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Boling, Patricia. The Politics of Work-Family Policies: Comparing Japan, France, Germany and the United States.

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Boling, Patricia. *The Politics of Work-Family Policies: Comparing Japan, France, Germany and the United States.*

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In *The Politics of Work-Family Policies*, Patricia Boling examines two questions, why do work-family policies matter and what is the best way to study them? Boling finds that work-family policies can help to ensure children get a good start in life, which was once broadly recognized as a public good. The author's comparative study examines four countries in depth: Japan, France, Germany, and the United States. Boling also uses Sweden in a more circumscribed manner in the latter part of her analysis of work-family policies as a "benchmark for a high-spending social democratic welfare state" (Boling, 177). Boling's contrasting experiences with childcare in Japan early in her career and subsequently back home in the United States, spurred her to undertake the project. For each of the four countries, Boling traces the historical development of family support policies in great detail. "Starting points matter," (217) for understanding policies relating to work and families within a particular country. She evaluates work-family policies on numerous levels, drawing upon the three regime types in Gøsta Esping-Andersen's book, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism*, as well as numerous scholars who have critiqued Andersen's typologies or investigated various multiple level approaches in examining work-family issues. Boling examines the political economy of the countries

studied and tackles challenges that they face, such as low-fertility crisis, rapid aging, and the private versus public approach to protecting children and mothers, and families.

This rich investigation is premised upon Boling's claim that people make decisions concerning their family life in ways that invariably relate to the labor markets and the means through which work-family policies are provided. Those means include "the market or the state, and the social security system." (16) Boling creates her own rubric for sorting work-family policy regimes, using a trove of data and demographic markers to accompany her evaluation of work-family policies (53). Thus, Boling builds upon the work of noted scholars in the fields relating to work-family policy and provides a virtual clearinghouse of work-family scholarship, including data from comparative studies done under the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).

Besides organization of labor markets within the four countries, Boling investigates practical aspects of policy-making and the fate of work-family policies once they are put into place. Boling demonstrates how political interests and powerful interest groups of all stripes shape the formation of work-family policies. She also provides examples for each country studied. In considering the likelihood of whether a policy will succeed or fail, Boling claims policy makers should carefully examine what is politically feasible. The author offers a pragmatic approach to an area of scholarly study and political discourse that tends toward what Boling notes is often utopic. One aspect of practical policymaking is evident in Boling's demonstration how work-family policy is, at the very least, partly path dependent. She examines cultural and ideological factors that affect policies' successes or failures upon implementation within each country studied.

Her explanations afford the reader an understanding of why, for example, work-family policy formation in the U.S. focuses on tax payments, where in Japan it invites first time mothers to “retire” from their full-time jobs, despite provisions in the law protecting their right to take maternity leave and to return to work after giving birth.

Boling’s book is helpful for understanding work-family policy making in national and local politics alike. For such a thorough treatment of its subject, the book is written in cleanly written prose. Boling’s book provides a comprehensive portrait of the field of work-family research and theories developed within the related disciplines in work-family policy. She also identifies areas where further research would provide help in developing work-family policies that will support mothers and children, and families, thus giving children a good start in life. Boling makes specific recommendations for policy change that she claims are possible within the four countries studied. Thus, Boling’s book seeks to help policy makers and all interested parties discern how to use “‘best practices’ of Northern Europe” (227) in formation of work-family policies and their successful implementation. The book significantly deepened my understanding of the political, economic and cultural underpinnings of laws affecting mothers and children and families.