



My Work Utopia: Pursuing A Satisfactory Work Life Amid an Alienating World

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Abstract: I began this paper describing how my emotional culture is about family and I made use of the word “choice.” This word is extremely indicative of my social location. I have been very fortunate to live in a country that, despite its numerous social problems, does in varying degrees allow its female population choices. American women are allowed more opportunities in how they structure their lives than most women in this patriarchal world we inhabit. Although we still work in sex segregated occupations, are paid less than men even when we are doing the same types of job, and do the lion’s share of the domestic work, I believe that equality between the sexes will eventually be achieved. The notion, if not yet the practice, of equal opportunity for both sexes has been part of American ideology since the second wave of feminism in the 1960s. The social world of the 1950s and 1960s, the time period that I grew up in, is vastly different from what is today.

My work utopia is based on my conceptions of family. What was and is in the best interests of my family has been the framework of my life. Family concerns have factored either consciously or unconsciously into my life decisions, such as where I’ve chosen to live, how I structure my time, what jobs I’ve worked at, how I have identified myself, and how others view me. For example, my choice of where to live once I left my childhood home was decided by my allegiance to my family. I have chosen to continue to live in the same city that I grew up in for the purpose of staying close to my father, disabled brother, and my sister because I was a significant part of their lives and they in mine. We share a sense of responsibility for one another and I needed to be in close proximity to them for a number of reasons.

Since the birth of my daughter, I have always identified myself as a “mother” when asked the question, “what do you do?” Although I knew people were inquiring as to what I did for paid employment, I wasn’t going to be defined by who I was as a person, by what I did or did not do for **wage labor**, the labor I performed for someone else in exchange for money. I identified myself as a mother because mothering is the work that gave me the most satisfaction. I am speaking in the past tense, as my daughter is now a young woman living on her own so I am not sure I would still identify myself primarily as a mother. Although, I am still a mother, I don’t work as intensely at **subsistence** work as I did when my daughter was younger. Of course, I still maintain a home, grocery shop, cook, emotionally nurture and

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perform other tasks necessary for survival, but I do this primarily for myself and my partner these days. Also, because I no longer have to economically provide for my daughter, I don't feel the pressure of having to do as much wage work as I sometimes did when my daughter was still living with me. Therefore, I don't feel the subsistence work I do at this point in my life is as labor intensive.

For most of the years that my daughter lived with me, it was just she and I that made up our immediate **household**. Torry Dickinson and Robert Schaeffer (2001), in their book, *Fast Forward*, identify households as an economic organizational unit where workers live together and "pool and redistribute tasks, resources, and income" (p. 29). I provided the resources and income in our very small household so there wasn't a lot of pooling and redistributing going on until my daughter began working in the **formal economy**—that is, when my daughter began working for an employer who was recognized as a legitimate business operator by the government and was paid a salary in which taxes were withheld; that is also when she started paying for her own cell phone bills, buying some of her own clothing, and paying for entertainment such as movies and concerts.

When thinking about the distribution of tasks within our household, I have to confess to being a parent similar to the parents in the U.S. that Frances Goldscheider and Linda Waite (2001) describe in their article, "Children's Share in Household Tasks" in *Shifting the Center: Understanding Contemporary Families, Second Edition* edited by Susan Ferguson. I was definitely ambivalent about my child's role in our household economy. Like the parents that the author's describe, I would say that I didn't "require the child's labor in running the house" (p. 251). I did almost all of the work in maintaining our home and very rarely gave my daughter any consistent **chores** such as washing the dishes,

taking out the trash, doing laundry, etc., in order to prepare her for running a home of her own in the future. I don't see that learning how to do chores necessarily builds character. My expectations for my daughter were that she assist me when I ask for help, that she work at being a student, and that she pick up after herself. She was never given an allowance or paid to do any chores.

Goldscheider and Waite write that the "ideal American child has been transformed from a *useful child* to a *useless child*" because there is now an expectation that "parents should exert themselves to the utmost to ensure that their children grow up to be successes" rather than an expectation that "children should help their parents" (p. 251). The term "useless child" is rather harsh in describing a child that isn't expected to do a lot of chores around the house. I don't have a problem with parents exerting themselves to ensure that their children grow up to be successful. It depends on how you interpret success. I would consider my daughter a success if she were a happy, imaginative, emotionally secure person who enjoyed life and respected all living things. I could care less what she chose as an occupation but I would hope that she receive some satisfaction from what she did. I also think if you raise a loving person, there isn't an issue about helping out when needed.

I was also conflicted about how much housework I wanted my daughter to do because she was female. I didn't want her to grow up thinking she was responsible for all of the unpaid domestic work that goes into maintaining a home. I wanted her to realize that there was such a thing as **gender equality** in the household—that both males and females should share equally in household tasks and caregiving. We didn't have a gendered household because there were no males living in our house. There was no **gendered division of labor** in our household because we did it

all. My daughter and I were not the traditional family with a **male breadwinner** who worked outside the home earning a family wage in order to support us. I played that role and along with doing what has traditionally been considered the female work in the house—the cooking, cleaning, washing, etc. I also did the work that would be considered male. I moved furniture, did yard work, took out the trash, repaired cracks in the walls, hired tradespeople to do the work I was unable to, etc. If I wasn't expecting my daughter to do the "male" chores, then I wasn't going to expect her to do the "female" chores either.

I should note that my daughter was really part of two households. Although, I was the parent who was the main economic provider, my daughter's father did a lot of **share work**. Dickinson and Schaeffer (2001) describe share work as the type of work that people who are outside the household do when they help out and share resources. These resources could be tangible things such as materials and money or intangible things like time and emotion work. My daughter's father spent a great deal of time with our daughter and shared the emotional work of raising a child. He also shared money with me when he could. There is a great deal of **emotional work** involved in raising children. Parents are supposed to provide emotional stability and emotional security and this involves at times masking feelings of hurt, frustration and anger for the sake of familial harmony. My daughter's father also did subsistence work for her which helped providing her with a home part of the time and feeding her.

Because my daughter's father lived alone off and on, he did a lot of what is traditionally considered female household tasks. His apartment was always immaculate and he is a superb cook who enjoys cooking and feeding people. He shares fully in **kin-work**. Micaela di Leonardo (1998) in the chapter entitled, "The Female

World of Cards and Holidays: Women, Families, and the Work of Kinship" in the book *Families in the U.S.: Kinship and Domestic Politics* edited by Karen Hanson and Anita Iltis Gerry, describes kin work as "the conception, maintenance, and ritual celebration of cross-household kin ties, including visits, letters, telephone calls, presents and cards, and the organization of holiday gatherings" (p. 419). She notes that this work is another type of unpaid female work that is considered part of the separate sphere of the home as opposed to the public sphere. I agree that kin-work is definitely work, however, my own experience does not support that kin-work is gendered. Not only does my current partner fully participate in kin-work, as does my daughter's father, but I learned the importance of kin-work first and foremost from my father. All of the males that I have lived with and have played important roles in my life, including my uncles and male cousins, love to participate in celebrations. They do and have done a great deal of the feeding work involved in holiday and other celebrations. They also make phone calls to family members, send cards, write letters, purchase gifts and plan and organize across-household events. They have done this kind of work and continue to do so without needing a female to organize things.

By identifying myself as a mother, I was making reference to a broader conception of the term "work" than most people do. I don't think most people think of mothering as work because it is non-market care labor and as Paula England and Nancy Folbre (2006) point out in their article, "Capitalism and the Erosion of Care," what has interested social theorists and economists is the type of labor that is done in the competitive marketplace. They point out that "the nonmarket work of women, a primary source of caring labor, has been explicitly excluded from most economic analysis" (p. 502). Living in the United States, the premier capitalist country in the

world, I am part of a culture that according to Ann Crittenden (2006) in "How Mothers' Work Was "Disappeared," "measures worth and achievement almost solely in terms of money" (p. 18). Mothers are not paid for the intensive work that they do taking care of what are arguably any nation's most vital resource—children. They are also not rewarded economically for what England and Folbre term the "externalities" of their labor. When talking about "externalities," the authors are referring to the overall benefits that society reaps by the work women do in raising "responsible, skilled, and loving adults" (p. 498) who add value to the community at large by being good neighbors and citizens. They also point out that employers in the marketplace benefit from the unpaid labor of women who raise children because "employers profit from access to competent, disciplined, and cooperative workers" (p. 498).

England and Folbre note that a lot of care work involves an emotional connection to the work and that there are intrinsic rewards to care work. This was certainly true in my case. The work I did as a mother was enjoyable as well as satisfying because I was emotionally connected to the work. I didn't experience what Marx called "**alienation**" from this work. Karl Marx describes alienation as a consequence of people feeling not only disconnected to the objects they produce but also disconnected from the activity of producing. The work involved in mothering, like the other forms of caregiving work that I have done, wasn't external or alien to me. It was directly the opposite of how Marx describes alienated labor. I did confirm myself in this type of work, I was happy, and I did deploy free physical and intellectual energy. My work as a mother wasn't being bought and sold as a **commodity**, and I wasn't doing this work out of a need to maintain my physical existence. This is true also for the caregiving work I did when taking care of my

father when he was older and ill and the type of work I still do for my disabled brother.

I have done other types of caregiving work that I was paid for and did do out of a need to maintain my physical existence. After my daughter was born, I continued working for a while at my wage job where I worked 30 hours a week in order to keep the health insurance benefits which were critical for all of the doctor's appointments that newborns need. I condensed my workweek into three ten-hour days. My daughter's father's sister came to live with us during the summer while she was on break from college and watched my daughter when I went to work. It was a great arrangement. She wanted to be in Cambridge for the summer and had four days to do what she wanted and I and my daughter's father supported her while she lived with us in exchange for the childcare. When she had to go back to school, I was unhappy thinking about leaving my daughter with anyone else so I decided that it wasn't worth it both emotionally and economically to continue working at my paid job. My daughter's father was able to pick up the health insurance benefits through his job but we still needed to make up for the income that we were going to lose by my quitting my job. I decided to do some **enterprising work**. Since I was going to be home taking care of one small child, I decided I could also take care of one or two other children which was not part of the formal economy. I did this for a while and made strong friendships with my customers and their children. I still keep in touch with the children I took care of during those years.

When my daughter was much older and in college, I did another type of caregiving that was paid work and I did this work because once again my family needed additional income. College is expensive and I was by this time working full-time and making a decent enough salary that

our family didn't qualify for much in terms of financial aid. In order to help reduce the amount of the loans my daughter and I would have to take out to pay for college, I decided to take a part-time job a few evenings a week and began working for an agency that provided care to developmentally disabled adults. I loved working with this population and once again doing care work was very satisfying.

However, I didn't enjoy working for the agency that hired me. The agency was extremely **bureaucratic**. It was hierarchical in structure and had almost limitless rules and regulations. Aside from providing direct care for individuals, there were constant training sessions that were mandatory, staff meetings, and always lots of paperwork and forms that needed to be filled out. In addition, the rules and regulations would change frequently requiring more trainings and new forms to be filled out and filed. The job paid \$11 an hour. The upper management was incompetent and unresponsive to the needs of the direct-care workers.

The agency I worked for is not unique in the privatized human services sector. England and Folbre (2006) write about the deterioration of care when public sector services are privatized and argue that the "commodification of care" (p. 505) effects the quality of care. Although they note that "service-oriented companies" (p. 501) are less impacted by **globalization** than are other industries such as manufacturing; they wryly note that "in the future, we may ship off our children, sick, and elderly to low-wage countries to be cared for—or simply import more low-wage immigrants to care for them here" (p. 502). According to Steven Vallas, William Finlay and Amy Wharton (2009), the authors of *The Sociology of Work: Structures and Inequalities*, "globalization" refers to "the extension of economic activities across national boundaries, yielding networks of production, exchange, and consumption that embed

spatially dispersed regions of the world within a single, highly interwoven system" (p. 316). The process of globalization allows for the transfer of capital and jobs overseas to take advantage of cheap labor pools and for the importation of cheaper priced goods that are manufactured abroad. It has also resulted in the migration of workers from Third World countries to First World countries who are hoping to find better-paying jobs in wealthy, industrialized nations. These new immigrants provide employers in wealthier nations with access to cheap labor.

Although of course England and Folbre are being sarcastic regarding the U.S. shipping its citizens in need of care overseas, they are on the mark regarding importing low-wage immigrants to do the care work. Across the board, you would be hard pressed to find any American-born citizen working in group homes doing direct-care. By the time I stopped working for the agency, almost the entire direct care-staff were either Haitian or African. My brother lives in a group home that is managed by another agency and the staff providing direct care are all Haitian. The upper management of these agencies are usually white and American but the staff doing the direct-care work are overwhelming black and foreign born. As the authors point out, quality of care is hard to measure but I feel that as the direct care staff of the agency I worked for became comprised of predominantly foreign-born workers, the quality of care suffered due to language and cultural barriers, inadequate training, and different attitudes towards work.

Another disturbing problem with the privatization of a service that used to be in the public sector is that lower-level staff are **exploited**. Exploitation of workers involves workers not being justly compensated for the work they do and unfair treatment of workers usually in order to benefit an employer. Before the human services industry in Massachusetts was privatized,

employees doing human service work for the developmentally disabled came under the auspices of a state agency, the Department of Mental Retardation. As such, the workers were state employees who received structured pay raises and state benefits. When the state privatized the human services industry, employees lost their status as state employees and became employees of privately owned companies. The agency I worked for had no structural pay increases and agencies are forbidden from advocating for increases in salary for their employees because salaries are tied to allocations from the state budget and there are conflict of interest issues. Direct-care staff are powerless and in desperate need of unionization, although I'm not sure if forming a union is even permissible for these employees because of state regulations. Because the majority of direct-care staff are newcomers to this country, they may also be unaware of their rights as workers.

My narrative so far has addressed my work as a caregiver both paid and unpaid since that is the work I value most. However, for almost as long as I have been a mother, I have also been employed as a wage-worker at one place of employment. I recently took early retirement from Harvard University, the institution that I worked for during the past twenty years. What surprises me is that I have absolutely no emotional attachment to the institution. In fact, after I decided to take early retirement, I had a sensation of elation—I felt that I was emerging from some sort of cocoon.

Although I have been retired for less than a year, my years of working at Harvard seem like a very distant and detached memory. I still think about the developmentally disabled clients I worked with and wonder how they are and have a store of funny and poignant memories from my year and a half working with them. However, when I think of the institution that I spent twenty years of my life at,

I draw a blank and that's because of the type of work I did. The work itself had no real significance for me, it was a means to making money in order to provide for my daughter and myself. In this respect, the product and the production activity were alien to me. As noted earlier, Marx believes that the alienation of labor is one of the effects of the system of industrialized **capitalism**, the economic system consisting of the mass production of goods that has resulted in the commodification of labor-power with the profits from the sale of goods produced by this labor power ending up in the hands of the owners of the means of production. In my case, the owners of the means of production were the Harvard Corporation and Board of Overseers who run a private institution of higher education with enormous wealth. Harvard's endowment funds total double digit billions of dollars and their endowment is larger than the total wealth of some Third World countries.

Harvard was also a place where the emotional geography was family-friendly which allowed for the integration of the two separate spheres of work and family. Arlie Hochschild (2007) in her chapter, "The Emotional Geography of Work and Family Life," published in the book edited by Susan Ferguson, *Shifting the Center: Understanding Contemporary Families*, gives a list of programs that companies with "warm modern" philosophies implement. She defines the term "warm modern" to point out how the workplace should be humane and egalitarian. (p. 685). Harvard offered flexible time, work sharing, regular part-time work, telecommuting, and generous vacation and sick time. Harvard also had an office dedicated to programs that addressed work-family balance issues. As far as offering ideal conditions for working mothers, Harvard was exemplary. The reason I decided to apply for employment at Harvard was because their system of **welfare capitalism** was hard to beat.

Harvard offered full benefits for part-time employees who consistently worked at least seventeen and a half hours a week. In the late 1980s, this was extremely unusual and still is today in most sectors outside of the education sector. Offering full benefits to part-time workers is somewhat standard amongst institutions of higher education, especially in a place like Boston where there are so many colleges and universities competing for workers. Because I wanted to work only part-time in order to still be able to have quantity time, as well as quality time, with my daughter—yet needed health insurance, dental insurance, worker's compensation, short-term disability insurance, and the other benefits that a system of welfare capitalism provides—Harvard seemed like a sensible choice for a place of employment.

Unlike the workers that Hochschild profiles in her article, I did take advantage of every family-friendly benefit Harvard had to offer. I was able to get my daughter into one of the Harvard-owned daycare centers that was within 5 minutes walking distance from where I worked and I applied for and was given a child-care scholarship that paid for almost all of the daycare costs. I routinely used all of my generous vacation time, nearly six weeks a year and I not only worked part-time for my first few years there, I always worked a flexible schedule. I could leave work personal reasons such as attending an event at my child's school and this was invaluable to me. I could also work extra hours and bank these hours to be used at my discretion. I honestly can't say enough about what an ideal employer Harvard was for me.

However, I don't want to give the impression that Harvard is an egalitarian institution because it isn't. It is an extremely hierarchical institution of white privilege that reflects the underlying sexism and racism of our society at large. Although it is slowly changing, it has a

history of denying access to everyone who wasn't white and male. Up until very recently, there were very few, if any, women and non-white males in positions of power. The higher levels of administration were all male until the recent appointment of a woman as President of the university. The tenured faculty are still predominantly white males and there are very few non-white faculty of any rank. Harvard is an extremely **racialized** place. Even the overwhelming majority of clerical staff and research assistants are white. In all of my years at working at Harvard, out of hundreds of contacts, I only met a handful of minority staff. There is still an implicit bias against people of color at Harvard regardless of the discourse about diversity. There is no doubt in my mind that I was hired by Harvard and was able to reap the rewards of their excellent benefits programs because I was white.

Harvard is making attempts to diversify their student population and they state publicly that they are a supporter of **affirmative action** policies. They have changed their admissions process and actively recruit underrepresented minority applicants. Underrepresented minority populations at Harvard would include African-American, Hispanic and Native American people. Harvard's undergraduate student body is fifty-six percent female and women make up sixty percent of the students studying for master's degrees. Harvard's gender make-up reflects the trend nationwide in which more women than men are attending institutions of higher education. "Minority" also includes income levels. Although Harvard has for years had a "needs blind" admission process and offered generous scholarships, it has recently changed its financial aid policies and offers free tuition and board to any student who is admitted whose family income totals less than \$100,000. Harvard understands that there isn't equal educational and economic opportunity for all in

this country. However, there continues to be scarce diversity in the makeup of their faculty and even scarcer diversity in the makeup of employees. The only minority employees of any size are invisible to most of the university population. They are the employees who clean the numerous campus buildings overnight. The janitorial staff are primarily Hispanic and black.

Harvard's generous family-friendly benefits were also fought for and won by the Harvard Union of Technical and Clerical Workers, a self-organized labor union with a membership of 4,800 workers. Because clerical work is a **sex typed occupation** in that the overwhelming majority of clerical workers are female, it would stand to reason that a union of clerical workers would be almost completely female, which it is. David Cotter, Joan Hermsen, and Reeve Vannerman (2006) in their article, "Gender Inequality at Work" in *Working in America: Continuity, Conflict, and Change* edited by Amy Wharton, note that "scholars examining gender segregation have commonly treated occupations in which more than 70 percent of the workers are of one sex as "sex-typed" occupations" (p. 191). The executive board of HUCTW is 71 percent female and 75 percent of the principal officers are women, reflecting the overall gender makeup of the clerical staff. HUCTW has become a powerful union and since its inception it has not only significantly raised the salaries of the clerical staff, it has also focused on issues that are important to women. The union is somewhat unique also in that it makes use of women's skills in relationship building. The union prides itself in maintaining a good working relationship with management by using humor, kindness and respect as opposed to antagonizing political game playing. However, the union is also capable of exerting political pressure in getting what it wants for its members. HUCTW has been extremely successful in negotiating excellent contracts and their efforts at improving

the quality of their members' work lives have also benefitted the employees outside the union.

The production of work at Harvard did not resemble the model of production that Vallas, Finlay, and Wharton describe as a component of **fordism**. The authors describe how Henry Ford's "methods of organizing work and workers" ultimately "came to define industrialist capital society" (p. 85) in the twentieth century. They note how Ford in his production processes utilized the methods of scientific management pioneered by Frederick Winslow Taylor. Taylor was concerned with the notions of time and efficiency. He believed that the knowledge and skill needed to produce objects could be broken down into smaller parts and that production knowledge should be in the hands of managers and supervisors rather than in the hands of workers. Taylor did time and motion studies to see how long it takes to do a task and to see if there were any unnecessary motions that could be eliminated in order to speed up production. Ford's invention of the assembly line method to build cars not only broke the task of producing an automobile into simple, repetitive motions, but the labor involved in assembling different parts was interchangeable. The authors note how the assembly line mode of production increased the efficiency and speed of the mass production of goods but this came at the cost of worker immiseration. In order to keep workers in his employ, Ford also instigated a program offering a decent wage and benefits which kept his workers tied to his company.

Although I wouldn't consider my job at Harvard comparable to the Ford assembly line model of production, my workload did over time quadruple. I was doing a significant amount of more work for the same amount of pay and although there wasn't the type of "time and motion" studies done by Taylor conducted at Harvard, Harvard did hire outside consultants to conduct a

review of departments in order to calculate the administrative needs for each department. The purpose of these reviews wasn't clear. The review process was portrayed as upper management wanting to know if departments needed more human resource allocations; however, they could also be used by management to see how administratively "lean" departments operated. What kept me tied to Harvard was not any particular enjoyment of the work I did; rather, I became dependent on the relatively good rate of pay and the benefits.

When Harvard offered early retirement to their longer service employees during the financial crisis of 2009, I decided to take them up on their offer so that I could shake myself out of complacency and re-envision what it was I wanted to do. At my retirement party, people wanted to know what I was going to do now that I was leaving Harvard. There was shocked disbelief reaction to my response that I was finally going to do what I always wanted to do—be a stay at home mom. Of course I was being a bit facetious as my daughter was grown and already out of the house. However, I have decided to do what I like doing best and that is learning and caregiving. I am now finishing up my undergraduate coursework and taking care of two young children part-time after school. I work harder at both of these two things than I ever did at Harvard but I enjoy the work so much more.

I began this paper describing how my emotional culture is about family and I made use of the word "choice." This word is extremely indicative of my social location. I have been very fortunate to live in a country that, despite its numerous social problems, does in varying degrees allow its female population choices. American women are allowed more opportunities in how they structure their lives than most women in this patriarchal world we inhabit. Although we still work in sex segregated occupations, are paid less than

men even when we are doing the same types of job, and do the lion's share of the domestic work, I believe that equality between the sexes will eventually be achieved. The notion, if not yet the practice, of equal opportunity for both sexes has been part of American ideology since the second wave of feminism in the 1960s. The social world of the 1950s and 1960s, the time period that I grew up in, is vastly different from what is today.

Women in the United States today can envision and live alternative lifestyles without experiencing social stigma. We now live alone, head households, live with domestic partners of both sexes and are no longer dependent upon men for our economic survival. We may pay economic penalties by not choosing to avail ourselves of some of the economic cushion that marriage provides and we may pay the "mommy tax." However, we are also allowed personal freedoms because we have the economic options that living in a wealthy, industrialized country that needs our labor allows.

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