

Gerson, K. (1993). *No man's land: Men's changing commitments to family and work*. New York: Basic Books.

Reviewed by

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Biographical Information

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As we maneuver through uncharted waters toward an uncertain destination, the nature of our involvement in occupational and domestic life has become increasingly important. Kathleen Gerson provides her readers with a powerful analysis of three ways in which such meanings are developed and enacted among contemporary American men. Much of Gerson's discussion involves the connections between family and work — the two principal domains of adult life for most individuals — and on the surface her volume appears to be devoted to this relationship. On a broader level, however, this book is fundamentally concerned with macro-level social issues (social change, in particular) as the context within which both family and work are embedded, and as the engine which is generating micro-level changes in many men's perceptions, feelings, and behaviors regarding their parental and occupational commitments. Gerson suggests that it is social change which has created the "no man's land" between the front lines of traditional male social dominance and an inexorably emerging social landscape. Thus, the scope of Gerson's argument is vast, in that she attempts to elucidate the linkages between macro- and micro-level social phenomena, yet she handles it with an ease which belies the complexity of the subject under discussion.

Drawing on the data from her interviews of 138 men of diverse ethnic, educational, and social class backgrounds, Gerson sketches a portrait of three groups of young and middle-aged American men and their orientations toward family and work. On the basis of her interview data, these men are grouped into; (a) "breadwinning" fathers, who are the primary economic providers for their families but who are largely uninvested in everyday family life; (b) "autonomous" men, who have never married or who have experienced divorce and become estranged from their children; and (c) "involved" fathers, who are less committed to work than they are to childrearing, although they are seldom as committed to childrearing as their wives. Through her interviews, Gerson constructs multiple views of these three groups. Retrospective data trace the impact of these men's families of origin on their development in adulthood, recreating early patterns of their parents' involvement with work and with one another and the extent to which such patterns were embraced by Gerson's subjects in their own adult lives (i.e., the

reproduction of social relations with spouses, children, and occupations). The impact of chance and luck, those unforeseen life circumstances which served to open or foreclose occupational and family options, are also examined as these men consider who and what they are, as well as who and what they might have been (and may yet be).

It is important to note that Gerson's analysis appears to argue against strictly causal processes in the production of these groups of men. Early life experience and, more importantly, subsequent life circumstances, constraints, and opportunities served as sources of variation in individuals' orientations toward parenting and occupational attainment, not as irresistible forces toward specific adult outcomes. The past shapes the present, and our present choices shape the array of work and family configurations that we will encounter in the future, but Gerson's causal imagery does not permit antecedent factors to be mapped onto present or future consequences in a wholly deterministic fashion. Thus, it is the manner in which her subjects perceived and responded to their life experiences, not the simple presence or absence of the events themselves, that produced the differences between them.

In many ways, Gerson's analysis is both admirable and instructive. She provides an overview of our current knowledge regarding changes in American family composition, rates of marital dissolution, and labor force participation. She demonstrates an ability to put her research findings into a broader social context and, conversely, to use her knowledge of this context to interpret her results and make them meaningful. Gerson understands the nature of social systems and the ways in which systemic factors may facilitate and constrain the development of individuals and families. She realizes that the three patterns of male involvement in family life that she describes may be viewed from different perspectives, and she is careful to acknowledge that multiple viewpoints are possible. In a subtle way, Gerson also attends to theoretical issues concerning the dynamics of family relationships. For example, one could contend that a covert use of social exchange theory frames her discussion of the "dilemmas" involved in evaluating the advantages and disadvantages accompanying each of the three patterns, whereas a hidden equity theory interpretation is provided regarding the relative investment of marital partners in work, family, and childcare. The balancing act in which modern American families are currently engaged — wherein family commitments and occupational obligations are in many ways antithetical — is clearly acknowledged and discussed. Moreover, Gerson understands that families (particularly their children) are involved in this high-stakes balancing act without the benefit of a net.

With all of this said, there are features of Gerson's treatment that inspire some uncertainty in its evaluation. First, the topic of leisure occupies an inconspicuous place in this volume. As a result, the instructional value of this work is marginal in light of its neglect of leisure within the family or as a correlate of occupational conditions. Although leisure behavior is clearly implied in Gerson's discussion of family activities, its importance as a central feature of family interaction is not dealt with explicitly. By virtue of this undifferentiated treatment of family behavior, Gerson sheds no light on the extent to which mothers and fathers participate in domestic labor versus leisure pursuits. We have known for some time that the gender-segregated nature of domestic involvement usually

results in mothers' heavy responsibility for instrumental childcare tasks and fathers' primary role as playmate. Thus, in view of the fact that Gerson neglects to disentangle instrumental and leisure behavior, readers should not be unduly impressed by an apparently highly involved group of fathers since they likely make few meaningful contributions to the real work which occurs on a daily basis within these families.

Second, it is difficult to determine whether the differences that Gerson describes between these groups of men are "apparent" or "real" (i.e., statistically significant), in that neither the nature of her data nor the analyses that she conducted are clearly laid out for the reader. Third, the interpretation of husbands' attitudes and behaviors is murky without corresponding data from their wives (for those men who are or were married). Investigations of marriage and parenting should, ideally, involve both spouses, yet the extent to which husbands' attitudes (e.g., gender-role traditionality) and behaviors (e.g., the extent of their instrumental and childcare involvement) engendered spousal conflict or consensus remains unknown. Finally, readers should be cautious when assessing Gerson's inferences regarding the validity of her typology of male involvement as an indicator of current social patterns. One such concern, for example, involves the possibility that since some of her groups are very small (12 subjects, in some instances), she occasionally over-generalizes her results to the entire population of interest. The boundary between social science and social philosophy is sometimes a "no man's land" of its own, but if we are to make sense of our current circumstances — and Gerson's analysis — we would do well to firmly fix its position before we proceed to evaluate our future prospects.