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Book Review: Women at the Top: Powerful Leaders Tell Us How to Combine Work and Family

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Women at the Top: Powerful Leaders Tell Us How to Combine Work and Family.
2008. Diane F. Halpern and Fanny M. Cheung.. West Sussex, United Kingdom: Wiley-Blackwell. 292 pp. Illustrations, references, appendix, and index are included. \$23.96. (Hardcover).

Reviewed by Kristi R. Branham¹

Diane F. Halpern and Fanny M. Cheung bring impressive credentials to their collaboration on *Women at the Top: Powerful Leaders Tell Us How to Combine Work and Family*. A professor of psychology, Halpern is past-president of the Western Psychological Association, the Society for the Teaching of Psychology, and the American Psychology Association. Cheung, also a professor of psychology, is the founder and current director of the Gender Research Centre at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. At first glance, one might think *Women at the Top* is a collection of personal essays written by successful professional women, each essay detailing a strategy for negotiating the work-life balance. This is not the case. In *Women at the Top*, Halpern and Cheung commandeer a substantial body of research on the work-family dichotomy to argue for a re-imagining of these spheres as integral rather than separate. They claim that “the concept of work-family balance is outmoded. . . . The new approach of work-family life integration can promote a more equitable and effective workplace” (134). They set out to prove this claim through a cross-cultural analysis of life and work patterns of highly successful women from China, Hong Kong, and the United States. Their research includes interviews with sixty-two women, their ages ranging from mid-forties to early eighties. The interviewees have held top positions in corporations, universities, and government. Each had been married and was responsible for the care of children, siblings, or parents while pursuing professional careers. As Halpern and Cheung explain in the preface, “the two Chinese societies reflect convergent and divergent trends of development in women’s status while sharing the same cultural roots . . . Hong Kong also serves as a bridge in the contrast between Chinese and American women” (x).

Women at the Top is a timely addition to the conversation. The question of work-life balance for professional women in developed countries has been a hot topic since the last decades of the twentieth century. Halpern and Cheung first situate their analysis by referencing Felice Schwartz’s 1989 *Harvard Business Review* article in which she coined the term “mommy track.” The “mommy track” would allow business to acknowledge the care giving responsibilities of women executives through various policy measures such as flexible work schedules. As Halpern and Cheung note, Schwartz’s conceptualization of the “mommy track” drew criticism for its apparent essentializing of women’s care giving role and as a step to isolate professional women further from their male counterparts. In the first chapter, “For Women at the Top: How’s the Weather up There?” they argue that while significant progress has been made for professional women, there are still significant discrepancies between the success levels of women and men. Even as the “New Economy” would seem to play to women’s strengths with growth predominantly in the service and information sectors, women continue to cluster at mid-level positions, and “among the small percentage of high-level executives who are women, almost half do not

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have children” (4). According to Halpern and Cheung, work policies and legislation must be combined with changes to society’s gender expectations and divisions of labor.

Halpern and Cheung conduct a cross-cultural analysis of the work-life dichotomy in order to illuminate social and cultural expectations for women, to compare policy and personal solutions, and ultimately to propose a strategic plan for navigating work-life demands. Acknowledging that “women’s choices are constrained by the systemic barriers that are implicit in the norms” (ix), they are clear in their assertion that women must participate in the work world, including representation at the top levels of business and government. They offer several reasons in support of this claim. First, they argue that there are practical and psychological reasons in support of women’s financial independence. Given the tendency toward high divorce rates and for women to outlive their husbands, women can expect to spend a significant portion of their lives single, divorced, or widowed. The practical exigencies for living in a market economy require women to be financially autonomous. However, the practical reasons represent only half of the equation. Halpern and Cheung include findings of prominent research on happiness. According to this research, there are two main areas of life that affect happiness levels—meaningful relationships with family and friends and meaningful work. Working women tend to be healthier and happier than their non-working counterparts. Halpern and Cheung conclude that “working and caring for a family do not cause ill health or high levels of stress. High stress levels result from lack of support, low wages, overwork, and monotonous work” (11). Finally, for Halpern and Cheung, the continued presence of women in top professional positions is essential for improving working conditions for women and caregivers. As the authors explain, “we do believe that, on average, women’s priorities will reflect a set of concerns that have been ignored or perceived as less pressing when only men have been in charge” (19).

Women at the Top is divided into nine chapters that blend research from various disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and economics, with the interviewees’ personal narratives. The chapters discuss in detail the many aspects that affect working wives and mothers. For example, in the chapter titled “Learning from Mothers, Mentors, and Others,” Halpern and Cheung evaluate the role familial and professional mentors have on the interviewees’ sense of self-efficacy. They conclude in this chapter that mentors are essential for the development of self-efficacy and for professional success, and point to the cultural differences between their interviewees as influential in the selection and acknowledgement of mentors. The chapter titled “Saving and Spending Time” includes data detailing the time demands on working wives and mothers. While both women and men participate in maintaining domestic life, on average women are responsible for more hours of homemaking and childcare than men. Further, in most industrialized countries, including the United States and China, workers are logging more and more hours. Halpern and Cheung criticize existing research on the work-family dichotomy for what they call a “scarcity perspective,” a perspective that pits work and family against each other (53). They are similarly critical of “sequencing,” a strategy in which young women spend a few years at their career, followed by time off for children, and once children have grown, return to their careers. According to Halpern and Cheung, “the financial and career costs of stepping out of the workforce for even a short period are larger than most people would estimate” (64). They conclude this chapter with a discussion of an integration strategy that blurs the line between family and work. One

highly successful integration strategy employed by the authors' interviewees is to cut back on sleep. The authors do not claim this strategy to be a good one, but they do acknowledge that it is useful.

It is surprising that Halpern and Cheung even reluctantly endorse less sleep as a strategy for professional women to integrate work and family. Such an endorsement points to one of the weaknesses of *Women at the Top*. Their program for refiguring the work-family dichotomy implicitly reinforces a traditional construction of womanhood and upholds a model of heteronormative union and reproduction. To recommend less sleep accepts cultural mandates for women's self-sacrifice, whether it's for their family or their employer. In addition, Halpern and Cheung stress that "social support is integral to reducing work-family conflict, and a supportive husband is *essential* to any woman who aspires to become dually successful" (83, emphasis mine). It's difficult to read "husband" as a gender-neutral term. Such oversight extends to their suggestion that highly-professional women outsource domestic work. They don't, however, problematize the race, class, and nationalist issues inherent in outsourcing domestic help. These oversights seem to ignore the ways in which historical, political, and cultural contexts influence the work and family expectations for professional women in China, Hong Kong, and the United States. The authors do touch on these influences and even include a chapter acknowledging that "culture counts" (154), but their argument would be better served if this analysis were integrated more fully into the rest of the book.

In *Women at the Top* Halpern and Cheung offer a detailed examination of the work-family dichotomy as it is expressed in China, Hong Kong, and the United States. They make use of an extensive body of research and interviews with sixty-two top women leaders to explore the challenges and offer solutions for integrating family and work. Rather than viewing this dilemma as hindrance, they argue for seeing work and family as integral to each other. Ultimately, the authors provide several practical suggestions for women to integrate their work and family life, making it useful for upper-level courses in programs such as Leadership Studies. An appendix offers brief professional biographies of each of the interviewees. The final chapter, "How to Lead a Dually Successful Life," compares leadership styles of women and men, argues for the benefit of women's presence in top leadership positions, and provides a model and a checklist for women who want to balance and integrate family and work.