

Suzanne M. Bianchi (1952-2013)

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Forthcoming in the *Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology*, 2nd edition

Abstract: Suzanne M. Bianchi was a professor of sociology and a demographer, working at the U.S. Census Bureau and on the faculty of the University of Maryland and the University of California, Los Angeles. She specialized in research on women and gender, work and family, and the gender division of labor, employing time-use surveys among other demographic methods. She was a pioneer in the application of demographic perspectives to the problems of modern family life.

Suzanne M. Bianchi was a sociologist and demographer whose research concerned gender, work, and family life, focusing on the use of time, the gender division of labor, and the caring relationships within families. She served as president of the Population Association of America (PAA) in 2000, and as co-editor of the association's flagship journal, *Demography*, from 2005 to 2007. At the end of her career she was the Dorothy Meier Chair in Social Equities at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), where she was a distinguished professor of sociology. She had previously served as professor and chair of the sociology department at the University of Maryland, College Park, and as director of the Maryland Population Research Center.

Born in Fort Dodge, Iowa, in 1952, Bianchi's mother was a housewife and her father worked in a meatpacking plant. She obtained degrees in sociology from Creighton University in 1973 (bachelor's), Notre Dame University in 1974 (master's), and the University of Michigan in 1978 (doctorate). She began her career as a demographer for the U.S. Census Bureau, eventually becoming assistant division chief in the Population Division, before returning to academia at the University of Maryland in 1994. In 2009 she moved to UCLA. She died in 2013 at the age of 61.

One of Bianchi's most influential works was her presidential address to the PAA (Bianchi 2000), titled, "Maternal Employment and Time with Children: Dramatic Change or Surprising Continuity?" In it she reported that, despite dire warnings of imminent harm to children — and countless empirical searches for that harm — the evidence was that women's employment did not harm their children, perhaps because it wasn't leading to parents spending less

time with them. Instead, lower fertility, changing definitions of ideal childhood, time juggling by parents, and increasing father time had kept parental time with children roughly constant. In addition, parents didn't spend as much time with their kids in the old days as researchers generally assumed. Her address stimulated research into the dynamics of family time use beyond simple accounting of employed versus non-employed time.

In that address, Bianchi also described the complexities and emotional challenges associated with women's changing family and economic opportunities and constraints. Far from offering a prosaic description, however, she stressed the complexities and struggles — in terms of time and money — involved in balancing labor force participation with parenting and childcare. She wrote:

"I do not think these changes have been easy for American families, particularly for American women. Why have women so increased their hours of paid employment? Many observers would emphasize constraints — men's poor labor force prospects — and this is probably part of the story. But this explanation is not sufficient, for it gives too little attention to the dramatic change in opportunities for women and in women's own conceptions of what a successful, normal adulthood should entail."

Even with such normative shifts, however, Bianchi also acknowledged the "self-doubt" that many women felt with regard to the tradeoffs they made along their work-family paths. These doubts, she believed, were a further impediment to social change with regard to gender and families.

The evolving allocation of time within and between families remained a central concern in her research, leading to the book she co-authored with John Robinson and Melissa Milkie (2006), *Changing Rhythms of American Family Life*, which won awards from the population and family sections of the American Sociological Association, the latter of which also gave her its distinguished career award in 2013. Her previous books included *American Women in Transition*, with Daphne Spain (1986); *Balancing Act: Motherhood, Marriage, and Employment Among American Women*, with Daphne Spain (1996); and *Continuity and Change in the American Family*, with Lynne Casper (2002).

In a review article published posthumously, Bianchi (2014) reiterated the importance of a demographic perspective for understanding evolving patterns of family life. In particular, she called attention to the growing importance of intergenerational relationships for both emotional and economic support. As life spans have increased and fertility rates have fallen, relationships up and down the generational structure (e.g., between children and grandparents) have become more important relative to horizontal relationships (e.g., between children or cousins). These vertical relationships would be of growing importance for children's wellbeing, she believed, especially among populations with low rates of marriage. The challenges posed by family complexity also were the subject of another late piece, in which Judith Seltzer and Bianchi (2013) argued, "The churning of couple relationships [among both parents and children] blurs the boundaries between who is in the family and who is not, threatening the effectiveness of the family safety net among those who may need it the most."

The legacy of Bianchi's work may be the application of demographic perspectives to problems of modern family life, especially those concerning gender, children, and the structures of support within families.

SEE ALSO: Gender, Work, and Family; Family Demography; Family Structure; Family Structure and Child Outcomes; Population and Gender

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