

Reviews

Ladge, J., & Greenberg, D. (2019). *Maternal optimism: Forging positive paths through work and motherhood*. Oxford University Press.

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*“Maternal Optimism: The desire or willingness to see the positive in events or conditions of combining motherhood with paid work with an expectation of favorable outcomes” (ix)*

Across 9 chapters and 250 pages, Ladge and Greenberg expertly weave personal anecdotes with quotes from their own research, while also integrating others’ reports and research to explore how women can survive and thrive in the work and family domains. Spanning the gamut of potential work-life events, *Maternal Optimism* tackles the topics of pre-pregnancy, maternity, return to work, empty nesting, and retirement, grouped into the overarching categories of expected and unexpected paths. Designed as a resource for working women to “provide...stories and research that supports the notion of owning and feeling confident in the choices you make as future or current working mothers” (x), each chapter follows a well-organized structure, concluding with key takeaways and references.

As a work-family and leadership researcher (e.g., Gloor & Braun, 2020; Gloor et al., 2018), this reviewer relays the book’s key themes, focusing on relevant topics for management scholars, practitioners, as well as academic and organizational leaders. Beginning with the most prominent messages, this review concludes with COVID-19-related reflections. While the core critique is its American-centric focus, because the authors are Americans working in the United States (U.S.)—but work-family research in general is also quite U.S.-centric (see Williams et al., 2016)—this approach is also reasonable. With dual affiliations in the United Kingdom (U.K.) and Switzerland, this reviewer aims to complement Ladge and Greenberg’s valuable insights with a more global perspective and international examples.

**A ‘No One-Size-Fits-All,’ Judgment-Free Resource**

“No two women have the same work/family path, yet too many women struggle as they judge their paths against mythical ideals” (xv). This quote reflects the authors’ general approach throughout, highlighting varied personal experiences and sources of evidence while also dispelling myths. One such myth is the idea of “having it all,” which the authors later clarify is unattainable only if “we allow societal or organizational influences to dictate what [having it all] means” (233). In doing so, the authors encourage mothers’ self-reflection of their dynamic, personal needs, thereby acknowledging and accepting diverse circumstances.

Similarly, the authors denounce judging mothers, including “mommy shaming” or “mommy wars.” A similar phenomenon in Europe is epitomized by the term “Rabenmutter” (in German) or “raven mother” (in English). Intended to ostracize women who return to work after having children (Bennhold, 2010)—often coming from men, women, and/or mothers—like many human mothers’ choices, this term is ironic if not wholly inappropriate: while ravens may push a chick out of the nest, this infrequent occurrence is enacted in the best interest of the whole family (e.g., to prevent starvation); ravens are otherwise noted as attentive mothers. Thus, there often lacks even a grain of truth in such avowals (see Junker et al., 2020).

Ladge and Greenberg generally provide a balanced overview, highlighting mothers’ successes *and* failures. In doing so, the authors provide a more honest, nuanced picture of working motherhood which continues the momentum of similar efforts to increase authenticity and transparency (e.g., CVs of failures in academia; Haushofer, 2016; Stefan, 2010).

Finally, Ladge and Greenberg take a more positive spin, focusing on enriching rather than conflicting work-family experiences (see Greenhaus & Powell, 2006), as clearly signaled already in their title. But by adding a splash of realism to this scientific, self-help resource, they reduce the risk of excessive optimism or naïvety (e.g., see Grant, 2011).

### **More about Men and Leaders**

While the authors include a chapter about men (Chapter 9), more concrete ideas could be explored in this space. International examples may be particularly helpful, given the lack of paternity leave in the U.S. despite the best efforts of hundreds of business school and management professors (e.g., in 2015; Vasel, 2015; and in 2021, led by Wharton scholars and the New America think tank). While relatively uncommon in the U.S., European men are (often creatively) reducing their work involvement to become more active caregivers. For example, “latte pappas” in Sweden take extended paid paternity leaves (Orange, 2012), while Swiss fathers reduce or rearrange their contracts to allow for a weekly “daddy day” or “Papi-Tag”. In these ways, fathers can spend more time with their children, actively support their partners, and gradually shift social judgments to slowly elevate the status of caregiving.

Given the powerful influence of leaders on their employees’ work-family experiences (Kossek et al., 2018), leaders also should not shy away from active family engagement (e.g., discussing their life outside of work and making time for their personal lives). While the book mentions how leaders can be role models and allies, recent research from the U.S., U.K., and Germany further underlines the benefits that global leaders may also personally gain from more active family engagement, involvement, and even work-family conflict (e.g., Dumas & Stanko, 2016; Gloor & Braun, 2020; Morgenroth et al., 2020; Ten Brummelhuis et al., 2014).

### **Coronavirus Considerations**

This book was published before the COVID-19 pandemic, which has undoubtedly transformed life and work, particularly for working women and mothers. By exposing systemic challenges for working parents (e.g., the lack of childcare infrastructure and paid medical/parental leave), increasing unemployment, and undermining economic security, the pandemic may have set the clock back on gender equity by decades (Boesch & Phadke, 2021; Kashen et al., 2020). While flexible and tele-work arrangements have become more prolific, less stigmatized, and will likely be sustained—offering some long-term advantages for women

and mothers—the gendered effects of the pandemic on well-being, productivity, and performance will linger (Gewin, 2021; Shockley et al., 2021; Vaziri et al., 2020). Thus, leaders, organizations, and academic institutions may consider new or revised promotion metrics with this in mind (Malisch et al., 2020) or else threaten future workforce diversity.

The authors mentioned several initiatives to facilitate work re-entry—a tough career obstacle for mothers further exacerbated by COVID-19 and institutional, gendered practices (e.g., see Levy & Sander, 2020)—but recent international initiatives may also be useful here. For example, “Women Back to Business” at the University of St.Gallen retrains women with university or advanced technical degrees to return to work after a family-related break or career hiatus. Increasingly more organizations in the U.S. and beyond are also offering “returnships” intended to facilitate mothers’ and older workers’ career re-entry (Boe, 2020). A simple résumé redesign may also help to proactively reduce employers’ devaluation of applicants with employment gaps due to caregiving or COVID-19 (see Kristal et al., 2021).

While the book mentioned several workplace initiatives, networks, and groups—some of which may have moved online during the COVID-19 crisis—a few natively digital, more international initiatives have popped up to sustain career and maternal optimism (e.g., Women of Organizational Behavior (O.B.) and New Moms of O.B. Facebook groups). By providing a platform for tangible exchange and socio-emotional support ranging from virtual teaching exercise recommendations to potential data sources, virtual writing workshops to career and childcare advice, groups like these are helping hundreds of international academic women and mothers to survive and thrive through the pandemic. Clubhouse also facilitates exchange, but the verdict is still out on how inclusive it is (i.e., it is an invite-only app only available on iOS, which also has major accessibility problems for disabled persons and those with international phone numbers; see Aquino, 2021; Kozhipatt, 2021).

## **Conclusion**

In summary, this book may be particularly interesting and relevant for the following illustrative—but non-exhaustive—potential readers: early career women (students or scholars) envisioning their future career paths and family plans; mid-career women considering promotions, dealing with dual-careers, sickness/sick children, or divorce; late-career women reimagining their personal or professional goals, parenting adult children, or phasing out of paid employment; men and leaders hoping to better understand mothers’ key career and family experiences to become more active and effective allies. Though only recently published, I already recommended it to a colleague who wished to learn more about the possibilities for successfully combining career and family. But no need to (just) take my word for it: the majority of readers have also given it 4- to 5-star ratings on Goodreads and Amazon. So, while you will have to read the book to truly experience the full range of inspiration and advice within its pages, perhaps this review has piqued your curiosity, increasing your optimism about *Maternal Optimism*?

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