

***Contemporary Motherhood:  
The impact of children on adult time  
Craig, Lyn. (2007). Aldershot: Ashgate***

*Reviewed by Lesley Patterson*

In her analysis of Australian time-use data, Lyn Craig presents a convincing argument that the so-called ‘sexual revolution’ has stalled, especially in relation to the burden of work. The mismatch between considerable change in the public sphere and comparatively trivial changes in the private sphere mean that the benefits of the revolution have not been shared by all adults. The lives of childfree women have perhaps improved most. For these women ‘sexual liberation’ has been translated into increasingly ‘equal’ workforce participation rates, and increasingly ‘equal’ annual and lifetime earnings. However, Craig shows empirically the ways in which the lives of women who are mothers remain structured by the gendered performance of care work within family households. The ‘mother penalty’ leaves these women financially worse off across their lifetimes than men (including fathers) and childfree women. Thus, argues Craig, the ‘maternal wall’ (as opposed to glass ceiling) is not an outcome of gender alone, but an outcome of “the gendered effects of parenthood and other care responsibilities” (p 9).

In order to understand the implications of the stalled revolution, Craig focuses on both parenthood and gender. In a comprehensive and theoretically rich introductory chapter, Craig compares and contrasts a range of social scientific explanations for the gendered division of labour, as well as the meanings of parent- and childhood. Craig also reviews much of the existing empirical evidence on time-use. In terms of domestic work for example, numerous studies have shown that women are doing less unpaid work as they do more paid work, but that the gendered division of labour within households remains remarkably persistent. Along with chapter two, the early chapters provide a thorough background to the subsequent analysis Craig presents. She identifies the effect of children on adult time as a missing piece in the empirical puzzle,

and sets up her data-oriented chapters with this excellent overview of the complex interrelationships between parenthood, gender, care and paid work.

In chapter three, Craig uses Australian time-use data to explore the connections between who lives in a household and the amount of domestic labour and care work performed, focusing on the ‘magnitude’ of the impact of children on parental time. Craig begins by identifying ‘the partnership penalty’ (when couples form households women’s unpaid work goes up while men’s goes down), an effect that occurs irrespective of the women’s motherhood status, although the presence of children almost always “deepens the division of domestic labour” (p 50). As well, Craig explores the relationship between time-use, the number of children, and the number of co-residing parents. In terms of children, the first child has the greatest impact on adult time; in terms of parents, the absence of men in lone mother’s households only slightly reduces women’s domestic time-use. Fathers are much more likely to do more care and domestic work if they have only one or two children. Rather helpfully, Craig ties up these empirical strands with an illustrative personification of “the statistical average”:

If a woman wants to combine work and motherhood, and hopes for a spousal contribution to the housework, having one child may be the most effective course. Two children would be the optimal number if she hoped for more paternal involvement in childcare and were prepared to take on all the extra housework associated with children. More children than that and specialisation by women in unpaid labour and by men in paid labour is entrenched (p 47).

Chapters four through six explore in more detail various effects of children on adult time. In chapter four, the focus is on what type of work parents do in the presence of their children, as well as how much time they spend with them. Much care work with children is about ‘being present’ and this can be combined with other activities. Interestingly, Craig shows how ‘double activity’ is highly gendered, as is the nature of the care work performed. Women are more likely to do care related tasks that need to be completed at fixed times, while men spend time with their children when they have that time available. Women are more likely to do

other things while looking after children (for example, preparing a family meal), and men are more likely to provide care while the mother is also present. A greater proportion of the time fathers spend with their children is identified as play and talking time (an effect of the greater amount of time mothers spend in total with children, as well as the greater proportion of their time doing 'double activities'). Thus, Craig argues that paternal time with children is often less like work than maternal time with children. One possible outcome of this difference is how men and women might conceptualise care. For men, perhaps, "this arguably contributes to the perception that childcare is more of a leisure activity than a work activity" (p 69).

Chapter five goes on to explore the impact of non-parental child care on time-use (use of non-parental child care does not seem to alter gendered household patterns) while chapter six explores the impact of parental educational achievement level, and whether or not education 'protects' family households from gendered patterns of time-use (hardly at all). In chapter seven, international comparisons are drawn. Here, Craig explores the association between time-use and the social and policy context. Comparing Australia with Germany, Italy and Norway, Craig again demonstrates that the presence of children brings more unpaid work, and this is stronger the younger the child. However, she also shows there are significant differences across these four countries, something she tentatively explains by reference to policy regime, and suggests that time use may be a sensitive indicator of "the point a country has reached in the sex revolution" (p 129).

Having children, Craig argues, has "become increasingly problematic, despite its centrality to the human condition" (p 131). There are significant workload differences between adults who remain childfree and parents, and Craig wonders about the emergence of a new social divide between these groups, especially as parenthood is no longer a standard life experience for almost all. While the lives of parents and the childfree are likely to grow increasingly divergent, the gendered differences in parenting and the effect of children on adult time by gender remain strong (although this specialisation by sex is policy sensitive and varies cross-nationally). The masculinisation of women's paid work patterns have not been matched by a masculinisation of their domestic and care work

patterns, and the feminisation of men's care work has changed even less. Given this, Craig posits interesting questions about how the effects of children on adult time can best be addressed in the Australian political context, and offers some sage warnings about the possible consequences of no, or inadequate, political action to ameliorate current inequalities.

Although based on Australian time-use data, I suspect that many of Craig's findings are likely to be similar in New Zealand. Decisions about whether or not to have children, and who should do what when children arrive, occur within broadly similar political and social contexts, despite nationalist claims of difference. At the same time, popular discourses privileging gender equality as something already achieved are shown to be extremely flimsy against the empirical evidence, and one wonders how new parents today 'make sense' of their own parenting experiences in a context so structured by enduring differences. My only criticism of the book is the title itself. This is not really a book about 'contemporary motherhood'. Rather, Craig's focus on the impact of children on adult time is especially thought-provoking as it raises and illuminates important issues around both long-lasting and new dimensions of gendered inequality. Perhaps a more salient title could have been 'Contemporary Parenthood – the unequal impact of children on adult time'. The title, however, is of very minor concern. Given that Craig includes plenty of methodological detail, this excellent book undoubtedly hold the attention of researchers, as well as students interested in work, family life and gender.