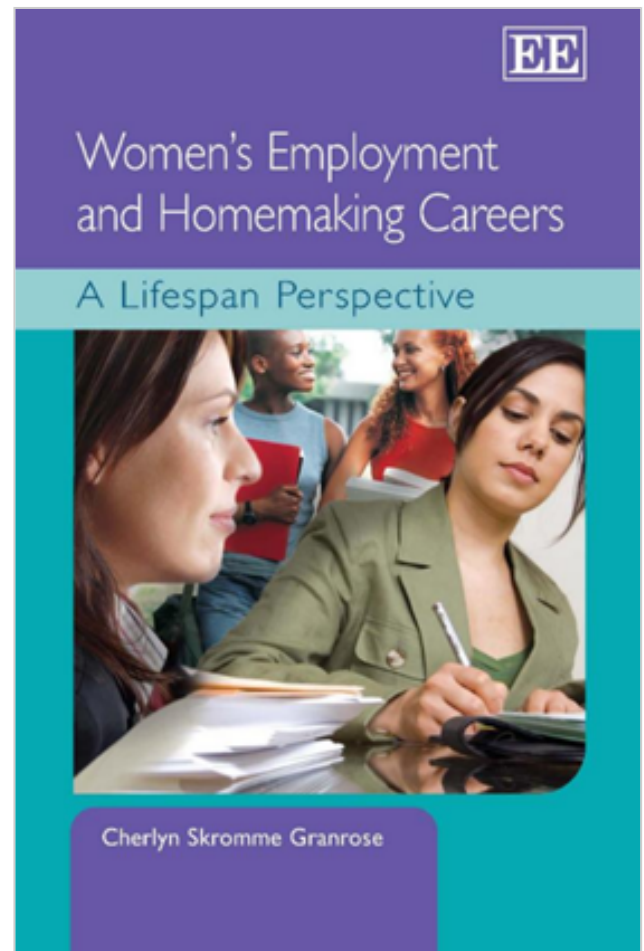


A feminist choice: longitudinal work–family decisions into the new millennium

Women’s Employment and Homemaking Careers: A Lifespan Perspective. By Cherlyn Skromme Granrose. Edward Elgar Publishing, Inc., 2010, 208 pp., \$120.00 hardcover.

Published in 2010, on the heels of the so-called third-wave feminism, *Women’s Employment and Homemaking Careers: A Lifespan Perspective* details a four-phase longitudinal study tracing the worklife decisions of women from their college through middle-age years. Juxtaposing traditional research reporting with personal anecdotes from the study’s participants, author Cherlyn Skromme Granrose seeks to capture (1) how women’s behavior throughout adulthood matches their college expectations and (2) how women’s opinions on employment after childbirth change as they gain work and maternal experience. At a time when women’s decisionmaking is becoming increasingly culturally and politically relevant, this book offers an interesting multidecade view of women’s balancing of work and family, providing valuable insight into the factors that could influence women’s decisions to pursue careers or become homemakers.

In the book’s first section, Granrose describes the background of the longitudinal study, leading the reader through its four phases. In Phase I, which began in 1980, the author and her collaborators interviewed 202 female college students at two large Northeastern universities, asking them about their plans for future careers, marriage, childbirth, and methods for balancing these priorities. Phase II began in 1990–91, requesting followup responses to the questions from the initial interviews. By this time, the participants were expected to be young career women and/or new mothers. However, these expectations differed from reality, as 46 percent of



Julia B. Doggett
doggett.julia@bls.gov

Julia B. Doggett is an economist in the Office of Prices and Living Conditions, U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

respondents in Phase II had at least one child, compared with 90 percent of respondents who had *anticipated* to have at least one child when first asked in 1980. Phase III was intended to portray the worklife experiences of the participants 20 years after graduation. By this time, 83 percent of women had their first child. Unfortunately, the researchers were able to obtain only 96 usable responses in Phase III, with the retention rate from Phase I dropping to an underwhelming 22 percent. The following (final) phase (Phase IV) was also marked by low retention and response rates, limiting the conclusions that can be drawn from the study.

Phase IV, unlike the previous two phases, was conducted through a telephone interview or in person in 2006–07. From Phase I to Phase IV, a 25-year period, only 16.4 percent of participants were maintained in the study. In Phase IV, responses regarding career progression and family life revealed some dominant themes: women worked more than anticipated, had less leisure time, and had fewer children at an older age than they had planned to have when in college. These generalizations are not surprising, especially given what the popular literature on human geography has predicted about declining birth rates among women in developed countries. Generally, such women have been expected to experience a decline in birth rates, as methods of birth control have become more widespread and advances in industrialization have increased the female labor force participation rate. It was valuable to see this global theory examined on a more granular scale, at the turn of the century.

The book's background section also lends a narrative on the cultural context of each phase and takes on the intellectually challenging topic of decisionmaking theory. With respect to cultural context, Granrose makes references to popular music, movies, and current events relevant to the era, forging a sense of kinship between the reader and the women participating in the study. Her discussion of decisionmaking theory focuses on the theory's psychological and sociological roots and its loose application to the work–family decisions described in the book's case studies. The overriding logic of this analysis appears to be that, ultimately, many factors inform women's worklife decisions after childbirth.

Following the background discussion is a comprehensive section titled “Career patterns: stories and explanations.” Here, the author offers case studies for each subject who participated in all phases of the study. The section reads overdeveloped, often citing insignificant details about the subjects' personal lives. Its “soft” case studies contrast with the dense research literature discussed in the previous section, at times introducing inconsistencies in tone. The reader is left with the sense that, just as we now cringe at images of hairdos from days of yore, the participants in many cases looked back on their work–family plans made in the early 1980s and laughed at how starkly different matters were two decades later.

The book's concluding section summarizes the longitudinal findings of the study into one concise “What have we learned” chapter. Its key takeaways, broken up by type of employment, are as follows:

- (1) Mothers employed full time generally had smaller families, married later in life, and deferred childbirth.
- (2) Mothers employed part time generally self-reported better work-family balance relative to the other groups and often changed careers in order to accommodate a part-time schedule.
- (3) Homemakers generally had larger families and, in many cases, intended to reenter the workforce after their children became of school age.

- (4) Self-employed mothers generally reported having no better work–family balance than if they had remained in a full-time status with an employer. Self-employed mothers also had concerns about benefits such as healthcare, retirement, and childcare options.

The book's concluding discussion also points to a common thread among women who returned to work postpartum. In Phase I, these women underestimated the time required for family and children, and their available leisure time. In Phases II–IV, they underestimated their ability to maintain career skills, their spouses' abilities to assist in childcare, and their closeness with their spouses after childbirth. This phenomenon presents readers with interesting aspects of gender roles in parenting, the implicit and explicit costs of childcare, and the societal norms associated with working mothers. Because of its empirical nature, the book is best suited for researchers or students of women in the labor market. Its concluding section may also prove useful in providing readers with commentary on women's working and mothering responsibilities from the late 20th century into the new millennium.