Contemporary Parenting and Parenthood

From News Headlines to New Research

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CHAPTER SEVEN

The Promise and Limits of Work-Family Supports in a Shifting Policy Landscape: A Double Bind for Working Mothers in Western Germany

Caitlyn Collins

Today, two out of every three mothers work outside the home in industrialized countries (OECD 2016), yet they still complete the lion's share of child care and housework for their families (OECD 2017). This unequal division of labor constrains mothers' job success and is a source of profound inequality between women and men (Williams 2000). News headlines highlight the reality that the United States lags far behind other countries in offering the supportive work-family policies that women need:

> "The U.S. Ranks Last in Every Measure When It Comes to Family Policy, in 10 Charts"
>
> – *The Washington Post* (June 23, 2014)

> "America's Family-Leave Disgrace"
>
> – *The New Yorker* (January 22, 2015)

"The Great Divide in Workplace Benefits"
– *New York Times* (September 23, 2015)

"Offering Paid Parental Leave is Just the Start"
– *USA Today* (April 19, 2016)

"On Your Mark, Give Birth, Go Back to Work"
– NPR (October 4, 2016)

"How to Close a Gender Gap: Let Employees Control Their Schedules"
– *New York Times* (February 7, 2017)

"Businesses Push Back On Paid-Sick-Leave Laws"
– NPR (May 6, 2017)

Scholars of work and family are also in consensus: the current system for organizing paid work and unpaid caregiving is failing American mothers and families (Glass 2009). A recent study found that parents in the United States report the highest levels of unhappiness compared to nonparents across 22 European and English-speaking countries (Glass, Simon, and Andersson 2016). The researchers found that this "happiness gap" is entirely explained by the absence of a robust work-family policy infrastructure. Thus, sociologists endorse policy recommendations to replace the United States' "patchwork system" of supports (Damaske 2011) with comprehensive work-family policies. Their call is buoyed by recent experimental research providing causal evidence that: 1) young men and women today would prefer egalitarian, dual-earner/carer relationships if supportive work-family policies made it possible (Pedulla and Thébaud 2015), and 2) "family-friendly" legal mandates can best reduce the motherhood penalty by signaling a broad social consensus about women's right to participate in both paid work and child rearing (Albiston et al. 2012).

These appeals for an overhaul of American work-family policy beg the question: What are the daily lived experiences of working mothers in a sociopolitical environment undergoing this sort of legal transformation? A sea change in policies can have dramatic—and sometimes unintended—consequences for people in their day-to-day lives that policymakers do not necessarily anticipate. Policies interact with cultural ideologies in ways that scholars are still trying to puzzle out (Budig, Misra, and Boeckmann 2012, 2016; Kremer 2007; Padamsee 2009; Pettit and Hook 2009). So it is important to gain insight directly from policy recipients to get a clearer picture of how people perceive and experience policy transformations in everyday life.

In this chapter, I investigate work-family policy reforms using the case of working mothers in western Germany. Germany, like other economically developed countries, is "involved in a process of 'unlearning' old policies . . . and learning new ones" (Mahon 2006, 179). It has long been the archetype of

a conservative welfare state (Esping-Andersen 1990, 2009) or "strong breadwinner state" (Adler and Brayfield 2006; Lewis 2009; Ostner 2010). However, since the 2000s Germany has initiated a major shift toward a new model called *Nachhaltige Familienpolitik* ("sustainable family policy") (Ostner 2010; Ziefle and Gangl 2014) with more gender-egalitarian, dual-earner legal mandates from the European Union. Drawing on 26 in-depth interviews with middle-income working mothers, I investigate how mothers experience this fluid sociopolitical context—a vital perspective if the United States is to consider similar policy reforms. Are work-family policies the panacea they seem?

Germany is an ideal case with which to examine the impact of shifting work-family policies in the daily lives of working mothers, because the state has a long history of intervention in family life (Ostner 2010). Yet, as in the United States, competing political interests mean that there is no consensus about the best work-family policy (Lewis et al. 2008). This study is important because policies have transformative potential to help reduce women's work-family conflict, yet sociologists know very little about how women themselves conceptualize their options for combining motherhood and employment in a context undergoing significant legal changes from one welfare state model to another. In this chapter, I identify the opportunities and barriers that women perceive to attaining successful careers and contented family lives in the face of this shifting policy landscape. My goal is to explore both the promise and the limits of work-family policy for helping women reconcile motherhood and employment given its interplay with a country's cultural context.

Employment, Motherhood, and the German Policy Context

We can understand a welfare state as interventions by the state in civil society to alter social and market forces (Orloff 1993). Not all state social interventions are aimed at, or actually produce, greater equality among citizens (Orloff 1993). Western Germany's welfare state (Esping-Anderson 1990, 2009) has long sought to preserve and facilitate the traditional family as a core unit in society (Fleckenstein and Lee 2014) with a male breadwinner family model and traditional work-family policy constellation (Adler and Brayfield 2006; Ostner 2010). Dominant cultural ideologies presupposed that women were primarily caregivers and perhaps, secondarily, part-time income earners (Lewis 1993; Pfau-Effinger and Smidt 2011), assuming complementary, different-but-equal gender roles (Ostner 2010).

Until 2007, this family model was reinforced by laws that disincentivized full-time working motherhood: punitive tax rates for second earners within families, long and rigid parental leave, short school days, and very few public

child care facilities (with short, inflexible opening hours) were long the standard (Adler and Brayfield 1997; Hummelsheim and Hirschle 2010; Pfau-Effinger and Smidt 2011).[1] Mothers' caring labor at home was further materially supported by three years' maternity leave and by public healthcare and pension systems that automatically granted insurance rights to an economically inactive wife of a working husband.

Germany has recently been forced to reconsider the conservative breadwinner model. The country grapples with a low fertility rate and a labor shortage. Its fertility rate stands at 1.4 births per woman of childbearing age, which is far below the replacement rate of 2.1 needed to sustain a country's population (Bacci 2013). Demographic research suggests that fertility will increase if a state resolves the incompatibility between work and family for women (McDonald 1997; Rindfuss et al. 2010). McDonald (1997) argues that governments can boost fertility by giving money and services to families with children and by encouraging a model of gender equity in the family. Germany embraced this argument and put it into practice in the past decade with sweeping structural reforms aimed at work-family balance. Germany is also required to meet mandates and legal directives established by the European Union and the United Nations to promote gender equality between women and men. These agreements have propelled the topics of work-family policy, gender equality, and antidiscrimination law to the forefront of current political debates (Ferree 2012). In Germany, as is the case across western industrialized countries ranging from Canada to Hungary, the policies offered are contested and in a state of flux (Lewis 2009).

Since the mid-2000s, Germany moved toward a new logic of work-family policy, called a "sustainable," "social investment," or "increasing returns" model (Esping-Andersen 2002; Ostner 2010). This approach addresses the goals of reducing maternal and childhood poverty and enhancing fertility and female labor supply. These policies are a striking break from the previous legal standard, seeking to support parents as workers in dual-earner families, promote mothers' continuous employment, increase the availability of preschool facilities, and enhance early childhood education (Ostner et al. 2003). These are precisely the policies called for by many U.S. scholars (Glass 2009; Gornick and Meyers 2003, 2004; Hochschild 1989, 1997; Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Pettit and Hook 2009; Pedulla and Thébaud 2015; Williams 2000).

Here I outline German work-family policy as of 2012, at the time of my interviews. Women were required to leave work six weeks before childbirth, and for eight weeks afterward, receiving full pay. They were entitled to a total of 12 months of paid leave (*Elterngeld*) at 67 percent of their salary (with a ceiling of €1,800 monthly [≈ $2,400]) and an additional two months were available provided that they were taken by the other parent. Parents were allowed to take a total of three years of parental leave (*Elternzeit*), and

employers were legally required to keep a position open for the parent's eventual return to work. The German government also paid families a "children's allowance" (*Kindergeld*) of 184 € per month (≈ USD $240) per child until the child is 18, or until age 25 if she/he is still in school.

All full-time workers had a legal right to 24 days of fully paid vacation per year. Employees working less than full time got fewer days in proportion to how much they worked. Workers could take as many personal sick days as needed over the course of a year at full wages paid by one's health insurance. All employees received 10 days' leave per year to tend to a sick child at 70 percent pay. All of these benefits extended to couples registered in same-sex partnerships and for parents who adopt children.

Part-time work continues to be widely available across both white- and blue-collar job sectors and accounts for 27 percent of those in employment (Eurostat 2014). Of employed women in western Germany, 38 percent work part-time compared to 19 percent of American women (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011). Part-time work is not associated with lower wages in Germany like it is in the United States (Gangl and Ziefle 2009). In 2012, 25.2 percent of mothers worked full time in western Germany. And 30.7 percent of two-parent households had a stay-at-home mother. In 1996, this figure was 44.8 percent, suggesting that many families have moved away from male breadwinner households (Holst and Wieber 2014). Additionally, flexible schedules, telecommuting, and job sharing are often available for white-collar workers. The government provides support through taxes for health care, child rearing, and education from preschool through graduate school (Ferree 2012).

State-sponsored child care is widely available for children over age three, but places for younger children have been difficult to find (Cooke 2007; Lewin-Epstein, Stier, and Braun 2006). The federal government has made it a political priority in the past several years to substantially expand child care for children under three (Fleckenstein and Lee 2014), in part because expanding child care is understood to increase birth rates (McDonald 1997).

Western German women's rates of labor force participation tend to be lower than that of U.S. women, and they tend to have higher rates of part-time employment, work interruptions, and long-term withdrawal from market work (Stier, Lewin-Epstein, and Braun 2001). However, the negative direct effects of lengthy work interruptions and part-time work such as wage penalties are smaller for mothers in western Germany than in the United States because of these protective policies (Gangl and Ziefle 2009).

Ilana Ostner (2010, 213) suggests that this new set of policies "altered the German family policy logic quite remarkably and also surprisingly [given that the previous] West German one can be summarized as marriage-based 'maternalism.'" The planned and enacted measures bring German policy much closer to a Scandinavian dual-earner model (Ostner 2010) and

represents one of "the most radical series of changes in terms of policy goals . . . in taking steps to promote the adult worker model family, accompanied by significant reform of and changes in policy instruments" compared to other EU countries (Lewis et al. 2008, 270).

Despite these reforms, the laws available remain somewhat contradictory. Primary schools, for example, are still often open only part of the day regardless of encouragement on the federal level to expand their opening hours. Although the government is currently making great strides to expand child care for children under age three, Germany's two main Christian democratic conservative parties (the CDU and CSU) campaigned heavily to guarantee "freedom of choice" and pushed through a highly controversial bill in August 2013 that gives stay-at-home mothers financial compensation (*Betreuungsgeld*) since they do not benefit from public child care. Rønsen (2009) evaluated a similar bill in Norway and found that it had a large negative effect on women's labor supply.

In this chapter, I investigate German mothers' experiences and perceptions about motherhood and employment given this shifting policy landscape. Understanding how women grapple with work and family decisions in a context undergoing dramatic legal change helps uncover cultural, political, and economic assumptions embedded in these laws about the value of women in society—both where women feel they belong and what they deserve, and where they perceive the state feels they belong and what they deserve. This analysis provides new empirical and theoretical insights for American scholars calling for similar work-family policy transformations on this side of the Atlantic. I demonstrate how this reform process impacts middle-income mothers "on the ground" in their day-to-day lives.

Methods

The data for this chapter are based on semi-structured interviews with 26 working mothers conducted in 2011 and 2012 in the western German cities of Munich, Stuttgart, and Heilbronn. The data are part of a larger interview study on the experiences of 135 working mothers in Germany, Sweden, Italy, and the United States. I focus on mothers because across industrialized countries, they complete the majority of families' child care and housework and report greater work-family conflict than men. They also use work-family policies more often than fathers, and policies have long targeted women rather than men (Blair-Loy and Wharton 2002; Dilworth 2004; Gornick and Meyers 2003; Hill 2005; Hook 2006; Jacobs and Gerson 2004; Lewis 2009).

I interviewed middle-class mothers. I used a multidimensional evaluation to filter and classify respondents as middle-class using women's education, occupation, personal income, household income, lifestyle, and self-reported social class. My respondents were relatively privileged: most women had the

sorts of resources that make work-family balance easier to achieve than for poorer women. Most cohabited with a partner, owned a car, and had a solid job with a stable wage. Their social networks generally possessed greater social and cultural capital—a feature lacking among the networks of the poor (Desmond 2012). The rationale to interview middle-class mothers was threefold. First, the majority of work and family research in the United States also examines white, middle-class couples in professional occupations (Perry-Jenkins, Repetti, and Crouter 2000), making this sample a parallel comparison. Second, studies of "elite" women allow researchers insight into what may be a sort of best-case scenario, given that mothers with high levels of privilege, skills, education, and resources can use this capital to their advantage in managing career success and involved parenthood (Blair-Loy 2003; Stone 2007). Finally, because German laws and policies apply to all citizens, the experiences of my respondents may resonate with other German women across racial/ethnic and class lines, though they likely differ in important ways given their varying social locations. Future research should investigate how women disadvantaged by race, class, sexuality, and migration status perceive these policies.

The mothers in my sample had at least one child currently living at home and were either employed or on maternity leave. Respondents were generally well educated, and they worked in a variety of occupations, including office and administrative support (three), media and communication (three), architecture (one), education (six), community and social services (two), social sciences (three), business/financial operations (two), personal care and service (four), and entertainment (two).

I used my social networks and snowball sampling to identify interview respondents. I began by reaching out to personal contacts in each of the three cities and then employed snowball sampling with multiple informants from different social networks to find additional respondents who met my criteria. Of the 26 respondents, 6 were personal contacts, 8 were organizational connections, and 12 were recruited and interviewed through referrals. This respondent-driven snowball approach attempts to reduce bias by tapping into multiple networks.

Interviews lasted from 40 to 70 minutes (with the average lasting one hour) and were conducted in women's offices and homes as well as in cafés, parks, and restaurants. I constructed the interview schedule to facilitate systematic comparisons among the participants. The schedule contained questions about balancing motherhood with a job, household division of labor, and general views on working mothers. Participants were given an opportunity to bring up other topics not previously discussed during interviews.

Interviews were conducted in English. Roughly 56 percent of Germans report speaking English well enough to have a conversation (European Commission 2006), and the country ranks seventh out of 27 European countries

for English proficiency overall. Germany is considered a "high English proficiency workforce" and women generally have better English skills than do men (Education First 2017). As a result, it was not difficult to recruit participants who could speak English with me, particularly among women in middle-income jobs with relatively high levels of education. Again, future studies would benefit by capturing the breadth of experiences for non-English-speaking and low-income mothers, whose work-family conflict is likely magnified compared to that of the participants in my study.

Interviewees ranged in age from 21 to 52, with a median age of 38. Of the women, 18 were married, 1 divorced, 1 separated, 2 single, and 4 were cohabiting. Most mothers had 1 or 2 children (16 were age 5 or younger, 10 were ages 6 to 11, and 7 were age 12 or older). Twenty-three mothers were German. Three were from England, France, and the United States—they were married to German men (one later divorced, and one separated) and raised their children in Germany, lending a helpful perspective as cultural outsiders. The majority of respondents had a bachelor's degree or higher. The women's median annual salary was $31,000 USD.

Because the German state mandated that all mothers take eight weeks of maternity leave and offered paid leave for up to one year at the time interviewees gave birth, all mothers took off two or more months of work after childbirth. With the exception of one woman who left the workforce for 10 years to raise her sons, these mothers took an average leave of eight months. Eighteen women changed their working hours or jobs after returning to work. Of the 26 women, 14 worked flexible hours or had some flexibility in their work schedule. Six mothers used a home office or "flex location" for part of their work week.

All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. They were coded and analyzed using the ATLAS.ti software package. I employed Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw's (2011) qualitative analytic coding strategy. This tactic approaches the analysis as a dialectical, reflexive interplay between theory and data. As unexpected patterns emerged from comparing my data across discrete observations during open coding, I developed new analytic themes and categories during the focused coding stage. Here I discuss the three most prominent themes that surfaced during the interviews and subsequent analyses: guilt as a "raven mother," lack of fulfillment at home, and marginalization at work.

Findings

My interviews detected a great deal of ambivalence on the part of working mothers about their experiences in navigating motherhood and employment. The first section briefly highlights an overarching sense of guilt women feel for defying German cultural ideals of the "good mother" by working outside

the home while raising young children. The second and third sections highlight what I refer to as the "gendered double bind" that mothers experience when they try to use work-family policies in a shifting cultural and political landscape (for more on double binds in various gendered contexts, see Bart 1971; Benard and Correll 2010; Correll 2017; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Rudman 1998; Rudman et al. 2012; Webber and Williams 2008). I examine how women feel when they take advantage of policies that give them more time at home. Finally, I discuss women's perceptions of their treatment in the workplace amid these changing family policies.

Guilt as a "Raven Mother"

Despite the rise in maternal employment and presence of increasingly family-friendly and gender-egalitarian laws, the women I spoke with sensed substantial hostility directed toward them as working mothers. Western Germans have a special, disparaging word for women who work while their children are infants and toddlers: *Rabenmutter*, or "raven mother." These women "leave their children in an empty nest while they fly away to pursue a career" (Landler 2006). Anja, a mother of two who worked as a personal care aide, explained: "Women are asked to work, to have a career. But if they have children and they work, it's—I don't know if in any other language there is a word like that—they are *Rabenmütter*[2] . . . They are neglecting their children, they are no-good mothers."

All of the women I spoke with expressed familiarity with the term, and none felt free of its stigma. Respondents often raised the topic of raven mothers during interviews, asking, "Have you heard of this word, *Rabenmutter*?" Many reported being explicitly subjected to raven mother criticism by other women when they did not take the full duration of maternity leave time that the German government provided at the time they gave birth. Ilona, a university professor with 8- and 10-year-old sons, explained that she had been castigated for returning to work while her sons were young:

> It's culturally completely accepted that it's better to stay home as a mom, and it's completely culturally not accepted to go away [and work]. I experienced really many problems with other mothers. . . . Expressions like, "Do you really have to work?" "Do you think this is good for your children?" "Do you think that it's OK that they have to be in childcare for that long? Don't you see that they are not developed correctly?" "You are too competitive." . . . It's an open conflict.

Ilona felt stigmatized for working outside the home when she could be on leave. The question "Do you really have to work?" implies that as a woman, she should not work unless she is financially compelled to do so. She

confronted the assumption that employment somehow damaged her children and meant that she was "too competitive," a stereotypically masculine trait. Ilona got the message that "good mothers" take the full maternity leave; having a job while raising young children made her a raven mother.

Like Anja and Ilona, Julia said that she confronted the *Rabenmutter* ideology when she enrolled her child in a daycare facility and went back to work as a teacher before the end of the allowable maternity leave:

> They think of you as a bad mother. A mother has to stay home with their kids until they are like 3 or 4 years old and go to the kindergarten. And if they don't, and spend a lot of time at work, in Germany, they are called *Rabenmütter*. . . . You always have to justify yourself. [. . .] "You cannot do this, you are selfish, you are a career whore," they say in Germany.

Julia loved her work: "It never actually occurred to me to leave the job because I liked it too much." Yet she still felt the need to justify to others why she worked outside the home.

The women I spoke with expressed dismay, anger, and guilt at being called raven mothers to their faces, primarily by other women who are stay-at-home mothers. Although nationally representative survey data demonstrate that western Germans report significantly more positive attitudes toward women's employment over the past two decades (Adler and Brayfield 2006; Lee, Alwin, and Tufiş 2007), the middle-income women I interviewed still felt strongly criticized by their peers for not living up to the cultural ideal of a "good mother" because they worked outside the home while their children were small.

This stigma has a cultural parallel in the United States, where middle-class mothers are also expected to devote their full time, energy, and attention to their children regardless of whether they work outside the home. Scholars refer to this ideal as the "family devotion schema" (Blair-Loy 2003) or the "cult of domesticity" (Williams 2000). Although public support for maternal employment is expanding in western Germany alongside policies that try to facilitate women's labor force participation, my interview data indicate that this support has not translated into more perceived respect in the day-to-day lives of working mothers. These middle-income mothers still felt obliged to live up to the ideal of the good mother and perceived that this unrealistic ideal had consequences for them in their home lives and on the job.

Lack of Fulfillment at Home

Several women reported feeling pressured to spend more time at home than they wanted after giving birth. Although some respondents welcomed the time away from work while on leave, others, like Erika, seemed desperate

to return to their jobs. Erika was a single mother and high school teacher who took the full three years of maternity leave available to her at the time. During leave, she described feeling disconnected, lonely, and bored:

> I'm not very good with children, I think. I want to get ahead with things—learn things. And to just be forced to do nothing, this was terrible. I always told my sister the first three years was like living in a daze. You are not yourself; you don't have time for yourself. You are just like a machine. . . . It was just so boring and I felt all my brains you know, like not able to think anymore.

Erika did not enjoy her maternity leave and seemed to resent the necessity that she devote all her time and energy toward her child. These feelings spurred her to question her abilities as a mother. Erika told me she had never considered going back to work before the three years of leave were up because, as bad as she felt at home, the reproach she would face if she did return to work felt to her like a worse fate.

Several women explained that they enjoyed their parental leave for a time but found it untenable after a number of months. For Edith, an educational administrator and mother of two, this tipping point occurred after one year following both pregnancies:

> When I stayed at home for two years, in the end, I was very unhappy. And if you are unhappy, you can't listen to the children. You don't want to play with them. . . . After one year, I want to come out to meet other people, don't talk about children. Talking to grown-ups [laughs].

Edith believed that she was a better parent when she worked. The lack of adult talk and disproportionate time spent on domestic tasks made her stir-crazy. Many of my respondents discussed the lack of stimulation, challenge, and fulfillment they felt while on leave. My interviewees, ranging from a retail cashier to an architect, emphasized that the benefits they enjoyed from paid work outside the home were qualitatively different from the benefits they enjoyed from the unpaid work of caring for their young children at home. For this reason, they wanted both to work outside the home for pay and to raise their children.

Each woman's interpretation of how much time she wanted at home was different. Erika could likely have returned to work quite soon after childbirth and been satisfied, while Edith was satisfied at home for one year. The problem for mothers like Erika and Edith arose when they felt *obligated* to remain at home longer than they would have liked. Substantial paid leave may compel mothers to take longer leaves than they want in order to comply with traditional cultural ideologies about good mothering.

With one exception, all the women I spoke with took more parental leave time than their partners. They felt that this uneven division reinforced traditional gender roles in their families. As a result, mothers tended to feel frustrated about their home lives. For example, Ilona (mentioned above) and her husband were both professors and had two sons. When I asked how she and her husband divided family and household responsibilities after her children were born, she laughed: "After birth, everything changed." Ilona explained that they had been together for many years before having children and were emphatic about being equal partners. She and her husband had separate bank accounts, separate bedrooms in addition to their shared room, kept their own last names, and alternated paying for meals at restaurants. They regularly discussed equality and the importance of not having delineated gender roles in their household. Ilona took the bare legal minimum of two months' leave when she had her boys, and her husband did not take any official leave. During and after this short maternity leave, though, Ilona told me with exasperation in her voice, "We have a completely developed role system. I'm the one who's doing everything. I am the one who's cooking, washing clothes, buying clothes, buying shoes. He's the one who's doing the money, the house, the cars." She explained that both she and her husband noticed the drastic change when she began leave, and neither liked the new division of labor. But Ilona said that neither had any idea how this pattern had developed or why it persisted. She expressed irritation and distress at this unexpected pattern.

The unbalanced division of labor that women reported following leave echoes previous research: the birth of a baby affects how parents divide paid work and housework (Neilson and Stanfors 2014; Sayer 2005). Time diary data in the United States shows that even among dual-earner couples who report an egalitarian division of labor prior to having a child, women typically shoulder more of the unpaid work after becoming parents than do men (Yavorsky, Kamp Dush, and Schoppe-Sullivan 2015). Compared to their partners, the women I interviewed said they did more of the laundry, cooked more of the meals, cleaned a larger proportion of the house, did more of the grocery shopping, and completed more of the caring tasks for their children during and after their maternity leave. These mothers were aggravated by what they perceived as sliding backward from a more egalitarian relationship to a more conventional one.

As of 2012, Germany's available 12 months' paid parental leave is formally gender neutral: it can be split evenly between partners (with an extra 2 months available if the leave is shared between parents, totaling 14 months), but according to my respondents, this has rarely happened. While the proportion of children with fathers that use parental leave has increased dramatically in Germany (from 8.8 percent for children born in 2007 to 32 percent for children born in 2013) (OECD 2016), it remains quite uncommon

for fathers to share leave time equally with mothers. In my study, one respondent—Birgit—shared the leave time equally with her spouse, while one father took four months, three took two months, and one took six weeks away from work. In two of these six cases, the men who took leave were unemployed when their child was born.

Birgit was a government adviser married to a public relations consultant. They had a two-year-old and six-month-old. Birgit frowned when explaining the logic that she often heard friends and colleagues use to justify their unequal division of leave time and reduced working hours:

> You could also split up seven months the man, seven months the woman. Here in reality, unfortunately, most people split it up 12 months the mother, and 2 months the father. Unfortunately, many fathers don't even take the two months because they say, "Yeah, it's a really good thing [for fathers to take leave] but in *my* job, of course, that's not possible that I stay at home because I'm a project leader. I would have to give away my project if I do that."

My respondents suggested that deference is paid to men's jobs over women's, although both careers can suffer from extended leaves. This dilemma isn't isolated to Germany. Even in countries like Sweden, where gender equality is a strong cultural ideal and an explicit national priority, mothers still take more parental leave than do fathers (though fathers' share is increasing; see Duvander and Johansson 2012; Ferrarini and Duvander 2010).

Fourteen of 26 respondents in western Germany worked fewer than 30 hours per week (two of these women were on maternity leave at the time of our interview, and three more worked longer part-time hours between 30 and 34 hours weekly). Working part time seemed to be a tactic to deter raven mother criticism and alleviate work-family conflict. Edith, who was unhappy after staying home for one year following the birth of her two children (now ages five and seven), had a master's in civil engineering and worked as an educational administrator part time when we spoke. Although Edith wanted to return to work after one year, she instead stayed at home for two years, returning to work part time afterward. She explained to me that mothers who worked long hours could not be good parents. This view may have shaped her own decisions about work and family life: Edith worked 20 hours per week and was overqualified for her job given her education, but her part-time schedule allowed her to fulfill the cultural definition of a "good mother" who can focus more time on her children.

The German government pays families both a children's allowance (*Kindergeld*) to defray the costs of child rearing, regardless of parents' work status, and a parents' allowance (*Elterngeld*), which funds their parental leave and is based on their previous average net income.

My respondents were critical of the financial offering called *Betreuungsgeld*. In 2013, the German government instituted this small stipend for parents who decide to stay home with their young children instead of enrolling them in publicly subsidized child care. While the money was useful, several interviewees believed that it incentivized women—especially low-income women—to take too much time off from work and stay at home, which disadvantaged them in the workplace and at home.

Nadine, a professor and mother of a three-year-old, explained that in western Germany, these incentives are referred to colloquially as a *Herdprämie*, or "stove premium"—the state pays women to stay in the kitchen:

> You should know about in Germany, we have the so-called *Herdprämie* [laughs]. That's not the technical term. . . . And I think that was the worst decision ever! . . . [Because] the people tend to stay at home this time and for me, one year out of a job is too long. I don't understand why they put that in place. Of course it's comfortable . . . and you are out of the game after a year. And the state has given an incentive to you that you do that. And that's something I don't really understand. . . . It is backwards.

This cash allowance encourages the "primary caregiver," almost always a woman, to stay at home. Parental allowance (*Elterngeld*) is meant to be a wage replacement, so it is only awarded if a parent takes leave time after childbirth.

Women also explained that because of *Elterngeld*, mothers who decided to work after the mandatory two months spent at home following childbirth could end up financially worse off than if they remained at home. Nadine lamented:

> But the *Elterngeld*, I didn't get it because I was back at work then, and I didn't get a lot more [money] at work. So I was working, paying for the childcare, paying for the commuting, but didn't get the money from the state when I would have stayed at home. I would have had *more* money not working. And that's counterproductive, in my perspective. . . . It was less money than if I would have stayed at home.

Research has found that cash allowance benefits depress women's labor force participation, while subsidies for child care increase it (OECD 2004). My respondents felt strongly that increasing the availability of high-quality affordable child care would be more effective at decreasing their stress than giving families cash allowances that seemed to encourage women to stay home with their young ones. The German government, taking up the call in an effort to increase women's employment, has worked to create hundreds of thousands of new child care spaces in the past decade. As of 2013, children under age three have a legal right to a spot in a daycare facility (Ziefle and Gangl 2014).

Women's comments suggest that the increase in child care availability is a necessary but insufficient solution to the raven mother stigma that mothers perceive for enrolling their young children in daycare. These spaces need to be not only *widely available* but also more *widely used*. Perhaps as cultural attitudes about "good mothers" catch up to the more progressive policy options, women who enroll their young children in daycare will feel less stigma attached to their decision. In an effort to avoid this ostracism, a number of my respondents stayed home longer than they would have liked and explained feeling unhappy as a result.

Marginalization at Work

Family policies can sometimes exacerbate gender inequality in the workplace (Mandel and Semyonov 2005). In this study, over half the women reported feeling that using maternity leave and job protection policies damaged their standing at work. Ilona is one example. Prior to becoming a professor, she had been a departmental director for a multimedia company and found out that the CEO was plotting to fire her after she announced her pregnancy. Although she expressed her intention of living up to the "ideal worker" image—one unencumbered by family commitments (Acker 1990)—at her highly demanding job by taking only the required two months' leave, her boss secretly consulted with a lawyer to find a legal loophole so she could be fired. An office secretary informed Ilona of this plan. When she angrily confronted her supervisor, he implored, "You have to understand us." He explained that Ilona was of little use to the company now and was a financial drain, given the legal mandates that the company subsidize her leave and keep her job secure.

Ilona's boss invoked maternity leave and job security policies meant to protect working mothers to make her feel guilty for getting pregnant. This event incited her to quit, and she eventually sought a position in academia, which she considered more welcoming to working mothers, albeit at half the salary. Julia similarly described her boss' reaction to her pregnancy:

> They put on a lot of stress and make you feel guilty sometimes because it's like, "We have to pay for you although you cannot work, and now we have to pay two people for the same job because of all these regulations." And it sometimes makes you feel a bit bad, even if it's not meant like that. Actually I was the one taking care of it because they didn't know anything about like, "What shall we do now?" . . . I proposed a plan and I got a replacement and I told my replacement how to do my job.

A number of women explained that their supervisors had expressed displeasure at what they perceived to be inconvenient, expensive accommodations resulting from women's legal right to paid maternity leave and job security.

Supervisors often seem displeased about having to accommodate respondents' absence or to find, hire, and train a temporary replacement. This burden often got displaced onto women in a kind of "you created the problem, so it's your job to solve it" mentality, particularly because men rarely used parental leave time. This dilemma was especially apparent in the experiences of 9 of the 26 women I interviewed, because they were the first women to become mothers in their departments—and sometimes their entire companies.

Birgit believed that her boss might have seen maternity leave as a useful way to rid the workplace of "incapable" pregnant women and mothers of young children:

> I heard from a colleague when I was pregnant again . . . that [my boss] said, "Frau Mezger is not so capable anymore now that she is pregnant." And that is a thing that irritated me a lot because I didn't miss work a single day because of my pregnancy. . . . I think sometimes he thought, "These women with their problems and their children. Why don't they just stay at home for three years? Then they wouldn't make me so much problems." . . . I think he thinks it's a little bit irritating that he has so many women there getting pregnant all the time.

Birgit's impressions from her boss's behavior and the conversation repeated to her by the receptionist shaped her understanding of how she was viewed at work. This theme of overcompensation came up frequently among the women I interviewed. They tried to counter prejudice and discrimination spurred by their leave time by demonstrating their proficiency at work by living up to the ideal worker model (Acker 1990) and work devotion schema (Blair-Loy 2003), the cultural dictate that demands that workers dedicate undivided attention to their jobs.

In addition to leave time, several respondents said they believed some employers interpreted a mother working part time as a sign of disinterest or lack of commitment or ability. Simone, a researcher and cohabiting mother of a one-year-old, perceived that women's part-time schedules factor into supervisors' decisions about whom to recruit and mentor along the career ladder:

> I think when you are in part time, they interpret this in terms of, "She does not want to develop further. She is not committed enough." . . . I think the tendency is that . . . when you step into the world of part-time jobs, that might be decisive for your future development. . . . I don't think it's right. I'm not supporting these ideas that are dominant as it seems to me in personal recruitment . . . where the decisions are taken about whom to foster and whom to put aside.

Simone's observation highlights another way that women can be disadvantaged at work compared to men: women may be more likely to be overlooked or dropped by supervisors because their reduced hours are interpreted as their primary devotion to their children rather than to their jobs. Unlike being a father, being a mother is viewed as incompatible with being an ideal worker, because a mother is presumed to be encumbered by family and unavailable to commit herself fully to work (Blair-Loy 2003).

Several women explained their decision to work full time by pointing to the disadvantages they saw for women with part-time schedules. Both Ilona and Annette recognized that it hindered women's job prospects, encouraged them to do more housework, and highlighted women's status as mothers and less desirable job candidates in the eyes of employers (Webber and Williams 2007, 2008). They were both professors and adamantly encouraged their women students to keep up their labor continuity and not reduce their hours, even though they admitted that the option to work part time could be appealing.

Adelheid was grateful that her boss allowed her a flexible schedule. She could select her own working hours and shift them weekly as needed after she gave birth to her daughter and returned from leave. However, Adelheid acknowledged regretfully that the fluctuations in her hours and intermittent time spent at the office had damaged her career prospects. While a flexible schedule enabled her to spend more time with her two-year-old, it hurt her career trajectory in the long run:

> You have to expect less from work and from the position you can get, and from the salary you can get. . . . It wasn't clear to me that it takes such a long time altogether [to raise children]—around 15 or 16 years that I have to work part time until I could change to full time again. But in my case it's far too late then, because then, I'm 55. Then I have to be happy if I can stay in this agency with all these young people and that they don't ask me to sit downstairs in the cellar where nobody can see me because I'm an old woman. It's really like that. So it's over. It sounds horrible, but that's the truth. It's over.

Adelheid seemed remorseful and frustrated that her job prospects were less promising after she had a child. The ability to adjust her hours meant that she could play a more active role in her daughter's life, but that meant that she played a less active role at work, too. This fluctuation in hours over the years might have meant that Adelheid was less able to keep up with new developments at work, especially because her consulting job is in the field of digital media, where innovation happens rapidly. She worried about getting passed by in knowledge and expertise by younger workers who could relegate her to the proverbial "cellar."

To counter this stigma associated with Adelheid's family status and use of a flexible schedule, she put considerable effort into managing others' impressions of her by demonstrating her proficiency and downplaying her status as a mother. Her company employed lots of women who were mothers, and her boss was firm in his support of them. Despite their numbers, Adelheid still believed that people view women who are mothers as less capable than other employees:

> We don't talk about children. . . . We want to be part of this agency, and we work there, and we want to do a good job. And if we talked about our children all the time, everybody will always say, "Ah, the mothers. We have just the mothers." I have a quite high position there, and I can't have this image as a mother all the time because I'm quite hard and quite tough. So it's not going together. We don't do that.

In spite of mothers' substantial numerical presence, Adelheid acknowledged that motherhood and expertise at work were considered incompatible. Implicit in her comment that she was "quite hard and quite tough" is the cultural belief that mothers are soft and weak: these are undesirable traits in the workplace. Therefore, Adelheid downplayed the fact that she was a mother in order to demonstrate to others that she possessed the masculine traits of someone deserving of "a quite high position." The fact that she sometimes worked full time—living up to the standard of the ideal worker—and sometimes part time meant that she had to perform additional labor to compensate for her use of a purportedly family-friendly policy.

While policies like telecommuting were available to many respondents, not all women used them, because they were aware of the consequences of putting in less face time in the office and worried about being put on the "mommy track." Birgit had a home office but used it only in unusual circumstances, because she feared that coworkers would think she was not committed even though she worked 30 hours a week:

> I didn't use it so much because for me . . . I felt more comfortable most often to go to the actual [office] because there I have my colleagues around, I can go for a coffee with them, I can be more "seen." Because it can be a problem if you work part time and then, three of these days, you sit at home. Then maybe people feel like, "Uh, is she really working? Is she really there?"

Similarly, Sonia (a married journalist and mother of two) realized that only after beginning a flexible schedule, her time in the office rarely overlapped with her supervisor's. He scheduled meetings when she had already gone home for the day and could not attend, which she worried sent the message to her colleagues that she was disengaged and unavailable.

My interviews show that despite women's hard work, commitment, and enthusiasm for their jobs, the presence of seemingly progressive work-family policies does not necessarily, or does not yet, advantage them in the workplace. Women reported feeling marked as inferior at work for being mothers, so women therefore felt ambivalent about using work-family policy because it was potentially fraught with trouble for them on the job.

Discussion

This study answers a neglected but important question: how women living in a country that recently implemented more progressive work-family policy supports experience these policies "on the ground" in their day-to-day lives at home and in the workplace. Are progressive work-family policies a panacea that we should import to the United States? Although popular media and many feminist scholars advocate for European-style social policies here, this article draws on interview data from western Germany in 2011–2012 to raise concerns about the promise and the limits of work-family policy given its interaction with cultural attitudes. By doing so, I underscore the need for more nuance in popular media accounts of these policies across European countries that considers the cultural context in which women use policies (Budig, Misra, and Boeckmann 2012, 2016).

Although today's legal framework in Germany tends to encourage women to work and have children and relies on their labor in the paid workforce and at home, the 26 middle-income mothers I interviewed felt devalued and criticized in both spheres. I attribute mothers' reported conflict to this debilitating gendered double bind. My findings indicate that on the one hand, working mothers felt stigmatized for their family status at work: women's policy use highlighted their inability to enact an ideal worker identity that remained implicitly coded as male. On the other hand, women also felt stigmatized for being employed outside the home while raising young children; returning to their jobs and shortening their maternity leave incurred the "raven mother" slur—someone who left her nest and deserted her offspring to pursue a career. The women I spoke with expressed little desire to stay at home for years on end and great interest in working for pay, yet working mothers also described barriers to their occupational success despite (and sometimes because of) the available policies. This gendered double bind is not a new finding, nor specific to Germany. In 1971, American feminist sociologist Pauline Bart wrote that women's "personal experiences are *data*. Because of sexism women are in a double bind—a no win situation . . . damned if she does and damned if she doesn't" (734–735).

Although a woman in western Germany may not lose her job for leaving work to care for a sick child, thanks to work-family policy, this fact does not disrupt the cultural assumption that it continues to be primarily women's job

to tend to children (a cultural expectation that transcends national borders; see Gornick and Meyers 2003). My respondents explained how their marriages slid from a more egalitarian to a more traditional dynamic once they gave birth and took maternity leave (Neilson and Stanfors 2014; Sayer 2005; Yavorsky, Kamp Dush, and Schoppe-Sullivan 2015). Women recounted their use of flexible hours or a home office as helpful but realized that they rarely saw their bosses. Mothers occasionally took advantage of the legal right to reduce their working hours after returning from maternity leave and, as we've seen, later learned that their bosses saw them as less capable and committed to their jobs. Some women decided to take longer leave instead of returning to work, because the cash allowance matched their normal salaries. In these regards, the western German mothers I interviewed expressed frustration at their inability to harmonize their careers with their domestic commitments using the work-family policies available to them, even with more recent policies that seem progressive in supporting women's dual responsibilities. The stories of my research participants make clear that the unintended consequences that scholars have identified with policies such as lengthy maternity leaves and part-time work schedules, as well as the lag time between policy implementation and attitudinal change, have real, negative consequences in western German mothers' day-to-day lives.

As American work-family scholars have argued for decades, the case remains that the right to job security as a parent, paid time to care for a newborn, the availability of high-quality affordable child care, the ability to take paid time off when a worker or her/his child is sick, and the guarantee of paid vacation are crucial, necessary entitlements to both women and men who are parents. The frequent media reports about American mothers suffering without these policies ring true in this regard. However, my findings suggest that work-family policies are limited in their ability to help women achieve successful careers and contented home lives if they are offered to and used disproportionately by women and not men. In other words, these policies need to be enacted in a cultural environment supportive of gender equality.

In the daily lives of my respondents, German policies do not yet disrupt the gender hierarchy between women and men. The current system maintains the power and privileges afforded to men across the home and work spheres. Indeed, scholars have documented the reality that Germany's policy goals have transformed more explicitly to stimulate changes in women's behavior but not men's (Lewis et al. 2008). Yet previous research shows that national context influences fathers' unpaid work behaviors (Hook 2006). Thus, I argue that a renewed conversation focusing on gender equality policy and policy instruments aimed at behavioral change on the part of men must go hand in hand with work-family policy debates in order to improve the social and economic climate for women.

The western German mothers in my study expressed dissatisfaction with the state's available laws and their ability to use them without fear of stigma. I suggest that this dissatisfaction stems from the German state's enforcement of a gender regime through its legal structure that is still pro-mother but not yet pro-equality. As in the United States, competing political groups in Germany have all shaped the current work-family policy landscape. The disparate voices around the table (European Union mandates, feminist groups, conservative parties, progressive parties, and religious groups, among others) seem to have led to a policy tug-of-war, with working mothers stuck in the middle.

Although German work-family policies seem to be mostly forging ahead toward a more social democratic model of gender equality and dual-earner families like in Scandinavia, this shift has not created consistent positive changes for working mothers on the ground in the decade or so since their inception. My interviews suggest that these tectonic shifts in the policy landscape leave working mothers with little stable ground upon which to stand: although motherhood and employment are ostensibly compatible in this new model (as the EU, feminist groups, and progressive political parties have pushed for), this study makes clear that this change on the policy level has not trickled down into consistent, widespread acceptance and support of women's dual work and family responsibilities in western Germany's cultural landscape. Furthermore, mixed signals evident in contradictory policy innovations do not create the sort of resounding, fundamental, positive change for which many sociologists might hope for mothers.

The "cultural lag" (Ogburn 1957; Swidler 1986) that occurs when implementing progressive, gender-egalitarian work-family policies in a traditional cultural environment where attitudes are resistant to change helps explain my respondents' guilt and stress. Cultural transformation tends to happen more slowly than changes to material conditions such as policy reforms. This period of incongruence may be inevitable. Nevertheless, a one-size-fits-all policy package (e.g., primarily supporting male breadwinner families; primarily supporting dual-earner families) is unlikely to suit all mothers and families, as evidenced in my interviews. Better would be a varied mix of work-family policies that allows individuals more agency in choosing the arrangement of their work and family lives. With more heterogeneity in policy offerings at the structural level, we may see less rigid gender expectations and more expansive cultural support of a variety of women's decisions about combining employment and motherhood at the interactional level. Indeed, feminist theories of social change suggest that structural changes to oppressive gender systems through policy may promote changes at the interactional level (Chafetz 1990; Deutsch 2007; Ridgeway and Correll 2000) that can, over time, "accumulate to produce gender equality" (Deutsch 2007, 118).

Much U.S. scholarship posits work-family policy innovation as the most promising tool to promote work-family reconciliation and gender equality

(e.g., Albiston et al. 2012), but I suggest that realistically, the lack of consensus among competing political factions means that whatever policy innovations are achieved will have to be a compromise. Feminist voices are likely to compete heavily against other political interests that also shape the policy landscape, meaning that modest innovations are most plausible in an American context. The process of "'unlearning' old policies . . . and learning new ones" (Mahon 2006, 179), as Germany is currently undergoing, can be a rocky road for mothers as legal changes take time to become culturally embedded.

Notes

1. Former East Germany has a very different history. Mothers' employment was quasi-compulsory during the country's time as a socialist welfare state from 1949 to 1990 (Matysiak and Steinmetz 2008). The GDR was explicitly pronatalist, with universal childcare and generous labor-oriented maternity benefits. After reunification, the GDR had to adopt West Germany's legal infrastructure. Although their policies converged, remnants of the GDR's socialist legacy live on: women work at higher rates in former East Germany than in western Germany (especially mothers of young children), gendered cultural norms are more egalitarian, and there are still more public daycares (Lee, Alwin, and Tufiş 2007; Rosenfeld, Trappe, and Gornick 2004). See Collins (forthcoming) for an investigation of mothers' daily lived experiences with work-family policy in former East Germany.

2. In the plural form, *u* changes to *ü*.

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