Pick-Up Time at Oakdale Elementary School: Work and Family from the Vantage Points of Children

*Barrie Thorne, Ph.D.**

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*Barrie Thorne is Co-Director of the Center for Working Families and Professor of Sociology and Women's Studies at the University of California, Berkeley.

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Abstract

Children are visible in the literature on work and family, but their presence is mostly passive, framed by their economic and emotional dependence, by their need for adult labor and time, and by "developmental outcomes" correlated with various arrangements for their care. This paper, based on collaborative fieldwork in a mixed-income, ethnically diverse area of Oakland, lays out a broader view. It considers economic, social, and cultural changes that are altering the dynamics of contemporary childhoods; and it draws upon theories of care to illuminate the moving dialectic of child and adult agency involved in the process of growing up. These themes are brought into analytic focus through an interrelated set of concepts – *caring projects*, *caring processes*, and *reading signs of care*. The paper concludes by arguing that the study of work and family is under-theorized and too narrowly defined and by suggesting strategies for re-visioning this field of study.

As more and more mothers enter the paid labor force, children are becoming key signifiers and symbols of "family." But the presence of children in the study of work and family is mostly passive, framed by their economic and emotional dependence, by their need for adult labor and time, and by "developmental outcomes" correlated with various arrangements for their care. Each of these framings is useful, but none of them attends to children's active participation in the everyday lives of families and communities. Nor does the work-family literature consider the process of growing up/raising up a child as a strand of daily life infused with concerns about and efforts to shape the future.

In this paper I argue that a more capacious view of children, alert to their agency and informed by theories of care, can provide fresh perspective on the study of work and family. This approach, developed through collaborative fieldwork on children's daily lives in two urban areas of California, situates families and jobs within larger ecologies of institutions and resources; turns attention to the range of beliefs and practices through which particular childhoods take shape; and views children not only in terms of their demand for adult labor and care, but also as active participants in everyday life and the process of growing up.

To evoke and contextualize this approach, I first describe an after-school pick-up scene in one of our field sites, a mixed-income, ethnically diverse area of Oakland. After pointing to recurring patterns and the economic, social, and cultural forces that help account for them, I use an interrelated set of concepts — *caring projects*, *caring processes*, and *reading signs of care* — to bring the pick-up scene and varied constructions of childhood into analytic focus. I conclude by arguing that the study of work and family is under-theorized and too narrowly defined, and by laying out several strategies for re-visioning this area of knowledge.

Pick-Up Time at an Urban Public Elementary School

It's 11:18 a.m. on a Tuesday morning at Oakdale Elementary School. Bits of litter from morning arrivals — a crushed juice box, the cellophane wrapper from a granola bar, a crumpled list of spelling words, a permission form with a parent's signature — are scattered on the wide concrete steps that lead up to the two-story building. Two white mothers wearing jeans, with younger children in stroller

and in tow, converse by the front entrance. A few feet away an elderly grandfather, an immigrant from China, unzips his tan cotton jacket as he settles onto a low cement wall. A Latina mother, wearing jeans, moves up the stairs, her slow and uneven pace set by the climbing toddler whose hand she is holding.

The dismissal bell for morning kindergarten rings at 11:20, and the heavy front door with a dangling metal chain swings open. The first child out the door is an exuberant five-year-old girl wearing a white blouse and navy jumper; she holds out a drawing as she runs to greet her mother and toddling little brother on the stairs. After hugs and brief talk, they begin the descent down the stairs and the half-mile walk to home. As adults (most of them women) continue to arrive, more children burst out the door, pulling on sweaters and jackets and jostling with one another as they hold on to drawings and the blue flyers that they are supposed to give to their parents. One of the children calls out a greeting in Cantonese as he pushes past a teacher and settles next to his grandfather on the low wall, beginning a two-hour wait for the boy's older brother, a second grader in the Early Bird reading group. When the brother gets out, the threesome will walk together to the city bus stop and take the bus home, where the grandmother is waiting.

When the second dismissal bell rings at 1:30 p.m., another shift of adults, each of them connected to an Early Bird reader, converges at the school. A Mexican immigrant father who works for a local delivery service has scheduled a late lunch break to coincide with his second grader's dismissal time. Several months before, when his daughter was switched from a late to an early reading schedule, he negotiated a change in his own work schedule so that he could continue to pick her up after school, take her home for lunch, and then bring her to the restaurant where her mother is employed as a food server. The mother has little spatial mobility during the work day; but her job site is a fixed and safe location, with leeway for the temporary presence of a child. Knowing that this makeshift arrangement depends on the goodwill of the restaurant owner and that her parents have no other options, the daughter sits unobtrusively on a chair near the kitchen, doing a bit of homework and watching the restaurant scene, waiting for her mother to get off work so they can go home together on the bus.

The last Oakdale dismissal bell rings at 2:40 p.m. By that time, many cars have pulled up, some double-parked, with drivers leaning over to crank down side windows so they can catch the attention of

the particular children they have come to transport. Some drivers get out and stand on the curb, snatching quick conversations with one another as they scan the front entrance. The owner of a family-based day care center has parked her van right in front of the building so that the four kids she has come to gather up, including her daughter, can easily find her. An African American father, wearing a suit and on a break from his job as an office manager in a state agency, hurries up the stairs, hoping that the third-grade teacher has let out her class, and thus his eight-year-old son, on time; that the boy's grandmother will be at home when they pull up for the drop- off; and that it will be possible to get back to the office in time for a 3:30 meeting. A Filipina woman wearing the uniform of a security guard, a laminated photo tag clipped to her front shirt pocket, comes up the stairs to look for her two nieces. As an "emergency person" (a term in their family vocabulary), the aunt makes an effort to help with transportation when the girls' mother can't do the pick-up.

More and more adults arrive on foot, including a young white woman who will lead about ten kids into the school cafeteria for a privately run after-school program that begins with "homework time" and lasts until 6:00 p.m. Fees are charged for late pick-ups. "Kids' Kamp," the other, less expensive, formal after-school program available in the Oakdale area, is run by the city recreation department and based at a nearby park. An African American staff member with a whistle dangling from his neck stands in his regular spot at the foot of the stairs, waiting for the kids whose names are on his clipboard. When everyone who has signed up is accounted for, they'll walk together to the park.

The last wave of students spills out of the school door, heading for waiting cars or agreed-upon outposts near the curb. Older kids who are responsible for getting their younger siblings home safely look around for their charges with the searching and slightly anxious look also worn by adults doing pick-up duty. Some kids begin to walk toward home or to the city bus stop several blocks away. Others head for midway destinations like the public library, an uncle's dry cleaning business, a video store owned by a family friend, or "the house of a lady from church" to wait until a relative or neighbor arrives to complete the transport home. Over the years, Oakdale students have established preferred routes for walking to and from the school, with way stations like a McDonald's and a mini-mart. The most traveled routes lead from the middle-class neighborhood of the school across the freeway and into

the "flatlands," the lower-income area of Oakland. Very few children walk in the other direction, toward "the hills," which is the upper-middle-class area of the city. Nearly all of the parents who live in that part of the Oakdale intake area have enrolled their children in private schools or arranged transfers to "hills" public schools.

By 3:15, the school entrance, stairs, and curb are nearly empty. A fourth-grade girl comes back into the hallway of the building to use the pay phone and find out if her auntie is on the way. Several parents have called the office to say that they'll be delayed. In the late afternoon the school janitor comes out to pick up the day's deposit of children's litter, including an afternoon layer of crumpled homework assignments written in pencil and corrected in red pen, a half-empty brown lunch bag, a dried-up curled orange peel, and several copies of the blue flyer announcing a PTA meeting. As the school day closes, the varied lives that have converged during pick-up time carry on in other venues.

Methods of Inquiry

This sketch of diverse after-school routines is drawn from an ethnographic study of childhoods in two urban areas of California that differ in social class and ethnic composition and in histories of immigration.[1] My collaborators and I have done fieldwork in elementary schools, PTA meetings, neighborhoods, after-school programs, public libraries, fast-food restaurants, and other child-related sites in each locale. We have also interviewed teachers, aides, and other child-care workers, as well as children and parents from the range of economic and cultural groups living in each community; and we have invited children to draw and write about their lives. Information from local archives, the census, and school district and city records has deepened our understanding of the political economy and history of each geographic area.

This paper focuses on our Oakland research site, the official intake area for Oakdale Elementary School (a pseudonym, as are all names in this paper). This area of the city, about six miles in radius, includes highly affluent, more middle-class, and low-income neighborhoods. In 1996-97, the first and most intensive of our three years of fieldwork, the 465 Oakdale students were 50% African American, 17% Asian, 14% Hispanic, and 13% white (these official school district categories gloss

enormous ethnic variation due, in part, to the arrival of many immigrants from Asia, Mexico, and Central America over the last two decades). In 1996-97, about a fourth of Oakdale students were transfers who lived outside the intake area, most of them in lower-income neighborhoods; and about half of all the students qualified for free or reduced cost lunch. The rest of the students were more middle class. (To reach across the full range of socioeconomic groups living in the Oakdale intake area, we have interviewed middle- and upper-middle-class parents and children who have "gone private" or else transferred to other public schools.)

This is a school, and a geographic area, "where peoples meet" and thus a fruitful site for exploring a range of contemporary childhoods; the processes through which they are created (processes that involve, but go far beyond, contexts of work and family); and the dynamics through which lives divide, and also interrelate, across socially constructed lines of age, social class, gender, racialized ethnicity, and immigration status.

The Pick-Up Scene as a Window on Work, Families, and Everyday Life

The after-school scene is a transitional time and place where seemingly separate worlds converge and where one can glimpse different patterns of everyday life and the way these patterns are stitched together. The pieces of everyday life don't come with fixed and agreed-upon labels, as suggested by categories (e.g., "mother in child's home," "relative in child's home," "paid group care," "nonrelative in another home," "child home alone") used in surveys of after-school care. Where in that list would one locate the video store, the public library, or an hour spent standing in front of the school or waiting in a restaurant until a mother wraps up her work shift? Although they make it possible to specify larger statistical patterns, surveys pull away from context and meanings. By staying closer to the ground, ethnographic methods open insight into complex variation and into social processes that may also be found in other situations.

Although they reside, work, and go to school in geographic proximity, Oakdale families organize their lives and the raising up of children in a variety of ways. After-school arrangements vary not only by age range and other basic characteristics (e.g., whether a child is blind or has sight), but also

in relation to household composition and income; the availability (and unavailability) of public resources such as access to quality public schools, bus transportation, and state-subsidized recreation programs; and the location and scheduling of jobs. Cultural beliefs and practices also enter into the configuration of after-school arrangements, including definitions of family and relations of obligation and reciprocity that may extend across households and to neighbors and friends; divisions of labor and ideologies of motherhood and fatherhood; and assumptions about the needs and capabilities of children, with variation by age and sometimes by gender.

Some arrangements for the transport and out-of-school care of children are organized entirely through networks of kith and kin, with occasional money transfers, as when a grandmother or a neighbor, who regularly does after-school-care, is "paid a little something" by the child's mother to smooth out uneven patterns of indebtedness. Children from lower-income families are more likely than middle-class children to walk long distances on their own and to ride by themselves on the city transit system. (Perpetually strapped for funds, the Oakland school district no longer runs its own bus system, except for students with severe physical disabilities.) The children of immigrants, who come from more than eleven different countries at this culturally diverse school, are the most likely to be transported and cared for by extended kin, like the Chinese grandparents who migrated from Hong Kong to help out their daughter, who works long hours in a garment factory, and their son-in-law, who is employed as a cook in two different restaurants. Families with limited income rely not only on networks of relatives, friends, and neighbors, but also on government-subsidized resources, such as recreation programs, buses, and the public library, which some parents regard as a safe and beneficial place for children to be on their own after school, although librarians occasionally protest the use of the facility for "child care."

Middle-class, non-immigrant families whose children attend Oakdale School tend to be small and self-contained, relying irregularly, if at all, on the help of relatives or friends. Some middle-class mothers, especially those with preschool children, do not have paid jobs; they are more likely than other adults to arrive at the school early and to visit with one another while they wait for the dismissal bell to ring. Other mothers work part-time or on night shifts so that they can pick up and care for their children after school. Compared with lower-income parents, middle-class dual-earner couples (a few are

lesbians) and middle-class solo parents (a few of them fathers) are more likely to have the means to shop in the local market of after-school programs, home care providers, lessons, organized sports activities, and summer camps. Paid care providers who will also handle after-school pick-ups are especially favored, and parents who are oriented to the child-care market swap information about costs of and experiences with available options.

None of the upper-middle-class children who live in the Oakdale intake area attend the "neighborhood public school." Their parents rely almost entirely on markets to organize their children's time outside the home, and some drive long distances so their children can enroll in a particular private school, play a specific sport, or have access to specialized lessons in music, art, or science. One prestigious private school, which goes from kindergarten through high school, offers on-site after-school programs and activities for every grade level, in effect providing one-stop shopping, at premium prices.

The Oakdale pick-up scene offers a glimpse not only of diverse arrangements for the transport and after-school care of children, but also of the daily routines and practices of different households. Objects that travel between home and school — lunchboxes, backpacks, homework, notes — give clues to daily life within these somewhat private domains. An archeology of school ground and lunchroom litter reveals diverse approaches to feeding and eating, with patterns related to ethnicity, income, and orientations to the market. (In Oakdale lunchtime culture, as in the Bay Area middle-school that Elaine Bell Kaplan [1999] has studied, pre-packaged, commercial items are the prestige food; lunches made and carried from home have middling status; and the state-subsidized school lunch is the least valued and may even be stigmatizing.) Other types of litter, such as notes, permission forms, homework assignments, newsletters, flyers, and report cards reveal written patterns of communication between parents and teachers, which, both parties lament and the litter testifies, are contingent on not-always-reliable child couriers. These artifacts also reflect the demands for labor and time that schools make on families, with varying degrees of success (Smith and Griffith 1990).

Many of the adults who converge when the school dismissal bells ring feel pressed by the time binds that Arlie Hochschild (1997) has insightfully analyzed; and some children seem to feel buffeted by parents' schedules, rushed by quick pick-ups and drop-offs, or bored by long waits in front of the

school or at a relative's place of employment. As the after-school scene makes clear, demands for adult time, and for being on time, extend not only from jobs and from home, but also from schools, after-school programs, and other organized activities (Berhau and Lareau 1993), and from the schedules and contingencies of neighbors, friends, and other caregivers. Oakdale parents often complain about collisions between the time orders of the school and of their places of employment, and when there is a "minimum day" or a weekday with no school, fragile arrangements (e.g., a father who can transport children only during a lunch break or a neighbor available only after 3 p.m.) may fall apart. When the school system has placed children from the same household into different temporal tracks, the pick-up challenge may be daunting. (See Orellana and Thorne 1998 for further analysis of the ways in which school schedules may exacerbate collisions between work and family time.)

Conceptualizing Children: Dependence, Participation, and Relations of Care

Child is an ambiguous category whose upper boundaries are much contested. A ten-year-old may insist that she is a *kid* and not a *child* (Thorne 1993); symbolic cut-off points, such as the age when one can apply for a driver's license, purchase liquor, vote, or enlist in the army, do not necessarily coincide; the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child extends the upper boundary to age eighteen. *Child* is a difficult category to specify not only because it encompasses many ages and capacities, but also because its inhabitants continually move through and out of its range. To grasp this elusive subject, one needs access to a range of conceptual tools.

The literature on work and family frames children primarily by their economic and emotional dependence and their demand for adult labor, as in socialist-feminist theories of reproductive labor and time-budget research on the hours adults spend doing child care (this literature doesn't explore actual processes and experiences of care). The limitations of these frameworks become apparent when one studies older children. As children grow, they are increasingly able to assume the tasks lumped under the rubric of "child care," such as getting themselves dressed, organized, and transported to and from school and taking care of themselves when adults are not around. Children also gain in the capacity to care for others and to do forms of paid labor that, in industrialized societies, are usually relegated to

adults. Defining children in terms of economic dependence and the more or less passive stance of "being socialized" within the protected spaces of home, school, and play makes it difficult to see the work that they may do (Solberg 1990). Conventional frameworks also obscure the ways in which children's practices may help sustain, and even alter, a range of institutions (Thorne 1987).

The pick-up scene offers glimpses of children actively constructing and negotiating everyday life, including divisions of labor within and extending beyond households. Kids take responsibility for locating younger siblings and getting them home; they organize themselves into groups to head for after-school destinations; they make phone calls to check up on adults who are late; they carry messages between school and home. In addition, kids sometimes help out on adult job sites, for example, by sorting dry cleaning at an uncle's store or by helping a mother clear tables in a restaurant. Children also contribute to housework, an area of activity with enormous variation in practices, meanings, and patterns of negotiation across Oakdale households.

Using Theories of Care to Analyze the Growing Up/Raising Up of Children

Recognizing that children contribute as well as receive labor is one way of inscribing them more fully in research. But theories of labor are not designed to grasp the moving dialectic of child and adult agency or the array of emotions and experiences bound up in the processes of "growing up" and "raising up a child." These paired terms allude to a mix of daily, cyclical time (get up, get dressed, eat breakfast, pack lunches, head for school and work) and the sweep of cumulative time entailed in the passage from child to adult.

Hanne Haavind (1987, Haavind and Andanaes 1992, personal communication) grasps this complexity by theorizing child development as a highly contextual and relational process. In a qualitative study of Norwegian mothers and their four year-old children, Haavind shows how everyday practices (such as suggesting that a child pack her own lunch) may embed varied goals and strategies (not only the goal of getting out the door more quickly, but also helping the child learn skills needed for access to a wider social world). Haavind uses the metaphor of a "running wheel" that turns in the minds of mothers and other engaged caregivers as they mentally record how a child is doing, both now and with

an eye to the future, and as they adjust their daily practices with these assessments in mind. Children also monitor their own changing capacities, sometimes refusing to "go forward" or trying to accelerate the pace or pursue goals other than those that their parents or teachers have in mind for them. Growing up/raising up is a guided but open-ended and highly contingent process, involving conflicts of will and desire and struggles over autonomy and control (Brannen and O'Brien 1996; Polatnick 1999; Solberg 1990).

Haavind's theorizing of "the tasks of growing up" brings children's vantage points into conjunction with an insightful literature on the ideologies, practices, and experiences of mothering (e.g., Glenn, Chang, and Forcey 1994; Ruddick, 1982). A particular construction of motherhood (such as the full-time intensive mother embedded in dominant family ideologies [Hays 1996] or the more collective and shared conception of mothering that is associated with African American culture [Collins 1990]) is also a construction of the "nature" and needs of children. Bringing up a child is a long-range process involving "bundles of tasks (Hughes 1971) that are continually negotiated and redefined. Mothers are given primary responsibility for organizing this process and major blame if it goes awry. But as more and more mothers enter the labor force, the participation of other actors has become increasingly visible, as have efforts to adjust and rework ideologies of motherhood (Garey 1999; Macdonald 1998; Uttal 1996).

Childrearing as a Caring Project

To draw the process of growing up/raising up into broader view, I have found it useful to think of childrearing as a *caring project* that is undertaken with a sense of purpose and guided by varied conceptions of the "good." I like the word *project* because it conveys (in Haavind's phrase) the "directed but open-ended" quality of childrearing, as well as efforts to coordinate shared activity across an array of people and contexts. Raising up a child may variously resemble the producing of a movie, the building of a house, or the moment-by-moment improvisation of a dance, with the major, challenging qualification that the "object" of the effort is also a sentient being who participates in the production,

building, or choreography both in the everyday and over longer spans of time. Children often prefer to dance or build, at least in part, according to their own designs.

All of the Oakland parents whom we have interviewed express long-range goals, hopes, and worries about the children they are raising. Some parents detail remarkably specific blueprints for their children, such as a white, college-educated mother, a part-time graduate student, whose husband works long hours managing a small business. They live near Oakdale Elementary School but transferred their daughter to a "hills" public school in a more affluent part of the city. Speaking in a mode of both dreaming and determination, the mother said that she wanted her daughter (then seven years-old) to attend Stanford University on a soccer scholarship and then go to graduate school at either Stanford or Berkeley. (This kind of close and even vicarious identification with one's child suggests another meaning, and pronunciation, of the word *project* — the psychodynamic process of projection, which is also relevant to parent-child relations.)

When Oakdale parents describe their experiences, they usually speak in general terms, for example, saying that they hope to raise a child who will finish high school, perhaps go to college, and end up in a "decent" job. A college-educated African American mother who works, as does her husband, in an administrative position in a state bureaucracy stressed "academics," homework, and going-to-college as central preoccupations of her childrearing. She actively shops for affordable lessons, recreation programs, and summer camps as a way of keeping her children out of trouble and headed toward securely middle-class lives.

Some parents use ethical language when they describe the goals that guide their child-rearing. For example, a mixed-ethnic, middle-class couple who are active in local politics said that they want their daughter to be able to get along with and respect "different people from different backgrounds" in a world that is increasingly diverse. They had this end in mind when they chose to live in a mixed-income, racially diverse "flats" neighborhood and to enroll their daughter in Oakdale School. Another sort of moral orientation — ensuring that their children will grow up with a firm attachment to Islam and to extended kin — guides the collective caring project of a family from Yemen whose thickly knit relations extend across national boundaries. The mothers in this extended family express fear that their

children might start to smoke, use drugs, or become interested in sex (teenage dating culture looms large in their horizon of worry). Other Oakdale parents, especially those who are scrambling for economic survival and who live in dangerous neighborhoods, also talked about what they do *not* want their children to do or become; "I'm not raising my son to be a gang-banger," an unemployed African American father said with determination.

Lower-income immigrant parents often frame their children's trajectories as part of the economic survival and potential mobility of the family as a whole, musing about how it is to grow up here compared with their countries of origin. For example, a Mien mother, a refugee from Laos, said that her family would "have a life here" if the children "do good in school." But she feared that, as recent immigrants, Mien parents "haven't gotten the experience to raise their children here." She continued:

> I think a lot of children are getting bad because their parents do not know how to deal with it yet. Because the way we raise our children in our own country is different. Like when children get older . . . they just go out and work in the field and when their parents tell them what to do, they just go and do it. Parents don't have to go out and watch them every day.

She also spoke of the shame she would feel if any of her children turned out "bad."

In short, caring projects encompass longer-range goals, hopes, and fears, *and* keen awareness of the "here and now," including the immediate challenges of organizing children's daily lives, keeping them safe and out of trouble, and juggling these efforts with other activities. Sometimes long-term goals are eclipsed by the demands of the present, such as scrambling for economic survival or coping with illness, death, or being evicted from yet another apartment. Both navigating present circumstances and efforts to shape a hoped-for future involve mobilizing networks and resources and coordinating lines of action. These dimensions are sometimes at odds, as when parents like the Mien mother or the unemployed African American father are overwhelmed by present contingencies and/or lack resources to actively promote a desired end.

Care as a Social Process

The metaphor of "project," and the related images of building and producing, point to the labor involved in childrearing. But metaphors of work don't adequately express the range of experiences that child-rearing may entail, thus my added image of childrearing as a dance, evoking pleasure and a sense of play. Theories of care, understood as a practice guided by concern for the well-being of another, tap into the domain of work; but they also encompass other dimensions of experience, especially the quality of relationships and orientation to meeting others' needs (Hochschild 1999; Ruddick 1998).

Joan Tronto (1994) theorizes care as a social process with four phases: (1) *caring about*, that is, attending to and being aware of the need for caring (akin to the "running wheel" of consciousness that Haavind describes); (2) *caring for*, or taking general responsibility for meeting the needs of another; (3) *caregiving*, that is, the material meeting of a need for care (a parent may take responsibility for organizing the care of a child, but delegate much of the hands-on care to others); and (4) *care-receiving* (this dimension highlights the relational nature of care: recipients, including children, may be grateful or dissatisfied, may feel controlled but not cared for, and/or may try to command particular kinds of care). As Tronto observes, caring processes may be fragmented; needs may be misrecognized or approached in ways more harmful than helpful. Parents may care about and take responsibility for their children, but lack the means to give adequate care. In short, care should not be romanticized, but rather used as a lens for understanding complex relationships and interactions that unfold over time.

Reading Signs of Care

> I do not even know if it matters, or if it explains anything . . .
> All that compounds a human being is so heavy and meaningful in me.
> — Tillie Olsen (1960)

These poignant words from a short story express the mix of love, responsibility, guilt, and nagging uncertainty that lies at the heart of mothering and of deeply felt caring projects more generally. The process of raising up and caring for a child is laced with uncertainty about what the child needs in order to flourish and about the adequacy of the care s/he is receiving. When the process of care is

guided by long-range goals, such as securing family loyalty and an attachment to Islam or ensuring that one's child will go to college, the uncertain connection of present actions to future outcomes magnifies feelings of anxiety, as does the participation of many different people, not necessarily of one's choosing or under one's control, in the process of raising up a child (Tillie Olsen's story beautifully conveys this theme).

Some parents opt for home schooling as a strategy for limiting outside influences and more tightly integrating the phases of care. Dual-earner couples may work split shifts not only because they can't afford to pay for child care, but also as a way of retaining more control over the caring process. Mobilizing relatives and friends to provide care may also reduce anxiety. Upper-middle-class parents who pay for private schools with selective admissions reassure one another that this is a proven strategy for raising up children who will attend elite colleges.

To cope with all of this uncertainty, including the fact that no strategy or formula for child-rearing yields guaranteed results, parents and other caregivers continually look for signs and portents. Like fortune-tellers reading tea leaves, they scan children's faces, bodies, pockets, and possessions, looking for signs of how the child is doing and whether trouble is afoot.[2] Sign-reading, at its best, is a form of "attentive love" (Ruddick 1982), part of the running wheel of maternal and caring consciousness. But sign reading may also become surveillance, diminishing the sense of autonomy and self-determination that may be important for the well-being of a growing child.[3] This ambiguity seems to be intrinsic to processes of care, especially when care-givers have much more power than care receivers.

Sign reading is a collective process that moves across institutional sites and frameworks of interpretation. Schools produce systems of signs (grades, test scores, suspensions) whose meanings are continually negotiated and sometimes contested. Many of the parents and children we have interviewed spoke of "good grades" as a prime symbol that a child is "on track" (grades, of course, are more than symbols; they have the power to open or shut down opportunities in and of themselves). Homework is another much discussed sign, loaded with information because it regularly travels between home and school. When homework is not turned in or is poorly done, teachers may assume that parents don't care about their child's education. Parents may also read homework for signs of whether or not, and

how much, a teacher can be trusted to care about a child. For example, a Mexican immigrant mother observed that her nine- and eleven-year-old children, who were in the same split-grade classroom in Oakdale School, routinely came home with identical homework assignments. "If they bring the same homework and do the same thing, then who is advancing, and who is falling behind?" the mother asked, suspecting that the teacher didn't care.

Details of comportment and appearance, such as a child's hair, style of dress, or attitude, are less stable in their positioning as signs, and interpretations are less stylized. When parents, teachers, daycare workers, and other participants in caring projects get together, they may pick up seemingly small details and weigh them for larger significance (e.g., "Her hair is always tangled when she comes to school; I think that there may be trouble at home." "That first-grader has been waiting in front of the school for half an hour; do you think his baby-sitter is unreliable?" "He's getting hyper; is there something wrong at Kids Kamp?" "You've been late coming home every day this week; are you getting an attitude?").

The sharing and negotiation of signs is the stuff of parent-teacher conferences, conversations between parents and childcare workers, casual chit-chat among adults who are waiting to pick up children after school or who meet on the sidelines of soccer games. Sign reading may lead to heart-to-heart talks between parents and children; and, moving to especially consequential domains, reading signs of care is a central activity of social workers, police, and other professionals who are charged with investigating disputes over child custody or investigating reports of child neglect or abuse.

The process of reading signs of care is central to the orchestration of caring projects, especially when different actors, contexts, and gaps of information are involved. When mothers anguish about whether or not to seek employment, switch jobs, or change paid caregiving arrangements, they often scan their children for signs of possible impact. The search for a baby-sitter, day-care center, school, or after-school program may also involve looking for and interpreting signs of care. One mother decided not to enroll her daughter in kindergarten at Oakdale School, which is near their home, because the girls' bathroom was dirty on the day she visited. She and her husband decided to request a transfer to a "hills" school in part because the bathroom was cleaner. But another mother who pondered a similar

transfer decided against it because she thought the kids in the "hills" school looked too "rich," which would make her daughter feel marginal. Thus goes the contested world of sign reading, interpretive frameworks, assumptions about well-being, and the improvisational and generally uncertain nature of the caring projects through which lives, and childhoods, take shape.

Sign reading is part of the building, producing, dancing of specific caring projects, moving through time. The process also enters into the juxtaposition and interrelationship of multiple caring projects within a neighborhood, school, or community. Adults and children read signs of care across cultural and class divides, as well as across differences in child-rearing philosophies. Some middle-class Oakdale families actively engage with the world of lessons, sports, camps, and other scheduled out-of-school activities. But others, who find that approach "too structured," believe that good care entails giving children time to "just hang out and be a child" (Lareau 1998). Cross-project readings may be conducted with idle, ambivalent, or appreciative curiosity; a wish to reach out and find common ground; suspicion and self-protection; or with the intent of reaffirming stereotypes and distancing oneself, and one's children, from a socially distant Other. Practices of sign reading help constitute and regulate social relations across lines of social class, racialized ethnicity, and gender.

Children's autonomous use of public space, a highly visible sign of family caring practices, is a staple item in menus of parent talk. For example, a white, middle-class mother commented in an interview that she thought a Yemeni family was neglectful because they let their six-year-old boy walk to and from school by himself. But the boy's mother saw no problem in letting her young son walk alone along the safe and much traveled few blocks between home and school. Boys in the Yemeni extended family help out in the family liquor store as young as seven, and a certain amount of spatial autonomy is a routine part of their upbringing. Yemeni girls are more closely watched and protected.

The question of how much spatial autonomy a child should have, and at what age, is an especially fraught subject because it taps into concerns about safety and about how to reconcile the contradiction between children's need for protection and their need for self-determination. In our group interviews with fifth and sixth graders, we heard many stories of negotiation and conflict over after-school arrangements. For example, some kids thought it was "babyish" to be picked up, but others

found it a burden that they had to walk or take the bus long distances; one pushed to go to Kids' Klub rather than to his grandmother's apartment after school; several found it scary, although perhaps a family necessity, to be home alone after school, while others begged for the opportunity. (For insightful research on children's negotiations of autonomy, see Brannen and O'Brien [1996]; Polatnick, [1999]; and Solberg [1990].)

Kids who walk on their own and/or who take care of themselves at home after school can often recite specific family rules governing these activities, e.g., "I have to be home by four or I get in trouble." "My mom says that I have to walk this certain route." "I kept telling my mom I was too old to be picked up; now she lets me walk home if one of my friends is with me." "When I get home, I have to keep the door locked, and I can't use the stove." "I can't answer the phone unless it rings twice and stops, and then rings again; that's a signal that my dad or someone else from his job is phoning to check on me." Kids sometimes use their knowledge of the practices of other families to justify claims for expanded autonomy ("But Donald's mother lets him stop at McDonald's on the way home. . .").

Living in a culturally and economically diverse community sharpens awareness not only of variation in childrearing practices, but also, in effect, of childhood as a social construction, as do dramatic changes, spontaneously mentioned by many of the parents we have interviewed, between the circumstances in which children grow up now compared with memories of past childhoods (the contrast is especially vivid in the accounts of immigrants from rural parts of Mexico or Asia). Everyone agrees that growing up now is much more risky than in the past, with dangers like child kidnapping, sexual abuse, street crime, drugs, gangs, the availability of guns, media violence, and consumer culture. The sheer uncertainty of the future in a rapidly changing world compounds the worry. Which leads to my next topic: large-scale economic, social, and cultural shifts that are altering the dynamics of contemporary childhoods as well as work and families.

The Changing Contours of Childhoods, Work, and Families

Our study of urban California childhoods in the late 1990s is framed by questions about the effects of large-scale economic and political changes on the everyday lives and experiences of children.

The literature on work and family focuses some of these changes, such as the rising employment rates of mothers and their continuing, disproportionate responsibility for the "second shift" of housework and child care (Hochschild 1989), expanded use of child care arrangements outside the home, a widely experienced speed up and felt shortage of personal and family time, and the diversification of household types and meanings of "family."

All of these changes are linked to major structural transformations that have received far too little attention in the study of family and work, as discussed by Harriet Gross (forthcoming). Global economic changes have set migration streams in motion, with California as one of the major destinations (a third of all California children now speak a language other than English at home). An unleashing of market forces has been accompanied by cutbacks in state provisioning for social welfare, resulting in a dramatic widening of income gaps. In Oakland, as in the U.S. as a whole, over 20% of children now live in poverty.[4] The contexts of childrearing have also been reshaped in many communities by the deterioration of public schools, parks, libraries, and transportation systems and by the unraveling of neighborhoods and voluntary organizations like scouts and Campfire Girls.

In an age-segmented twist of the commodification of everything, markets in child products and services are now flourishing in metropolitan areas like Oakland, with an array of private schools, preschools, daycare centers, camps, lessons, housekeepers, nannies, au pairs, paid domestic workers, household "organizers" (who will tidy up closets and drawers), birthday party planners, and taxi and van companies willing to move kids across long distances. In short, a privatized infrastructure for raising children has consolidated, with access and quality depending on one's ability to pay (the low-cost versions of paid after-school care tend to be primarily custodial). Affluent children whose lives are organized almost entirely through the market are increasingly sealed off from contact with lower-income and even middle-class children. The economic and social distance between childhoods in the Oakland "hills" and those in the poorest parts of the "flats" is a microcosm of a social class bifurcation that is deeper now in the U.S. than at any other time in the twentieth century.

Conclusion

In this paper I have argued that a broader approach to studying children, attentive to their agency and informed by theories of care, can not only enrich, but also provide leads for re-visioning the study of work and family. Re-visioning is much needed because the study of work and family is a hybrid field that is narrowly framed and in need of theoretical integration. Note the telling vocabulary and syntax that define this field: two nouns linked by a hyphen and by an array of other words ("work-family nexus," "relations between work and family," "balancing work and family," "juggling work and family") signaling connection. The paired terms, *work and family*, still carry baggage from the nineteenth-century gendered ideology of "separate spheres," although there has been considerable progress in challenging this ideology and in theorizing the changing dynamics of gender.

What is work? What is family? Most of the literature on work and family takes these categories to be self-evident, using them in ways that gloss complex, contradictory, and shifting realities even as the categories continue to order perceptions of the world. Dorothy Smith (1993) has insightfully discussed the use of self-referential "ideological codes" that draw on commonsense typifications in an unexamined way (also see Bourdieu 1996). A good example is the use of the term *working families* to stake out and draw boundaries around a terrain of study. The term, as Loic Wacquant (1999) has argued, is haunted by the lives it excludes — "non-working," "non-families," i.e., the stigmatized "underclass." Other terms, such as *middle-class, dual-earner families*, have also been artificially fixed, reified, and sliced from relational and historical contexts. The connecting, hyphenating, "linkage" vocabulary of work-family research, including the circus imagery of individual performers "juggling" and "balancing," signals a field that has been cut off from its historical and contextual moorings.

How can one move beyond this problematic framing? First, by using concepts in a more self-reflective way, alert to underlying assumptions and the realities they may obscure, as well as the realities they may help constitute and reproduce. Another strategy is to define research topics informed by larger historical, social, and cultural contexts. Dramatic structural transformations (such as global economic shifts and cutbacks by the state) that are reshaping work, family, and the rest of the social life should be brought to the forefront of this area of study.

Finally, the study of work and family can be re-visioned by breaking with the "linkages" framework and pursuing research topics with more solid theoretical grounding. Some of the most fruitful topics illuminate social processes that don't necessarily stop at the prespecified boundaries of "work" or "family," such as changing divisions of labor, trade-offs between time and money, patterns of reciprocity and obligation, the dynamics of consumerism, quests for economic and physical security in an increasingly unstable world, and the giving and receiving of care. Theories of care provide especially generative leads for studying children and for framing a wide range of topics that move beyond the limiting discourse of work and family (Hochschild 1999). By highlighting relations of interdependence and raising questions about human needs, theories of care can also provide critical perspective on the instrumental values that permeate the literature on work and family.

Notes

1. Our study of contemporary childhoods began in the Pico Union area of Los Angeles, a low-income community of immigrants from Mexico, Central America, and Korea (Marjorie Faulstich Orellana has taken primary responsibility for research in that site). This paper draws on data gathered between 1996 and 1999 in our second site, the intake area of a public school in a mixed-income, ethnically diverse area of Oakland.

2. People caught up in fateful but unpredictable situations often engage in collective efforts to reduce feelings of uncertainty. Thus parents coping with the uncertainties of childrearing have something in common with patients in a TB sanitarium who look for clues that might predict the course of an unpredictable disease (Roth 1963) and with people in situations of war and internment who circulate rumors to try to fill gaps of information (Shibutani 1966).

3. After the spring 1999 high school shooting rampage in Littleton, Colorado, the news media reverberated with questions about why the parents of the two killers didn't pick up signs that their sons were in trouble. How did seemingly "normal" (white, middle-class, married, suburban) parents raise up teenagers steeped in fantasies of violence and capable of murder? Littleton has become a symbol of the painful uncertainty of caring projects, the connected themes of threat and victimization that permeate contemporary representations of children and teens, and the ambiguous line between healthy parental vigilance and excessive snooping and efforts to control.

4. According to a 1995 study by Rainwater and Smeeding, without government tax and transfers, 25% of children in France and in the U.S. would live in poverty. In France, government tax and transfers have lowered the figure to 6.5%, but in the U.S., government policies have reduced the figure only marginally, to 21.5%.

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