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"For the Family": Asian Immigrant Women's Triple Day

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This article examines how Asian immigrant women manage the demands of family, job training, and paid work in their new society. Using institutional ethnography, a feminist research strategy developed by Dorothy Smith, the study begins with the women's experiences to explore the extended social relations which give shape to them. The study argues that among those extended relations are the organization of the labor market in the contemporary period, immigration legislation, and the ideological practices embedded in developing, managing, and administering public policies such as job training. A critical eye is turned to social science discourses on family which penetrate the multiple sites forming the institutional complex organizing and regulating the activities of these women. Thus, for example, the article argues that notions such as the "standard North American family" (Smith, 1993) are implicated in the development of family policies designed to help families manage work and family responsibilities. However, such policies neglect the specific experiences of poor, minority, immigrant women since they rely on and reproduce a conception of family built on the experiences of primarily middle-class white women.

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Introduction

This study examines how Asian immigrant women manage the triple responsibilities of family, job training, and paid work in a new society. The cases discussed here are derived from a larger field study examining Asian immigrant women's entry into the labor market via job training programs. Following a feminist research strategy developed by Dorothy Smith (1987), I look at the women's experiences and the extended social relations which shape their lives. The actual organization of their lives departs from the pervasive formulation in the discourse on "work/family balance" that posits a duality of experience, particularly for women. I argue that this dualism is founded on the experiences of middle-class white women. The dual or separate spheres approach to work/family balance treats women's responsibilities to family (reproductive work) as something separate and usually opposed to work responsibilities (productive work). Thus, it relies on and reproduces an ideological conception of the "Standard North American Family" (Smith, 1993). The dual spheres approach has not only come to dominate most studies on work/family balance but has been the overriding framework in formulation of family policy for addressing the problems identified in these studies. As a result, the "Standard North American Family" operates as an "ideological code" in these different arenas. Though feminist scholars such as Glenn (1996) and Collins (1994) have challenged the idea that work and family spheres have historically been separate for women of color, the present study goes further in mapping the social relations governing the three spheres of engagement for Asian immigrant women in the contemporary period.

Since the large scale movement of middle-class women into the labor force during the 1960s, there has been considerable attention to the ramifications of their paid work for family life. As they continued to move into the labor force in the 1970s and 1980s, the demands that women faced in fulfilling domestic responsibilities and their responsibilities in the paid work sphere came to be a focus of study. In her now classic study of the phenomenon called the "second shift," Hochschild (1989) had found that in dual-earner families women still did the bulk of household work and child care after their paid work day was done. In her more recent
work (Hochschild, 1997) the focus was on the time constraints that families, especially women in them, faced as they struggled to meet their responsibilities in both spheres. In these studies, women’s paid work responsibilities are often presented as exerting pressure on their family responsibilities in a way which suggests that there is a necessary split between responsibilities to work and responsibilities to family.

This formulation of dual spheres arises out of a perspective which has allocated responsibility to women for the affective, nurturing sphere of family while allocating responsibility to men for the breadwinning/provider role. For men the responsibility to family is differently constructed than it is for women. As Smith (1993) has shown, this is a formulation which is built on an assumption of a standard middle-class (historically white) family form. Though this assumption is now a widely recognized feature of the social science discourse on family, this standard still shapes thought about families and women’s responsibilities to them. Indeed, it influences how public policy discussions about family move forward in U.S. society. Thus for example, the Family and Medical Leave Act may have been a step in the right direction for helping families cope with the dual responsibilities. Even so, the act confers advantages to a middle class family form in which at least one member of such families (mostly women) can take leave to the extent another is available (usually male) to bring home a decent wage. It is more difficult for working class families to do this, since they are often unable to manage on the earnings of a single wage earner—particularly in a restructured economy which has witnessed the shrinking of better paid unionized manufacturing jobs and the rise of contingent, poorly paid work. It is certainly not as readily usable by the significant numbers of single parents who are largely female and disproportionately members of race-ethnic minority groups.

A recent conference provides another illustration of how working class, poor, race-ethnic minority and immigrant families are marginalized in discussions about managing family and work responsibilities. The conference, held in 1998, was entitled “Work and Family: Today’s Realities, Tomorrow’s Visions.” Despite the prominence of many sociologists of family, there was an almost complete absence of consideration of the realities faced by race-ethnic minority families. Over a two day period, of thirty regular
sessions, only two focused on working class and poor families and only one focused on "ethnic diversity." A session on immigrant families was scheduled as one of the last concurrent sessions at the conference. Over the course of the conference, the operative model for debate and discussion was the white middle class dual-earner family. In cases such as this, the standard North American family is used as an ideological code through which race-ethnic minority, immigrant, working class families emerge as a deviation from this norm, and through which immigrant families are marginalized or rendered invisible. While I do not wish to diminish the difficulties faced by women in white middle-class families as they attempt to meet their multiple responsibilities, my research is intended to alert us to the multiple challenges faced by women who are much more marginalized and whose needs are virtually ignored by public policy makers.

The Asian-immigrant women in this study do not view the domains of practices identified by the "dual spheres" approach as distinct and separate; rather their work and their schooling are viewed as extensions of their familial responsibilities. The notion that work and family spheres are separate for women of color has been contested by scholars such as Collins (1994) and Glenn (1996), who have argued that historically such women's paid work was an extension of family responsibilities that ensured the survival of their children. The present study reveals a new challenge in the lives of at least one group of women of color—job training—even though this too is viewed by them as an extension of their responsibilities to family. The study finds that there is a gendered division of household labor in which men resist more involvement with domestic work, even as the women take on responsibility for providing economically for the family.

My aim here is to demonstrate that an understanding the complexities of these women's lives in the United States requires an account of the extended relations in which they are embedded. The analysis provided here utilizes institutional ethnography, a feminist research strategy developed in Dorothy Smith's work (1987). The data are drawn from a larger ethnographic project that examines how employment training programs are involved in organizing Asian immigrant women into the labor market (K. Grahame, 1999). This article argues that the extended insti-
tutional relations shaping the women's experiences of juggling multiple responsibilities include the structure of the labor market, the organization of job-training programs, and ideological practices such as the conceptualization of Asians as a "model minority" in U.S. society. In what follows, I outline the conceptual framework guiding this study and the method used, discuss the social science literature on work/family balance and family policy, explore the women's experiences of managing their spheres of activity, and sketch an analysis that displays the broader social relations governing those experiences.

**Conceptual Framework**

In her pioneering work in developing a feminist sociology, Dorothy Smith has insisted on beginning inquiry from the standpoint of women. She has proposed a research strategy called institutional ethnography as a method of inquiry for exploring how social processes and practices organize people's experience (DeVault, 1999; P. Grahame, 1998; Smith 1987). This approach guides this study. An outgrowth of her work in the sociology of knowledge, institutional ethnography seeks to explicate how everyday activities in local settings are shaped by institutional practices extending beyond the local. Central to Smith's approach is her insistence that the point of departure for inquiry is with the situated activities of subjects in the everyday world, hence we begin with the standpoint of women. Such a starting point is offered as a break with the standard practice of social science inquiry which begins within academic or "ruling" discourses. In developing her critique of standard sociological practice, Smith has directed attention to how such practices objectify people's experiences, producing a knowledge "of" rather than "for," excluding the standpoint of women while providing the "conceptual currency" of ruling. Her alternative method of inquiry is thus fruitful for studies which focus on marginalized voices and neglected topics, since the challenge in taking up these matters is directly linked to the ruling forms of social organization which include standard discourses (see K. Grahame, 1998a; P. Grahame & K. Grahame, 2001; Ng, 1988). However, inquiry must move beyond the direct experiences of the everyday world of the his-
torically located subject for those experiences are "organized by
social relations not fully apparent in it nor contained in it" (Smith,
1987, p. 92).

This study begins with the standpoint of the Asian immi-
grant women in employment training programs. This is the entry
point for exploring and analyzing the complex of relations giving
shape to their experiences. Exploration and analysis are oriented
to making visible the social relations, conceived as "temporally
concerted sequences or courses of action" in and through which
the activities of people in different sites, who may or may not be
known to one another, are coordinated (Smith 1987, 1990a, 1990b,
1999).

Whereas in standard sociology "ethnography" demarcates a
description of a particular local setting, in institutional ethnog-
raphy the local setting is a starting point for explicating how
the activities within that setting are coordinated in relation to
multiple sites and as such accomplish social relations of ruling.3
Central to these coordinative practices are concepts, ideologies,
and beliefs which serve as a form of currency allowing for ex-
change among the diverse sites of an organizational complex.
Here I argue that both "model minority" and the "standard North
American family" are part of the ideological currency which bear
upon Asian immigrant women's experiences and are operative
within this social organizational complex. With its implication
of "hard work" and "appropriate family values," the concept of
model minority is an example of what Smith refers to as an ideo-
logical circle in that it is used to selectively interpret and project
immigrant Asian experience and behavior. Aspects of experience
and behavior which do not fit the framework are ignored and
do not "become part of the textual realities governing decision-
making processes" (Smith, 1990a, p. 94). The "standard North
American family" has also come to be inscribed ideologically in
government policy in that it shapes the development of policy
which reinforces that form of family and draws on that form
as "ideal."

Ideas incorporated in the concepts of "model minority" and
the "standard North American family" arise in the social science
discourse on race/ethnicity and family, and penetrate many dif-
ferent sites of governing, managing, administering—that is, of
ruling. The relations of ruling, Smith has forcefully argued, are "textually-mediated." Texts, in both their "material" and "symbolic aspect," form the "bridge between the everyday/everynight local actualities of our living and the ruling relations" (1999, p. 7). Texts are broadly defined to include an array of documents, media reports, the discourses of sociology and other social sciences, accounting records, forms of various kinds, and the like. Texts such as these are essential elements in the coordinative practices in and through which ruling is accomplished. As a distinctive research enterprise, institutional ethnography takes up how texts are at work in these coordinative practices of ruling.

Method

This article emerges out of a larger institutional ethnography focusing on how employment training programs produce Asian immigrant women as commodities for the labor market (K. Grahame, 1999). That study was concerned with exploring the relations of ruling (Smith, 1987, 1990a, 1990b, 1999) through which these women's lives were managed, shaped, and ruled by focusing on the job training complex which offered training programs. As an institutional ethnography it utilized various methods of collecting data—observation, interviews, and document analysis (see Smith, 1987). Beginning with Asian immigrant women clients taking training programs in two community based organizations, the fieldwork carried out over a two year span involved interviews with the women and workers at all levels of what I came to call the "job-training complex" (community based workers, workers at the local, state and federal levels of government, an array of documents, reports, and the like) as well as observation of intake work at the agencies delivering training. The larger research project demonstrates that the ways in which certain public policies (specifically job training policy) operate produce experiences of marginalization for the group of Asian immigrant women in my study, even as they access these programs in an effort to improve their economic prospects and provide for their families in their new society.

The research reported here draws on the interviews with seven women clients of the programs. In undertaking that re-
search I discovered that the women would sometimes speak of their lives in their home countries and the relationship between home life and work life—for example of the supportive extended family system they had which enabled some to work. At the same time they described their attempts to manage their domestic responsibilities, to attend a full time job training program, and work part time in paid labor as well. Thus, it was clear that these women were juggling three major domains of activities and they were doing so in a context in which they had much fewer social or familial supports than they had had in their countries of origin. In addition, this article draws on interviews with training agency personnel, some of whom were able to provide some insight into such women’s lives based on their long experience of working with such women. Moreover, their views of these women as clients and their practices of selecting them into programs are relevant for understanding the women’s experiences. The eligibility criteria for participation in the training programs\textsuperscript{5} include economic disadvantage—e.g. income below the poverty level as established by the Office of Budget and Management—so the women in this study are women whose family incomes fall at or below the training guidelines’ eligibility criteria.

The material presented here is intended to demonstrate some of the ways in which broader institutional structures impinge on and shape the lives of immigrant Asian women. Understanding how it is they came to be in such circumstances requires a focus on the institutional processes giving shape to them. It adds to the growing body of literature that address their experiences. Their talk about managing these diverse roles—the entry point for this analysis—brought into view how we have to continue to challenge the prevailing definitions of what constitutes family and family responsibilities.

Work, Family and Beyond

The research on women balancing work and family responsibilities often points out that many married women work in the paid labor force because of the financial necessity for doing so (See Crosby, 1994; Hochschild, 1989; Spain and Bianchi, 1996). For example, Spain and Bianchi state that wives in less
affluent families (where "other income"—i.e., husband's—was under $40,000) were twice as likely to be in paid labor than wives in families where "other income" was over $40,000 (p. 153). Thus, many families feel that they require a second income to provide for their needs. This need has been intensified in an era of economic restructuring characterized by a loss of better paid manufacturing jobs and the development of service sector work much of which continues to be filled by women (Amott, 1996). For some married women with children, paid work is sought because they want to work, building careers—this is especially so for college educated women. A large number of Asian families are families in which there are at least two wage earners. Of all race-ethnic groups, Asians have the largest proportion of families with more than 3 earners—20% in 1990 as compared to 12% for white families (Spain & Bianchi, 1996). The tendency for contemporary immigrant Asian families to have multiple earners has been attributed to the low wage levels they earn as individuals in the secondary labor market (see Glenn, 1996). This is the labor market sector that has grown as a result of economic restructuring, and women, especially women of color, have adopted various strategies—including taking on several jobs—to help make ends meet (Amott, 1996).

The problems that have attended dual earner families in balancing work and family commitments seem to also be true for Asian immigrants. Glenn reports that one main difference for Chinese women from Hong Kong is that in their home country many were balancing these as homeworkers. Another difference is that in the U.S. women become co-equal breadwinners with men: women's earnings form a greater share of the family's income in the U.S. than they did in Hong Kong because men's wages decrease when they come to the U.S. and the gender wage differentials are greater in Hong Kong (Glenn, 1996, p. 86). Though in her research on New York's Chinatown, Zhou (1992) does not formulate women's contributions as co-equal, she found that the income that women earned in the labor market was necessary to support the family's economic well-being because of the low-income jobs that were available to both immigrant men (who tended to work in the restaurant trade) and women (largely in garment work). My research found that economic necessity
was the chief reason that Asian immigrant women work or were seeking work or better paying work than they had. However, the circumstances of the women in this study meant that they had—at least for a short period—the task of balancing full-time job training (a form of unpaid work) and domestic labor. For some of the women in the study, a third area of responsibility was working part-time in paid labor to help support their families. The responses from the women in this study suggest that this group of women defined their responsibilities to family to include their economic responsibility—that is they did not make a distinction between provisioning activities and nurturing ones. The job training they went into was put forward as essential for family survival.

For example for Min, a participant in my study, the job training program offered possibilities of a better job which was necessary to support her family. After her lay-off from a job in the garment industry, she came to training because she needed a job to help “take care of my family, that’s important.” The importance of the job for the family’s well being was a theme repeated by other women. Five of the seven were married and three of them had children whose ages ranged from a few months to sixteen years. The women themselves ranged in age from their mid-twenties to mid-forties. For two of the women with children the economic well being of their families was uppermost.

Tina, a woman in her early forties, had three children, a baby, a three year old and a sixteen year old. The baby was born within the first year she arrived in the U.S. and had medical problems because she was premature. Explaining her likes and dislikes about the U.S., Tina said:

I don’t like here now—but I don’t hate it. Food is cheaper. Most important is how to support family. In Hong Kong land is higher, food is higher, but salary higher too if you work hard.

Later she explained that her husband is working at Macdonald’s and that his salary is not enough to support her family. I ask if he thinks that, both of them think that, or his coworkers think that.

It’s what everybody says. When you pay rent for one family—two bedroom, one dining room and you have to pay something and then the baby food, bill for electricity, and phone. It’s not enough.
The government is not willing to give the people from Hong Kong. Since we have been three years we can’t get any welfare from the government. But actually if we can find the job we don’t want the welfare too, no need. If you got a job, you have money to support a family.

Even though her husband had a full time job at MacDonald’s, it was not enough for the family. He earned about $18,000 a year, a salary that was below the poverty level for a family of that size. He had only been earning this salary recently since he had been promoted to manager, a promotion she attributed to his performance and the fact that he had been a hotel manager at the Holiday Inn in Hong Kong.

It was not only the financial boost that the training offered which was attractive; the possibility that the job it would provide would include health care benefits was important. I had learned from several community activists that for many Asian immigrant families, it was often the wife’s job (such as Min, whose job included health benefits) which provided such benefits. Thus, since many men worked in the restaurant industry where jobs were usually without such benefits, women with jobs carrying health benefits contributed substantially to the family’s well being. There were times, as in Tina’s case, that it could be a matter of life or death.

Before he was working part time. That time we were very poor because baby had to go to hospital. I had no job. My sister send help. Family couldn’t help with hospital bills so I apply to government. The social worker ask to apply for Medicaid. We did because the baby was born here. Now my husband works hard and boss says he is good and his hotel background. So he got the manager job. Good position and high pay but one person can’t support the family I think. Now (the baby) has Medicaid but every year we have to sign papers and fill in, have them check it again to see if they’ll let us continue or not. That money is not enough and for us we don’t have insurance. If we got sick, we would die.

Although her husband’s workplace provided benefits for him, they did not provide health care insurance for the family. For Tina, supporting her family meant that she would, like Min, have to find a job with health care benefits.
Concern about benefits was also expressed by one of the other married women. All of these three women had husbands who worked in the restaurant business—two as cooks—businesses in which salaries were not only low but benefits were non-existent. The importance of immigrant Chinese women’s contributions in terms of job benefits, in particular health insurance benefits, was first brought to my attention by an agency in Chinatown that had been formed to support immigrant women who had lost jobs after the garment industry in Massachusetts shrunk. It was a pattern that I saw being repeated here.

In her analysis of race, class and feminist theorizing about motherhood, Collins (1994) challenges the notion that work and family are separate spheres for women of color. She argues that for Asian American, African American, and Hispanic women motherwork involved work to ensure the physical survival of their children even if, ironically, it meant lack of access to their children (such as work in domestic service). In her earlier work (cited by Collins) on Chinese American families, Glenn (1996) analyses the different forms of family which develop at three different historical periods in U.S. society. She situates these developments in relation to the institutional structures—e.g., legal and political constraints imposed through immigration and citizenship legislation—which give shape to the different forms. She posits these institutional arrangements as an alternative approach to the “cultural approach”—where aspects of Chinese culture are used to explain Chinese family form and experiences—for understanding Chinese family organization. Under each of the three socio-historical periods, she argues, the family strategy is for survival which includes the involvement of women in economic activities.

In the contemporary period, as I argue, survival continues to be primary so that women define their contribution as a significant means to this end. However, meeting economic need was not the only possibility that the program and the potential job at the end of it offered. A concern expressed by several of the women was loneliness and boredom they felt without a job and friends.

Tina: I don’t really like it here. It’s boring because I have no friends, because no job. Only come to school and go home. Have to work
hard. Maybe later on if I get a job and has friend here maybe I would like it. I don’t know.

Meizhu, who had stayed home with her daughter after she had first arrived in the U.S., expressed a desire to go back to China if she could not find a job at the end of the program. “Maybe if I can’t find a job I have to stay home. So my whole life maybe this way. Very Lonely. Lonely. It’s very lonely.” Meizhu was one of two women who had no extended family members in the U.S. But even women with extended families expressed a feeling of isolation. Van, for example, who lived in an extended family, expressed a keen desire to get a job because she “is very sad about being at home.” This feeling of loneliness was intensified since she had previously been working in a day-care setting.

While caring for family members was important for these women, they experienced a social isolation in the confines of family. But though the job training classes provided, and the jobs promised, a social life outside of the family, for all of the women who lived with family members, which six of them did, there was much juggling to do around their family responsibilities, school and the homework it entailed, and for some a part-time job in addition. All of the married women reported having supportive husbands but they mostly all carried the household responsibilities and child care if they had children.

For the women with children much of the childcare responsibility was theirs. As Min pointed out, she would be unable to attend class in the absence of her mother-in-law, who lived not with her but close to her, taking care of the child. No one else was available nor could she afford to pay someone. In addition, when I interviewed her, her husband was away in China so she was also without the little help he might provide. The childcare responsibilities also extended to making some decisions around the child’s schooling. Since our interview was in late August and her child was kindergarten age, some of our discussions centered around the child attending school. She seemed confused about whether her child was eligible for school and we had a little discussion about this. Her responsibilities for housework and child care meant that she spent late nights doing her homework.

When I go home I finish my housework. About nine o’clock I do my homework till eleven o’ clock. I get up at seven o’clock.
I had seen Min with shopping bags on the subway once after I had observed the intake interviews, part of the process through which women were selected for the training programs. She routinely shopped after class on the way home to "get some meat and vegetables and anything else to go home and cook."

Tina's schedule was even more hectic because of her baby. In addition she had two other children. She has found it difficult studying and caring for children, particularly the youngest who was a premature baby:

(I) found it difficult because of the baby. At 6:30 she has to be picked up and then baby goes to bed 9:30 to 10:00 and then I take shower and then got time one or two hours to practice and then when I go to bed she wake up all the night. Some babies sleep all the night but not she so I have to wake up a few times at least. Sometimes every hour she wake up once, other times she will sleep and wake up 20 mins. I'm very tired but I want a good grade. I don't want government to give money for us to study and then I lose chance so I have to study hard. So I always wake up 4:30 every morning and I study to 7:00 and then baby wake up and I have to bring her to sitter. So I work very hard.

Hers was the most rigorous of schedules that I heard from the women. In addition, she had a teenage son who it appeared had had some difficulty adjusting to the change from Hong Kong, the loss of friends, and feeling "ashamed" because he "couldn't understand English at all when he came." This manifested itself at school, a problem she had to sort out with the school:

He is afraid of the school and he is absent 15 days. He says he is absent because "I don't know anything." I talked to the school and they said they like to help him and put him in ESL. Now he can learn English very well. Before he got all Cs.

Her classes and study habits became a point of comparison for their respective progress in school.

My son says "Mommy, you are luckier than me and you are easier because you know English so it's easier for you." But after explaining to him "Look at my book, is anything English? No, right." Then he says harder. He says, "You don't have time to sleep and everyday you wake up to study. That's why you get an A grade." I say, "You have to try hard."
Meizhu has one seven year old daughter who goes to extended care after school is out. Because she sometimes works at night and weekends as a cashier at the supermarket, her husband cares for the child when she is at the job. She finds juggling all of this difficult particularly since she compares what she has to do now with the help she had in China when the child was younger, and she had a live in babysitter and her parents.

Not like now, everything I have to do by myself. It's very hard. I have to come to school, to study. And I have a part time job that is three or two days week-days and week-end and I have to take care of my daughter and do the housework and make dinner and do laundry.

While her husband helps, she finds he is unable to provide the kind of care she does—especially when it comes to the child's learning:

But he cannot do too many things like me and the man always lose the patience. Especially how to teach my daughter—he always lose patience. . . . Sometimes he really wanted my daughter to do something but my daughter says “No, I don’t want to do” so he says, “Okay, I don’t care. You can do anything you want.” But if I was home I have to let her do mathematics or write some (unclear) or something. . . . You know if I don’t work all night, I spend a lot of time with her. With her reading or writing but my husband doesn’t do that.

As for other household responsibilities, although he helps her, she wishes he would do more.

M: Of course he can help me a little bit. Like every night there's so many dishes over there. I really so disgusted I didn’t really want to do that so I leave there. But in the next day morning he washed it. . . . And Sunday I always go to work. So he doing the laundry.

K: So he does help you some?
M: A little (laughs). Not a lot.
K: Not a lot. You wish for more?
M: Right. He said, “Oh you’re busy, I’m busy too. You don’t (unclear) just watching TV and thinking.” (She emphasizes the word and laughs at the idea, I think, that one can watch TV and think.)
M: “I’m not really watching, I’m thinking.” (imitating him) I said “Okay . . . .”
Meizhu was the only one who expressed a desire for her husband to do more. With others it was simply resigned acceptance that the husband could not or would not help. For example, Min’s husband “helps sometimes. Sometimes it’s very (unclear). Sometimes when he goes to work no time to help me.” Bettie, who is married, works part-time and attends the training program full-time, but has no children, talks about a distinct gendered division of household labor in which he takes care of the outside chores while she does indoor work. “Usually Chinese guy don’t want to—because in the Chinese culture you can’t do the housework ’cause if your friend knew it, they’d be laughing at you. I usually do the vacuuming and laundry, but he cuts the grass and does other outside things. I take care of inside the house.”

Van, a Vietnamese woman who lived with her family members including parents and a brother, also spoke of how her brother does no household work but she has to help her mother cook and clean. She also helps care for a nephew whose mother works.

In contrast to both of these men however, Tina’s son takes a different path from the cultural expectations for men that both Van and Bettie had identified.

(My son) is in high school. He helps me a lot. After school he helps me cook dinner and then I don’t need to allow a lot of time to cook. He’s really good boy and help me to do homework and help me to do cleaning. Husband helps too.

Thus, although some women find help from some family members as they attempt to complete their programs, others find little. Not surprisingly, it is the women with children who had the most challenging job of managing their various demands. Meizhu who with a paid job, school, a child, and no family apart from her husband to help felt most keenly the strain of doing all three. Perhaps too, because of the supports (paid live in sitter and parents) when she lived and worked in China, the demands in the U.S. seemed more acute. Still, going out to a job was envisioned as a relief from the loneliness of the home so much so that she had decided that if she did not get a job at the end of the training, she might return to China.
Discussion and Analysis

From the perspective of the women I interviewed, there was no distinction between provisioning activities and family responsibilities. However, when it came to domestic labor there seemed to be a distinct gendered division of labor. Still, it seemed to be the case that some of the men were beginning to cross boundaries, though in a limited way and perhaps out of necessity in the absence of larger networks of family on whom they might call for help. In my conversations with these women, the equanimity with which they described their household and childcaring responsibilities was striking. With one exception, I heard little in the way of dissatisfaction with the contributions that spouses or other family members made. It was the same sense I got from their talk about the training or schooling and their paid work. They were doing what they had to do for their families. This did not mean that they did not see the circumstances they were in as challenging. This was expressed in their remarks about the organization of their days when they had to be at the training site five days a week from 9:00 a.m. until 4:00 p.m., almost mirroring a regular working day, on top of which they had to complete homework daily, household labor, and for some night-time and weekend shifts at a paid job. Despite the challenges posed, there was a sense of hopefulness that at the end of training, their lives would in general be better than it was and most had plans to pursue more education—either at a community college or university on a part-time basis while they held full time post-training jobs. These plans were related to a desire to support their families. Thus even though it might be tempting to consider the managing of at least three roles as a relatively short-lived event, these women were not intending this to be so. My concern here is to consider how it is that these women come to be in these particular circumstances. An understanding of this depends on understanding the institutional arrangements within which their experiences were embedded. That is, there are a broader set of social relations which are operative in producing the experiences these women have.

First, being immigrants who are non-English speakers and of color disadvantages them in the labor market. Thus, although they have prior work experience and a variety of skills, in the
new context they are relegated to jobs in the secondary labor market—e.g. garment factory work, supermarket cashiers. This is true for their spouses and other family members as well. The low wages that are earned and few benefits that are offered mean that two or more (when possible) wages are needed for the family’s survival. Their labor market location, as I argued in the larger research project, is not simply due to the lack of skills but a result of the ways in which immigration legislation has arisen particularly in relation to Asians (K. Grahame, 1999). Changes to immigration legislation in 1965 permitted Asians entry into the U.S. The use of the “family re-unification category” begun under 1952 reforms and continued in 1965 has enabled a significant increase in Asian immigration. Female immigrants are more likely to be “sponsored immigrants” via “family reunification.” As immigrants, even prior to the recent welfare reform laws, they were denied access to, or had only limited access to, a host of income support programs. For sponsored immigrants (which all of the women were) there were “deeming provisions”—i.e. sponsor’s income is regarded (deemed) as available for the sponsored immigrant when determining her eligibility for means-tested public benefits—for public support programs (see Espenshade & Huber, 1999). This essentially meant that if the other family members were not able to provide sufficient income, the women had to work too. When they were able to, they worked where English was not required (garment industry work, ethnic enclave sales, or restaurant work) and then as they learned a little English, they were able to begin working in jobs in the mainstream economy although still in low level jobs in the service sector (such as the non-enclave supermarket cashier’s job). Their location in the labor market thus also has been governed by changes in the broader economy. For example, in the north eastern city where this study was based, the manufacturing industry has been in decline throughout the last decades of the 20th Century. Asian immigrant women who had once been able to find jobs in the garment industry had begun losing them as those industries closed and relocated either to the southern U.S. and overseas—for example, Min’s experience described in this study and the group of Asian dislocated workers described earlier.
The job training program was viewed as a means to a better job than either garment factory or supermarket work. Though the program was a day long commitment over six to seven months (the last an unpaid internship at a private sector employer), there were no institutional supports for child care for these women. Training agency workers made it clear that if child care was going to be an issue for the women then they would have to wait for training when it was no longer a problem. Thus, the women screened into the program were ones who could provide evidence that their child care needs were being adequately met. Ironically, to the extent that the women with children relied on extended family members to help with child care, the current immigration legislation allowing for “family re-unification” produced a benefit in the form of cost free child care. The exception was Meizhu who had no extended family members in the U.S., whose school aged daughter went to extended day care, much less costly than full day care, and whose husband was available to care for her child when she worked weekends and nights at a supermarket. Institutional practices, such as immigration legislation, job training policies limiting services available, and the training organization’s screening practices, thus converged to produce conditions under which they had little choice to combine work, training and reliance on extended family members. Yet, workers in the training organization attributed the presence of Asian women in the program to the “family centered values that Asians had,” essentially adopting the “cultural approach” to understanding Asian family experience that Glenn criticized. This is a stunning example of what Smith calls text-mediated relations of ruling wherein aspects of social science discourse shapes how the actualities of people’s lives are represented. The conceptual schema of “family centered Asian values,” which is part of the broader notion of Asians as a “model minority,” dispersed as it has been from earlier social science writings to popular discourse, enters into and shapes how the Asian presence in these programs is understood. As Glenn pointed out, the cultural approach blinds us to the institutionally produced constraints that Chinese families faced. Indeed, in the case reported here, “family centered values of Asians” becomes critical in the selection process, enabling the conditions under
which such families can succeed, through the women's jobs, thus reproducing Asians as a "model minority"—thus the ideological circle is complete.

Though I share the concerns about a reliance on cultural approaches for understanding the experiences of these families, I do not wish to altogether discard the importance of culture. At least some of the women expressed the view that there was a cultural basis for the ways in which household work was divided. That is, the gendered division of household labor was due to the expectation that men would do only certain kinds of work (for example, outside yard work but not vacuuming inside). Still there was evidence of some shifts that were going on as some of the men took on childcaring and other household activities when their spouses were unavailable to do so.

The larger story here is not so much one of internal household struggle over the division of household labor as it is one of families trying to patch together lives in the face of a number of constraints in their new society. Beyond the organization of the labor market and the policies towards immigrants which bear on those experiences is the organization of health care in U.S. society. Access to health care is dependent for most families on a job which provides health care insurance (see Diamond, 1992). The jobs the women were training for were likely to provide health care benefits which was an attractive feature for women such as these whose husbands tended to not have jobs with such benefits. Such jobs were also attractive for women like Van who, as a single adult would require a job with health benefits to get coverage. The potential for health care insurance was an added incentive for juggling the three spheres of activities.

These women's experiences highlight the inadequacies of a dual spheres approach to work/family balance. Their experiences are shaped by a labor market which affords them and other family members low wages and poor benefits. This and an inadequate health care system propel them into a job training system which, though falling short of their needs, promises a better future for their families. The policies advocated and passed to alleviate the problem of work/family balance are built upon a standard form of family in which one earner can take time to meet family needs. So long as Asian immigrant women and their families
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can only labor at jobs which provide meager wages, they would
have little use for family leave polices which offer no pay or
benefits. Public policy purportedly to help families manage work
and family commitments leave lower income families such as
these immigrants out in the cold. Even so it seems that every
election cycle brings calls for more family friendly policies. The
families that are implied in these discussions are the standard
North American family (two recent examples include eliminating
the marriage penalty in the taxation system, and calls for tax
credits for families in which a parent stays at home to care for
children). No more telling evidence exists of how the standard
North American family has insinuated itself into public policy
than the welfare reform Act of 1996. In its very title, “Personal
Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act,” this
legislation implied that the families targeted (poor, mostly single
parent and disproportionately race-ethnic minority) by these re-
forms were irresponsible. Further, in its preambles to the specific
provisions, the act upholds the standard North American family
as ideal: “Marriage is the foundation of a successful society. Pro-
motion of responsible fatherhood and motherhood is integral to
successful child rearing and the well-being of children.” Through
and through, the document is laced with material suggesting
the defectiveness of specifically single parent family forms. In
its insistence on paid work for single mothers, it creates a dou-
ble standard for such women and women in the standard form
at the same time that it fails to provide appropriate long term
supports for building economically improved family life. Indeed,
selectively weeded out of the discussion of welfare reform were
the stories of lost jobs because of economic re-structuring and of a
crisis in health care not only for workers who had lost jobs but also
for “working families” whose jobs provided no health benefits.

The latest (2002) public policy proposal regarding welfare re-
form advocated by the Bush administration has as its centerpiece
“marriage promotion.” The administration views marriage—not
jobs that pay well and provide benefits—as an essential tool in
alleviating poverty. The companion to the 1996 welfare reform
Act, the “Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsi-
bility Act,” also created further constraints for legal immigrants in
their attempts to build better family lives. Re-iterating “national
policy with respect to welfare and immigration,” the legislation restated “self-sufficiency” as the principle guiding immigration legislation, and claimed that increasing numbers of immigrants were applying for government benefits and that therefore it was in the government’s interest to ensure that “aliens be self-reliant” by making new rules for eligibility to immigrate and for sponsors of immigrants. These new rules included deporting an immigrant if she or he became a public charge by accessing welfare, food stamps, Medicaid, housing programs etc., within seven years of arrival. Given these developments, it seems that for the near future, immigrant women who seek better jobs to provide for their families will have to continue to knit together available resources to do so, even when it means an enormous outlay of time and energy in meeting their multiple responsibilities.

Conclusion

Over the last two decades, a standard story about work/family balance has emerged. As told in both the social science discourse and the popular press, the continued entry of women into the paid workforce has resulted in time crunches for families. The more progressive elements of that discourse have drawn attention to the “double burden” that women face in managing the demands of work and family. Conservative elements of that discourse took a different tack, linking women’s paid work with a decline in “family values” and the source of myriad societal ills, including increased divorce rates, out-of wedlock births, irresponsible fatherhood and the increase in single welfare mothers. During the 1990s, a separate story about immigrants emerged which claimed that immigrants (legal and illegal) were a drain on the resources of the society. Reforms in immigration and welfare legislation were called for in an effort to reduce what was represented as these populations’ illegitimate dependency on the state. The state’s answer to these problems was to enact reforms which required women on welfare to work, denied illegal immigrants access to a range of social welfare programs, and held immigrant sponsors liable for the immigrants they sponsored. These measures were supposed to return or enforce “personal responsibility” to segments of the population which were por-
trayed as never having developed or ignored the "values" which such responsibility implied. As I have argued, the reforms were developed within a framework that upheld the nuclear family as ideal and selectively drew on the social science research linking "single parenthood" to poverty. In this way, the actualities of the everyday lives of poor women (including immigrants) as they struggled to carve out a life for their families were ignored. While policies such as the Family and Medical Leave Act was a step in the right direction for many families, it did nothing for poor families who could ill afford time off.

In contrast to the oversimplified view promoted by these standard representations, my study reveals a more complex reality in the lives of a group of women immigrants. It does so by beginning with their stories and their experiences. As I have shown, for many of these women meeting their family needs required that they engage simultaneously in several spheres of activities, including job training. Further, my work suggests that these complexities have been produced by the organization of the labor market, immigration legislation, and the ideological practices embedded in developing, managing, and administering public policies such as job training and family leave. These, I have argued, converged to form the extended social relations that shape and direct these women's experiences. In contrast to the standard representations that dominate contemporary discourses of family and immigration, the alternative realities about these women's lives disclosed by institutional ethnography suggest that the task of investigations which begin in the actualities of people's lives is the ongoing project of making visible the ways in which our lives are managed, shaped, and ruled.

Notes

1. Smith identifies "ideological code" as a "schema which replicates its organization in multiple and various sites... It is a constant generator of procedures for selecting syntax, categories, and vocabulary in the writing of texts and the production of talk and for interpreting sentences, written or spoken, ordered by it" (1993: 51). In divergent sites of writing and talk such as social scientific, legislative and popular media, an ideological code thus creates the same order. She identifies the standard North American family—a legally married couple sharing a household with adult employed male as primary
provider and female whose primary responsibility is to care for household, children and husband—as such an ideological code. Though in recent times, the woman may also earn a wage, her primary responsibilities remain. I would add that in the U.S. context, the latter point is so for primarily middle-class white women. As several scholars have now noted, in earlier periods significant proportions of race-ethnic minority women and working class women were engaged in paid labor (see for example, Amott and Matthaei 1991).

2. Lamphere’s and Zavella’s study *Sunbelt Working Mothers* (1993) describes the development of Anglo and Hispano working class families in which increasing numbers of women perform co-provider roles in the context of the shifting labor markets because of economic restructuring in Albuquerque in the early 80s.

3. In her formulation of relations of ruling, Smith specifies that ruling refers to a broad array of activities by which societies such as ours are managed, ruled, and administered. The focus is on organized practices of ruling co-coordinated across an array of sites and mediated by various forms of texts (these include professional discourses including those of sociology).

4. These were open-ended, in the form of conversations (see Lofland and Lofland, 1995).

5. The programs were office skills programs. Note that all of the women had been employed in their countries of origin, some in professional capacities such as managerial kinds of work, others in either their own businesses or family run businesses and still others in office work.

6. The specific skills training program she was in was “medical office skills” so that much of the terminology they were learning were Latin words. All of the women in this program commented on the challenge of learning both English and Latin.

7. The curricula of these programs include teaching promptness and acclimatizing students to the regularities of a job.

8. All of the women had completed high school and three had university training—two had completed their degrees and one had not. Also noteworthy is that other Asian women in the training programs also had held professional jobs in their countries of origin—e.g. teachers and nurses.

References


