



The Rosabeth Moss Kanter Award

For Excellence in Work-Family Research

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHORS

What were the major findings of your study?

In our study we wanted to understand how social policies in different countries affect long-term work and family lives. Specifically, we chose the United States and Germany to analyze the interplay between work and family lives over a long period of the life course, from ages 22-44, when people build families and establish careers. Our study focused on the lives of men and women born between 1956 and 1965, and we observe their work and family lives in the years from 1978-2009. Precisely in this historical period, the United States and Germany had very different institutions and social policies concerning possibilities to combine work and family for men and women. On the one hand, the United States was a prototype of a high inequality society with a weak welfare state and few policies to support either mothers or fathers. Instead, child care could be purchased on the private market and was unaffordable for less affluent parents. On the other hand, Germany illustrates the conservative generous welfare state that particularly encouraged women to take long leaves for child care. In this time period, Germany shared the lack of public child care options with the United States, and on top of that there was also no private market for child care services. This made it very difficult for mothers to return to work quickly after giving birth.

We used new methods adopted from biology, called sequence analysis, to identify which types of social inequality in long-term work and family life courses result in these two country contexts. Results show a typology of the most common combined work and family life course types in both countries. In the United States, we find that privileged men and women have equal chances to combine stable high stakes careers with stable partnerships and parenthood. In contrast, this type of life course is only attainable for men in Germany in our observation period, with few exceptions. However, gender equality at the top comes at the cost of having no safety net for the already disadvantaged in the United States. Here we find a large group of primarily women and black Americans who experience both family and employment instability, and combined single parenthood and frequent re-partnering with very unstable employment careers of cycling in and out of low quality jobs. In contrast, in Germany, even low paying jobs tend to be stable and combine with a normative stable two child family.

Were you surprised by the findings?

Yes and No. We did expect gender inequality in work and family lives to be much stronger in Germany and our findings support this. But we were surprised by the extent of gender inequality in Germany, and by how strong the inequality based on social class, and also race is in the United States. One side story of our findings is that the better-off in the United States live completely different life courses both in the work and family domain compared to lower class men and women. In contrast, in Germany, we see a stronger division between men's and women's lives, whereas differences by social class are much smaller compared to the United States. However, with recent reforms in Germany, including a massive expansion of quality public child care and shorter, but better paid parental leave of about 12 month at 68% of their former salary, we expect these dynamics to change for younger cohorts of men and women in Germany.

What do you think are the most important implications of your findings for employees? For human resource practitioners?

Our findings highlight that state policies concerning parental leave and the provision of child care have strong and direct effects on how people can combine work and family. We think that companies should work together with the government to improve possibilities for combining work and family for men and women. For the United States, our findings particularly highlight a lack of child care and support for lower class families to combine successful careers with having children.



DR. SILKE AISENBREY

PROFESSOR OF
SOCIOLOGY; CHAIR,
DEPARTMENT OF
SOCIOLOGY

YESHIVA UNIVERSITY



DR. ANETTE FASANG

PROFESSOR OF
MICROSOCIOLOGY

HUMBOLDT
UNIVERSITÄT
BERLIN

The Interaction of Employment-and Family-Trajectories: Germany and the United States in Comparison

American Journal
of Sociology
March 2017



2018 Finalists

Aisenbrey, S., & Fasang, A. (2017). The interplay of work and family trajectories over the life course: Germany and the United States in comparison. *American Journal of Sociology*, 122(5), 1448-1484. WINNER

Ollo-López, A., & Goñi-Legaz, S. (2017). Differences in work–family conflict: Which individual and national factors explain them?. *The International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 28(3), 499-525.

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Lin, K. J., Ilies, R., Pluut, H., & Pan, S. Y. (2017). You are a helpful co-worker, but do you support your spouse? A resource-based work-family model of helping and support provision. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, 138, 45-58.

Dinh, H., Strazdins, L., & Welsh, J. (2017). Hour-glass ceilings: Work-hour thresholds, gendered health inequities. *Social Science & Medicine*, 176, 42-51.

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Blair-Loy, M., & Cech, E. A. (2017). Demands and devotion: Cultural meanings of work and overload among women researchers and professionals in science and technology industries. *Sociological Forum*, 32(1), 5-27.

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Huffman, M. L., King, J., & Reichelt, M. (2017). Equality for whom? Organizational policies and the gender gap across the German earnings distribution. *ILR Review*, 70(1), 16-41.

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