriage and one child later, the man is still special to me and to my life.

Upon receiving my Associate's degree, I worked as a teller at a local bank, and then

took my present job as an administrative assistant on the SUNY Oneonta campus. The people I would come to work with, the educational environment of the campus, a supportive husband, and a very personal drive to in effect “redeem” myself educationally, would combine to carry me into an exciting and challenging new phase of my life. As Georg Simmel has observed “...small town life ... rests upon more deeply felt and emotional relationships” (Simmel 149). Being myself from a small rural community, I also believe such emotional ties makes me, consciously or not, particularly sensitive to what my community thinks of my achievements—especially since I now live in the same community as an adult. These have contributed to the development of a strong sense of **generalized other** (Mead 167) in my identity, shaping my life goals and plans.

After working hard to establish some success at work I decided to return to the classroom as a part-time college student. Working full-time, taking classes part-time, and still making time for my husband (and doing all well), was a balance I strove to achieve. Following the birth of my son, this balance became all the more delicate and difficult to accomplish. There has never been any question that my role as a mother was now the most important—but my sense of self-fulfillment to be gained through being a good wife and partner, having an enjoyable job, and my return to complete my college studies, remains important also. I have always believed that I owe myself something that is my own, and that a happy woman will be a better wife and mother. If necessary would I put my own dreams on hold for the benefit of my family? Without hesitation. Would I give them up altogether? Never.

Reflecting back, I see there are many forces that have shaped my drive to do well at everything, and in particular, at achieving the balance between career and family. One of the most influential people in my

life has been my mother. For a time following her divorce from my father, when my younger brother and I were one and five years old respectively, she was a single mom struggling to keep the household afloat. After being an excellent student in high school, she too had decided against college to marry my father instead. Therefore, without a college degree she would always hold jobs with low pay and minimal benefits. She has finally been able to prove herself and work up to the respectable position she has today, but this effort has taken nearly thirty years. Growing up, my mother always stressed to us the importance of being independent and self-sufficient, and she never hid her regret at not going to college. So, I have worked to fulfill a dream that has been hers and mine, to finish college and ensure that I will be able to be my husband’s partner and not his dependent. I mirror Emily Margulies’s observations in “From Anti-man to Anti-patriarchy” that, “I am determined to be self sufficient in my life,” and that “My need for self sufficiency relates to the fact that I never want to be the kind of woman who relies on a man to fulfill her” (Margulies 1).

Another prominent role model for me has been the woman I would work for when I first began my current job on the college campus. Having received her doctorate in education after having her first child, she espoused everything I pictured a professional woman to be. She was knowledgeable, professional, steadfast in her convictions, supportive of those around her, respected by her peers and support staff, and most importantly—a wife and mother. She saw my potential, rewarded it, and encouraged me to go back to school. Once my son was born, she continued to encourage my education while acknowledging my new focus on family. She has shown me what is attainable by women, yet never implied that the balance between family and career would be easily achieved. It is the at-

tempt to find this balance that has become my greatest challenge.

Parsons's **Functionalist** theory, while to some extent outdated, does much to explain the role of women in the United States and the part they play in its social structure. Young girls are taught early in life that the **feminine role** is to serve the functions of wife, mother, and manager of the household, all of which serve as a "**pseudo**"-**occupation** (Parsons 240). When this **domestic** "job" within the home is partnered with an outside career, the entire structure of the family is altered (Parsons 242). In the film *Billy Elliot*, the lack of a mother role in the family structure does indeed result in the family being without a "nurturer," and when the father is consumed by a labor strike his focus is diverted from the household and everyone in it neglected. Even as a child Billy must take a major responsibility for the care of his elderly grandmother, and the hole left in his life by the death of his mother is evident. Billy goes so far as to imagine his mother in the kitchen telling him to get a glass and not drink milk straight from the bottle.

The importance of the mother within the family is also demonstrated in the film *Erin Brockovich*, which depicts the struggles of a single mother to obtain employment and balance professional responsibilities with those of her family. In one scene Brockovich's ten-year old son is upset when she has worked long hours and missed dinner, to which she offers, "Don't you want Mommy to be good at her job?" Her son is only aware of her role as his mother, not that she must also provide for the family. The mother's conflict is compounded when the job is satisfying and evolves into a career that earns her respect. This film also shows the possible effects of outside employment on the male/female relationship. After many months of long hours, Brockovich's boyfriend and daycare provider leaves her when he states he is receiving nothing out of the relationship.

The woman portrayed in this film was obviously attempting to strike several balances and was seemingly failing for awhile, albeit for a good cause.

In their article "Women's Employment, Marital Happiness, and Divorce," Schoen et al. address the question of whether or not a woman's participation in the labor force destabilizes otherwise happy marriages (2002). Their study shows that rather than disrupting happy marriages, a wife's employment is instead an enabling factor in her ending an unhappy marriage. When a woman works outside the home, she will be less apt to remain part of an unhappy union and because of her employment has the means to end the marriage and support herself (Schoen et al. 2002).

**Phenomenologically** speaking, I have spent my lifetime observing and learning from my mother and other women, through which I have gained much **common-sense** knowledge in regards to women's roles in parenting, marriage, and the workplace. As described by Shutz, our commonsense knowledge and "all interpretation of this world is based on a stock of previous experiences of it, our own or those handed down to us by parents or teachers" (Shutz 315). Using this accumulated **knowledge at hand** and my personal **standpoint** as a woman, I form opinions, set standards, and weigh choices in how I will go about fulfilling my roles. In "Honor Thy Father and Mother" Nancy Chapin writes, "Our personal narratives are initially largely constructed through our relationship with our parents or other significant adults. The relationship that we form with our parents is elemental to the concept of self, forming the base of our identity" (47). In the film *Twelve Angry Men*, for instance, it becomes evident just how different individuals **interpret** the same events differently. The juror who had himself been raised in a slum showed much more understanding toward the defendant of the same upbringing than did the angry juror whose knowl-

edge of slums was far removed and prejudiced. Each was clearly drawing upon his own experience and worldly education to understand the facts presented in the murder trial, and their interpretation would have serious consequences for others involved. This is a key point: how we **internalize** society has much to do with how we in turn affect our environment. My **predecessors**, being my parents as well as people who have lived throughout time, have affected the situation in which I live as a woman today—just as I and my **contemporaries** will affect the future of society for our **successors** by **externalizing** our own attitudes in society and the changes we make or fail to make in our own lifetime (Shutz 320; Wallace and Wolf 278-283).

Am I as good an employee as a man? Yes. However, my work on the college campus is not my only job. When I am at the office, that job is not the only thing on my mind. My attention is bifurcated between family and career, as Dorothy Smith has aptly characterized the experience:

The bifurcation of consciousness becomes for us a daily chasm to be crossed, on the one side of which is this special conceptual activity of thought, research, teaching, and administration, and on the other the world of localized activities oriented toward particular others, keeping things clean, managing somehow the house and household and the children—a world in which the particularities of persons in their full organic immediacy (feeding, cleaning up vomit, changing the diapers) are inescapable. (Smith 375)

My husband is a great help; however, in our society **gender roles** still prevail. According to the **socialization theory** my husband's and my images of the roles of wife, husband, mother, and father, are rooted in

what we have each been taught those roles to be, by our own parents and the larger society. When my son is ill, it is most often mommy who needs to take the day off and be home with him or who makes the trip to the doctor's office. Hence, upon return to work there are tasks to be completed in addition to my regular duties, in order to catch up for the time away. Also, responsibility for securing and maintaining quality day-care is primarily mine. Besides the everyday task of taking him to and from day-care (coat on, coat off, coat on...), I am the person who must keep track of when he needs clean clothes, diapers, and other provisions to re-supply the day-care provider. Each evening I return home to get my son settled, prepare dinner, do laundry, spend time with my son, ready him for bed, and then do course work before going to bed myself. Once in awhile my husband and I actually find time to spend together, watching a movie or having an adult conversation. Then we rise the next morning to do it all over again. The pace is often taxing, so my husband and I make an effort to keep weekends mainly for family time, with some opportunity for grocery shopping and my course work.

***“THE IDEAL MOTHER, LIKE THE IDEAL MARRIAGE, IS A FICTION.”—MILTON R. SAPIRSTEIN, PARADOXES OF EVERYDAY LIFE (1955)***

Being a mother for me is not simply a struggle to find balance between career and family, as I interpret balance to mean each is getting the necessary attention. I want to do both and *do both well*. I do not simply want to be a mother to my children—I want to be a *great* mom, a role model, a source of comfort and strength, a teacher, and a friend. After all, my children will undoubtedly be the most significant product of my life. For my husband I want to be a great wife, a partner and friend, with time as a



family and time as a couple. And in my education and career, which I see as my opportunity to do something for myself, I want to be the excellent student and prized employee. Therefore, it is not only an external balance of tasks and duties, but rather an internal organization of roles or **selves**. It is not possible to completely push all other selves aside for the prominent self of the moment. For instance, at the workplace I am not able to bury the mother self in order to be an employee—the “**me**” that is a mother remains and to some degree overlaps with other selves. There is a constant organization and reorganization of selves as appropriate for the situation at hand (Mead 161). In the film *Multiple Personalities*, several cases were illustrated where such an organization and overlap of selves was absent. The individuals who shared their painful stories often had completely separated selves to the extent that particular selves did not know what the body or other selves were doing, or would even attempt to injure the body or other selves, not being able to see all of the selves as part of the same person. I do not experience such extreme alienation of selves in my own situation; however, the task of balancing my many roles does involve the integration of multiple selfhoods.

Is achievement of my conflicting goals possible? I feel it is to a large degree, but within certain limits. I am able to do my best and excel at many pursuits in my life. For instance, returning to my studies has largely been possible due to a level of convenience afforded because of working on campus. Working on campus, I have been able to take courses at virtually any time of day, and knowing that my husband is willing to help at home has allowed me to concentrate on my coursework. Would I have been as apt to return to college if a long commute was necessary, if night classes were the only option, if I were financially unable to pay tuition, or if there had been no one willing to help care for my son? Very

likely not. Such an opportunity has brought my educational goal within reach. Davis and Moore wrote of **degrees of opportunity** in their functionalist discussion of principles of stratification. The idea of **mobility**, or the ability to change one's position or rank within a system, is one mode or type of variation in stratified systems (235). Hence, my opportunity to advance myself occupationally through education is possible because I am part of a relatively **open** or mobile system, which allows for such movement. Also, the opportunity to attend college, whether taken or not, is itself a source of power. According to Davis and Moore, “The control of the avenues of training may inhere as a sort of property right in certain families or classes, giving them power and prestige in consequence” (234). The authors' idea that **social inequality** is a society's way of making sure only the best people for important positions indeed fill those positions somewhat corresponds with Weber's writings on bureaucracy. On this I will elaborate more later.

Marcuse wrote in *One Dimensional Man* of **false needs**, or those that are not actually needs, but wants generated by society and the media (393). Until this time I have thought of economic freedom as being able to afford everything my family feels they need; however, Marcuse defines **economic freedom** as “...freedom from the daily struggle for existence, from earning a living.” (392). I also agree that people have misguidedly come to define themselves through their material possessions, and I do not believe there is such a thing as economic freedom in the United States today. Unfortunately, a person must participate in the system to earn a living, but the level of participation can be largely at the individual's discretion. I was profoundly struck by the film *Affluenza* and its depiction of the U.S. as a society caught up in consumerism and the desire to obtain material possessions. I was able to relate to every aspect of the film, but especially with the idea that

consumerism is contagious and that people today are suffering an overload of debt and anxiety. I feel that society is showing me through the media what and who I should be. In magazines and on television I see the slim, attractive, successful, professional woman in stylish clothes standing in a beautiful kitchen, making a gourmet dinner for her family with a happy baby on her hip—after which she will load into a new sport utility vehicle and take her son to a cub scout meeting for which she prepared all of the refreshments... from scratch. In my reality, I ride home in a used minivan trying to identify the latest squeaking noise, to trip over a toy in my disheveled kitchen while wearing budget clothing because my son needs the clothes worse than I do, trying to figure out what to make for dinner because I forgot in our morning rush to thaw anything out, with a grumpy toddler pulling on my leg, suddenly remembering that I forgot to make pies for the church dinner three days ago. Yet, at the end of the evening when I pick up a magazine and see a picture of the “together” woman, I somehow feel that what I’m seeing is achievable. I also know now, upon introspection, that as long as I buy into that picture I am a potential consumer, “buying” much more than simply products but also an idea of what society expects of me. The same idea that defies all common sense plagues many women like myself—the conflict between what is possible in everyday life and what society tells us happiness and success are supposed to look like. I can see that I am largely resembling Nietzsche’s **ultimate man**, seeking happiness in “things” no matter how temporary that happiness will be. The difficulty is that being aware is not enough—breaking these societal ideals and becoming the **overman** is extremely hard to do (93). Weber’s view of **bureaucracy**, from a **conflict theory** perspective, centers on the idea of impersonal, hierarchical organizations where individuals are in competition for available posi-

tions. This competition is largely due to the degree of **specialization** required of various positions, which is demonstrated through training and the ability to pass special examinations (Weber 115). The higher an individual’s position in the hierarchy, generally the higher their **salary** and hence their **social prestige**, as employees within a bureaucratic system are paid for their position or **status** rather than for the work completed (Weber 117). Weber also addresses the waning of the “**cultivated man**,” a man of a time when education was the pursuit of knowledge rather than specialized training (123). In my personal experience with our modern bureaucratic world I have found a great deal of support for what Weber has written. While I have enjoyed several of my college courses, pleasure is not the most powerful motivator for me, rather it is the reality that my obtaining a Bachelor’s degree will give me greater choice in securing career positions which would be otherwise unavailable. Such positions, their salaries, and benefits, will allow me to improve my family’s **style of life**, when I can help to provide more for my husband and children. But how many of my family’s needs are truly needs?

If having it all is such a struggle, why bother? From an **exchange theory** perspective, Blau would argue that in turn for my efforts I am receiving some sort of reward. The rewards described can be “extrinsic rewards, which are tangible things, such as money, and intrinsic rewards, which are intangible, such as love or respect” (Blau, in Farganis 295). It is apparent that through education and a successful career I receive both types of rewards; **extrinsic rewards** such as money or pay will allow me to help provide for my family, and the **intrinsic reward** of respect will advance my professional status. Being successful at home offers intrinsic rewards such as the love of my family, and the respect of my husband for being his partner and a good mother to our children.

While there are many hurdles to leap in my effort to balance family and career, the greatest struggle is an internal one. My desires to be a good mother while having a personally satisfying career are constantly in conflict with one another. Even as Parsons had stated that women are taught their domestic role early in life, it also seems to me to be true that much of a woman's role as mother and caretaker is natural. No matter how important it is that I work or how good my daycare provider is, I will always feel that I should be the one taking care of my children. When my son is sick or injured, I feel physical discomfort—not his pain exactly, but a deep internal reaction to his pain. One scene in the film *Erin Brockovich* brought tears to my eyes because I could feel the main character's pain. One night on her way home from work, Brockovich calls home to talk to her boyfriend and babysitter about how her children's day has gone. She cries as he tells her that the baby spoke her first word that day, and how amazing it was to witness such an event. This mother had missed an important moment, much as I did when my son took his first steps at daycare and instead of seeing it myself I was told about it second-hand. Moments like those will never come again.

When a mother must contribute financially, the search for quality daycare is an agonizing one. The mother who is already feeling guilt at having to place her child in someone else's care is also (in most cases) primarily responsible for securing that care. Our society is not currently providing an affordable, adequate supply of daycare for the huge demand that exists. Daycare providers are paid low wages and given little respect for the work they do. Why does such an important service continue to go unprovided? In her article, "Children Left Behind: Why We Need a National Child-Care Program, Now More Than Ever" (2002) Stephanie Mencimer states that the main reason why the daycare issue does not demand attention is that the lack of ac-

tive voters among parents of young children allows politicians to focus on other issues without fear of repercussion. This paired with our nation's ideal of personal responsibility contributes to parents' private struggle to find a safe place for their children during working hours. It seems that this problem will remain until its effects are felt by politicians themselves.

***"A RICH CHILD OFTEN SITS IN A POOR MOTHER'S LAP."*—DANISH PROVERB**

Having now had the opportunity to exercise my **sociological imagination**, I reflect upon the challenge in my everyday life and the larger societal forces that contribute to that challenge. I have begun to develop a new outlook on my balance of family and career. The goal to obtain a satisfying career that will allow me non-monetary benefits such as flexibility of my work schedule, while also being able to contribute more to my family financially, is a respectable goal to have. At this point in my life I have to work, so I might as well have some freedom in choosing a job I will enjoy. However, any jobs I take during my career will be chosen with my children in mind, as it is the time spent with them that is most important, and their childhood will no doubt go by quickly.

As parents, my peers and I need to feel there is power in our votes for making our needs known to those in power. As we are all "working" mothers, women must recognize that many of us are facing the same struggles and challenges, and perhaps be supportive rather than competitive and judgmental of one another. It is admittedly difficult to fight the urge to try and be more like the "together" woman than our neighbor. Our society also needs to "reward" stay-at-home mothers so that such a choice is seen as valid and respectable. Employed mothers' balancing act may be made easier if quality daycare was made available at an



affordable price. Consequently, if daycare providers were better compensated for the important service they provide, perhaps more people would be willing to enter the field of childcare. In the workplace, women do not want easier jobs or special treatment—they need understanding and flexibility. These women need not be seen as selfish, but rather as providers for their families who are respected for the many important things they do each day.

If American society cannot cure its “affluenza,” I can at least attempt to treat mine. It is possible to have some and not all, and to be okay with what is affordable within my family’s means. This is perhaps the most important lesson I can learn, as what I choose to do about consumerism will be an example for my children and influence how they live their own lives.

Perhaps most importantly, we must recognize that women’s struggle to balance career and family is not their struggle alone. Happy women make happy wives, mothers, and workers. Men must take an active part in their roles as husbands, fathers, co-workers, employers, voters, and/or lawmakers. All of society is affected by the plight of working mothers, because all of society is affected by what kind of adults our children will become. Children really are our future, and it is time to decide what kind of world this will become.

*“The only way to predict the future is to have power to shape the future.”—Eric Hoffer, The Passionate State of Mind (1954).*

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