



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

---

Volume 35

Issue 3 September - Special Issue: *Beyond the Numbers: How the Lived Experiences of Women Challenge the "Success" of Welfare Reform*

Article 27

---

2008

*Busier Than Ever: Why American Families Can't Slow Down.*

Charles N. Darrah, James M. Freeman and J. A. English-Leuck.

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>



Part of the Social Work Commons

---

#### Recommended Citation

(2008) "*Busier Than Ever: Why American Families Can't Slow Down.* Charles N. Darrah, James M. Freeman and J. A. English-Leuck.," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 35: Iss. 3, Article 27.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15453/0191-5096.3379>

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol35/iss3/27>

This Book Note is brought to you by the Western Michigan University School of Social Work. For more information, please contact [wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu](mailto:wmu-scholarworks@wmich.edu).



**WESTERN  
MICHIGAN**  
UNIVERSITY

standardize and harmonize their welfare systems. Nor can it establish its own social policies. Nevertheless, member states may voluntarily cooperate to promote greater standardization.

Most of the book consists of country case studies that describe the social policy approaches used in the different member nations and consider the extent to which their governments are willing to foster the greater integration and harmonization of income protection. As was noted earlier, major differences in the social policies of different countries are documented, and the editors suggest that there are significant challenges ahead if the goal of Europeanization is to be realized.

This is an informative book which will serve as a useful reference for anyone interested in developments in social policy in Europe today. The creation of the European Union is obviously an achievement of major international significance and the extent to which social policy can be integrated among its diverse member states will be of great significance to international social welfare scholarship. Although it is clear that the European social model is still a poorly defined ideal, efforts to enhance international cooperation in social policy in Europe have lessons for other parts of the world as well.

Charles N. Darrah, James M. Freeman & J. A. English-Leuck.  
*Busier Than Ever: Why American Families Can't Slow Down.*  
Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007. \$19.95  
papercover.

There has been much discussion in recent years around the increasingly busy nature of American family life, from "overworked" parents to "overscheduled" children. Interestingly, however, there is little consensus in the literature that work is taking over home life or that children are lacking time with parents. Some studies suggest that Americans are working longer hours than ever, while others find Americans enjoying more leisure time than ever; other studies likewise report that parents actually spend more time with their children today than in times past. How does one explain such contradictions?

The authors of *Busier Than Ever* might argue that, in part, it's because busyness has not been studied appropriately, or

at least not completely. As ethnographers, they argue that 'the devil is in the details,' so to speak, and that busyness is a uniquely constructed experience from family to family. This is the major conclusion reached by the authors after two years spent in the field with fourteen very busy families in California's Silicon Valley. One commonality between the families was the extraordinary amount of time and effort put into planning, coordinating, and troubleshooting the multitude of tasks and obligations assumed by each family—what the authors term the "tacit work" of busyness. Likewise, not only did work appear to intrude upon so-called family life, family life often intruded equally upon the workday. Indeed, the authors conclude that the boundary between work and home that has defined the modern family has become vastly more permeable. Whether or not this represents a problem will depend upon the morals and values of our evolving society, although the authors do sound an alarm by pointing out that simply coping with busyness without examining its rationale(s) may ultimately interfere with how we construct meaning, both as individuals and on a societal level.

This book is a fascinating read, packed with detailed information about each of the study families' various experiences with and attempts to cope with busyness. It gives a finely nuanced picture of the multitude of forms busyness can take in contemporary families. As the authors note, this is the kind of information one simply cannot access with a survey or even a time-use study. Their conclusions are insightful and provocative, and should spark lively discussion. However, there is a concern about the representativeness of their sample. Silicon Valley arguably is a unique area of the country and is unlikely to reflect a mainstream American population, a fact not adequately addressed by the authors. The book itself could have been better organized to present the study conclusions up-front. As it is, the authors' argument is not fully articulated until the concluding chapter. A brief summary of prior research also would have been helpful for readers not familiar with the literature. Finally, it seemed a little heavy on jargon, even for an academic audience, at least one outside of anthropology. Because the topic is timely and likely to be of wide interest, it is regrettable the material was not made more accessible to the lay reader.

*Lorelei Mitchell, University of California, Berkeley*