

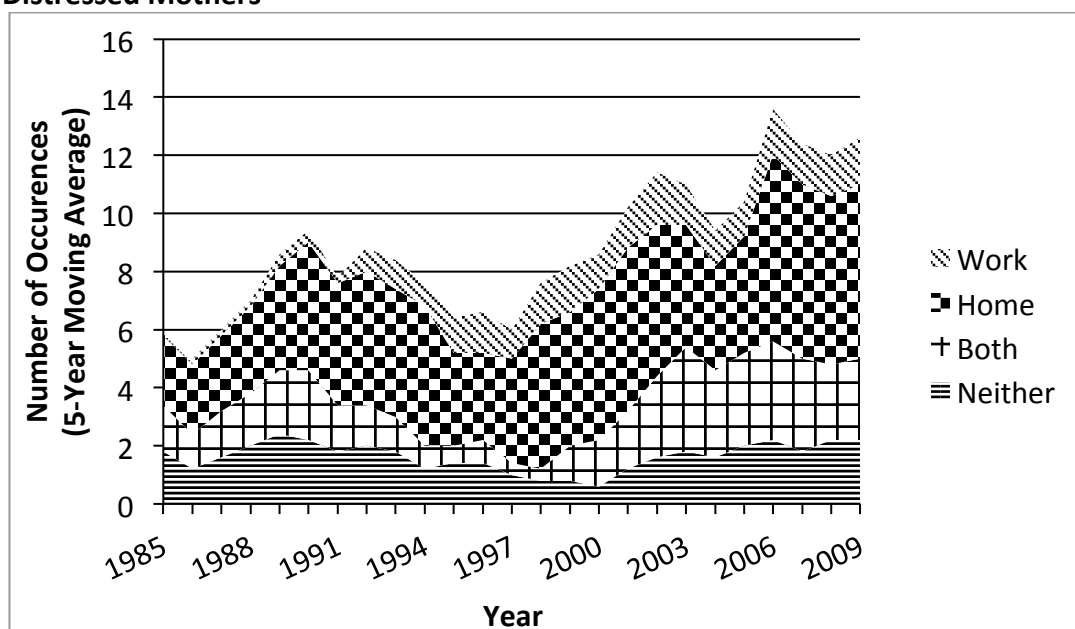
The Distressed Working Mother Schema: An Unintended Cultural Source of the Stalled Gender Revolution?

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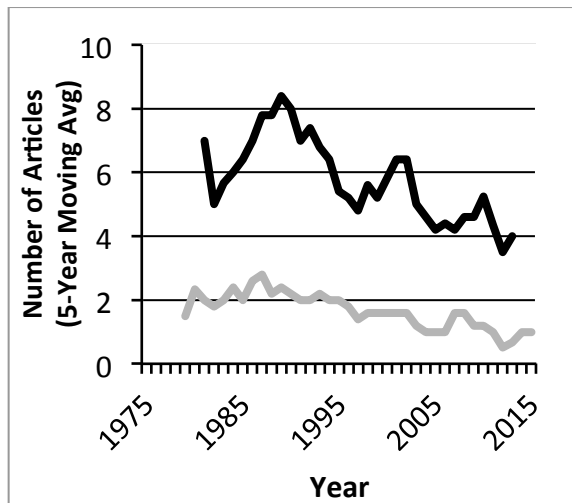
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Abstract: Rising concern over a reasonable work-family balance has supported a narrative about distressed working mothers whose inflexible work environments have led to impossibly conflicting demands. Paradoxically, a similar distressed working mothers narrative emerged from the conservative backlash to feminism, claiming that feminist advances for women in the workplace have led mainly to guilt-ridden mothers stressed out by trying to “have it all”. We examine how working mothers narratives changed over time by coding 808 New York Times articles and 568 Washington Post articles over three decades. We find marked growth in the 1990s of stories containing a theme of distressed working mothers. In contrast, we find declines since the 1980s in traditional familism’s critique that mothers’ employment harms *children*. Feminist themes of the benefits of work for working mothers show a third pattern of no secular trend over the three decades. The distressed working mothers schema reinforces and is reinforced by other schemas critiquing working mothers such as ‘opting out’ (stories of working mothers leaving careers to care for children) and ‘mommy wars’ (criticisms of working mothers coming from same generation stay-at-home mothers). Each of these also shows increases beginning in the 1990s and continuing through the first decade of the century. We argue that these cultural schemas critiquing working mothers combined to create a space conducive to the stall in the gender revolution that also occurred in the middle of the 1990s.

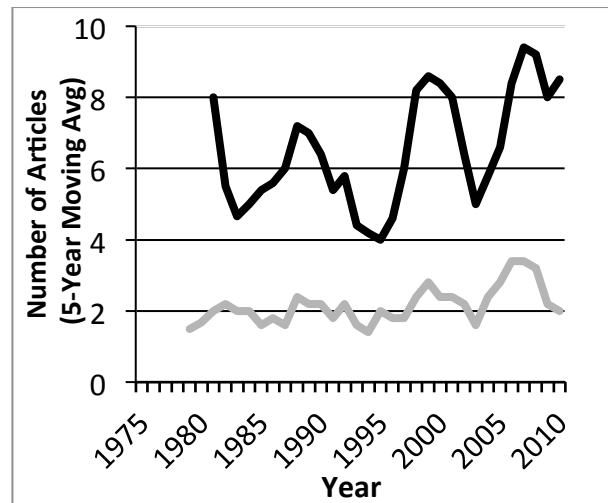
Distressed Mothers



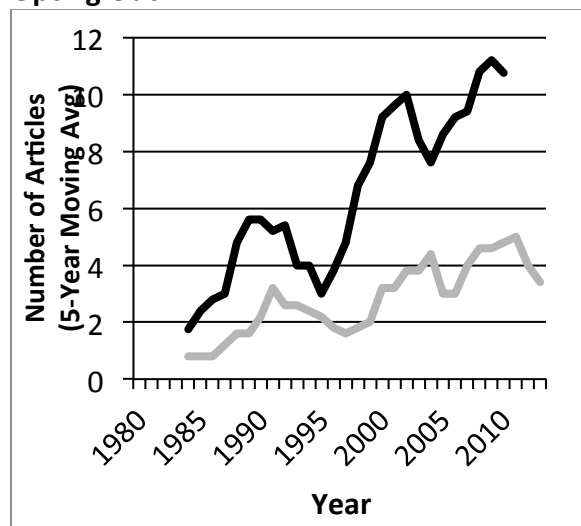
Work Hurts Children



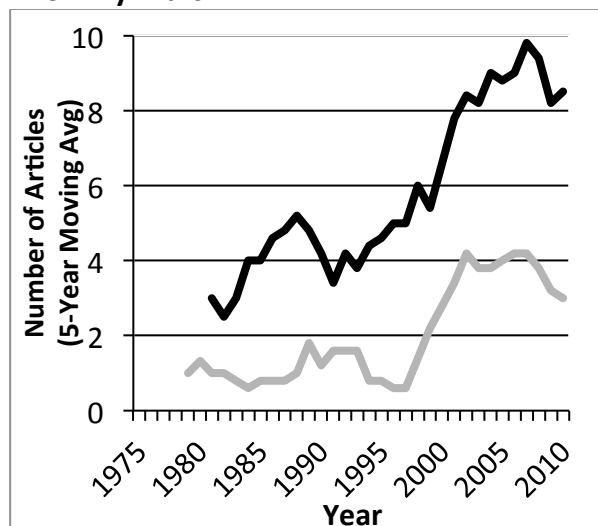
Benefits of Work for Mothers



Opting Out



Mommy Wars



Black line is New York Times; Gray line is Washington Post

Code Definitions:

Distressed Working Mothers: The stress, guilt, or other problems for mothers from combining work and parenting; negative effects on home/ self because of work; negative effects on work/ career; breastfeeding problems; economic costs of work; normative acknowledgement of preference for stay-at-home mothers. The New York Times was sub-coded into the distress originated 1) at home, 2) at work, 3) at both home and work, and 4) the location of the distress was not specified.

Work Hurts Children: Any educational, emotional, interpersonal or other problems of children of working mothers; less supervision or quality interaction with children by working mothers; also, expressions of concern about the effects of mother's work on children, even without actual evidence; problems of day care arrangements or complaints by children themselves.

Benefits of Work: A working mother's sense of fulfillment or self-confidence provided by work; a mother's report that she enjoys work or is looking for fulfilling work; added income or fringe benefits to family; working mothers who are cited as role models for society; others (experts, survey results, acquaintances, the general culture) say it is better for mothers to work.

Mommy Wars: Rivalry or jealousy between stay-at-home mothers and working mothers; stay-at-home versus working mothers debates or conflicts in cultural context or interpersonal struggle;

Opting Out: A working mother (or expectant mother) who quits her work ("opts out") or cuts back to part-time in order to spend more time with her children.