



## *Conversations with the Experts*

### Not-so-Nuclear Families: Class, Gender, and Networks of Care



**Karen V. Hansen**

**Bio:** Karen V. Hansen, Professor of Sociology & Women's and Gender Studies, came to Brandeis University in 1989 after finishing her Ph.D. at the University of California, Berkeley. She teaches courses in feminist theory, sociology of families, women's biography and society, and historical methods.

Professor Hansen is currently working on an historical project, *In the Wake of the Land Rush: Scandinavian Settlers and Dakota Indians at Spirit Lake, 1900-1930*, for which she just received a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship. *In the Wake of the Land Rush* examines the transcultural exchange between the Dakota and Scandinavian homesteaders who lived at the Fort Totten Indian Reservation at the turn of the twentieth century. With white settlement, the reservation became a "contact zone." This project explores the effects of land-taking on the community that emerges in its aftermath by using the multiple methods of historical sociology – a combination of statistical analysis, archival research, and oral history. Through analyzing the dynamic changes in one geographic place, it seeks to theorize how legally-encoded and socially-enacted inequality simultaneously produced conflict, mutuality, and cooperation.

Professor Hansen's most recent book, *Not-So-Nuclear Families: Class, Gender, and Networks of Care* (Rutgers University Press, 2005), investigates the lives of working families and the networks they construct to help them care for their school-age children. A finalist for The C. Wright Mills Award, its stories vividly illustrate the conflicts, hardships, and triumphs of four families that span the economic spectrum (working class, middle class, professional middle class, and upper class). It examines how working parents manage the crisis of care -- the shortage of responsible adults with sufficient time to attend to the needs of their kin -- that is structurally produced and individually experienced. *Not-So-Nuclear Families* details the complex relationships between the adults in the ways they sustain a safe environment for their children and cultivate emotional and practical support for the parents. A network constructed around care for children quickly broadens to a system of sharing and trading about all aspects of life. Sociological studies of child rearing that focus exclusively on nuclear families assume that they are isolated. Those portraits, so gripping in the U.S. cultural imagination, inadequately capture the ebb and flow of people in and out of children's lives.

Research for this project was conducted while Professor Hansen was an Associate Senior Researcher at the Berkeley Center for Working Families at the University of California. An Alfred P. Sloan Foundation Grant generously supported her time at the Center.

### **An Interview with Karen V. Hansen**

By Karen Corday and Judi Casey

**Corday:** In the preface of your book, you indicate that "understanding contemporary families is possible only by understanding class, and vice versa." What led you to this conclusion?

**Hansen:** I first came to this conclusion from reading the literature on families from the last couple of decades. That information led me to design my research so that it was comparative across classes. Once I started talking to families, they reinforced that it was an important issue, because while there are similarities across

classes, there are also profound differences. When you're trying to assess the challenges that families face, you have to understand what kinds of resources they have available to them. I don't mean simply money, but also the people that families can call on to help out with child care, transportation, and other day to day needs. In addition, "resources" also refer to a family's community. For example, what kind of school system do the children attend? Is the neighborhood where the family lives safe? Do they know and trust their neighbors? All of these resources shape what is possible for families and how parents think about caring for their children. Placing families in a larger socio-economic context is essential to understanding family dynamics and relationships.

**Corday:** What is a "network of care?"

**Hansen:** It's a group of people that a parent or guardian assembles to help care for the children. In the book, I'm careful not to assume that a parent organizes that care, so I use the term "anchor" to refer to the main person at the center of the network. The term "anchor" is a metaphor that weights this system of people in place and time.

**Corday:** Why did you decide to use case studies to illustrate networks of care? What did the studies reveal, particularly about class differences?

**Hansen:** One of the frustrations about much research on family networks is that it tries to quantify certain things that are fundamentally unquantifiable. That's a noble effort, on the one hand, but frustrating on the other. A quantitative researcher can ask, "Who helps you?" It's virtually impossible in a large study to link the members of the network and their responses.

An alternative methodological approach has been ethnography. That also has its virtues and limitations. One strength is placing families in the context of their neighborhoods and understanding their interactions over time. However, ethnography limits the researcher to a single experience or situation. In contrast, case studies are a vehicle for studying an entire network and facilitate understanding the dynamics between people from different vantage points.

Understanding the give and take dynamics of a network of people, linked in their care activities, had a real benefit to me. The case study allowed me to see the give and take from contrasting vantage points in the same group of people. When I went to an uncle or aunt who had been named by the anchor, I'd ask them about their involvement in that network, and I'd also ask them about their own network. So, while the center of my study is these four cases, the study also gathers information about the subsequent starbursts that ripple out from the networks.

I designed the research so that I could understand entire networks and care across class. I interviewed a working class family, a middle class family, a professional middle class family and an upper class family. The class dimension was very much informed by the literature on domestic networks that has been evolving for the last forty years. It suggests the importance of class in shaping people's networks and how they think about interdependence. I had never seen a study that systematically looked across a broad class range with some consistency. I don't want to claim that this method is perfect; it does have its limitations. However, the strengths of the method are that I'm able to look at a network in its dynamic entirety; the criteria people use for screening other members, what people expect in return, and the system of exchange within the network. I'm also able to examine how class operates in those different family situations. It's the first study that includes the upper class as part of the comparative research design.

**Corday:** Could you talk about "staging," the process people use to create their networks of care?

**Hansen:** Constructing a network is a very intricate process. Some people were very conscious about the process, others did it automatically. The concept of staging helps me analytically to differentiate steps in that process. First, anchors need to identify people that might be potential members of the network. They need to screen these potential members—by that, I mean they must decide if the person is trustworthy, if he or she is compatible with the child, and if he or she is reliable. Another aspect of screening that tends to get lost in other studies is the issue of compatibility in child-rearing approaches. This is profoundly important, because there are distinctive cultures of child-rearing. Whether or not parents emphasize responsibility in the home, whether they care about the amount of television their children watch or what kinds of food they consume, infuses these value-laden cultures. Differences in those attitudes and practices can create friction between the adults and can confuse children. The screening process allows the anchors to decide if the potential caregiver agrees with their way of taking care of children. People do ask for various types of help from different members of their network. The criteria for seeking help changes according to the demands and needs of a situation. Anchors

don't have the same standards for every person. In an emergency, someone who may not pass the litmus test for regular care and involvement may be called on for an hour or two.

The first part of the staging process is this identification and screening. The next part of the process is engaging network members in reciprocal relationships. An anchor may not start the screening process by asking someone to babysit their child; they may ask for a ride to the airport or take over a batch of cookies. The anchor may babysit the potential network member's children and hope that he or she will babysit the anchor's children three weeks from now. This caregiving is not measured in a specific, immediate way, but it leads to reciprocal exchanges. This "back-and-forth" acts as a reservoir of good will in the best of all possible circumstances; it obliges the network member to help the anchor when help is needed. It may be awhile down the road, and it may involve any type of assistance: transportation, money or child care, for example. In the final stage of this process, the anchor mobilizes the other person's sense of responsibility to participate in the network of care.

**Corday:** Your findings on the involvement of men in these care networks came as a surprise to you. What did you find? How do men become involved fathers and male role models?

**Hansen:** I wasn't expecting to find men very deeply involved in these domestic networks. My expectations were based on the literature, which finds women at the absolute center of domestic networks and, at every turn, men not equally contributing to household labor, which includes child care. In sociology and, to a certain extent, anthropology, by paying attention to dominant trends and activities of the subjects one is studying, the researcher pays less attention to subtle trends and unusual kinds of behaviors. Sociologists are the first to acknowledge that men contribute more to household work than they did twenty years ago, and there's a significant portion of men—twenty to twenty five percent, according to several studies—that share housework fifty/fifty. It's a growing population, but it's still a minority population. We also know from research that when men contribute, they're more likely to do child care than clean bathrooms. This has been confirmed again and again.

What surprised me was that men were important in all four of the networks I studied. They weren't necessarily co-anchors, although I did find one case in which a husband and wife were true fifty/fifty co-anchors. In all cases, men were critical to the networks and were not peripheral to the anchors or the children. That was a fascinating phenomenon. Even when they weren't at the center, fathers were doing all the caregiving tasks that children need—feeding them, bathing them, giving them rides to school. The men were really important. In the case of the middle-class family, the Beckers, the anchor is the mother of the children. One of her brothers is an emergency medical technician, and has large blocks of time off from work. He constructs his time so that he is available on call to his extended family for different tasks, including child care. His time and energy are critical to the functioning of the whole family and the child care system. He doesn't put in as much time as the anchor, but that doesn't mean he's not a critical contributor. This was a pleasant surprise. For the most part, the men were not doing the every day kinds of care, but they were taking children to their baseball games and to the park—they were involved in a lot of play activity. This is important to the children and important to the anchors, which is very significant. Male role models were particularly important to the working class women in the study; they appreciated having a representative of masculine culture involved in their children's lives, with male children in particular. This finding broadened my concept of family networks and what families need. As the title of the book suggests, it's not just about the nuclear family—a father, a mother, children. It's also about these other people who bring resources, energy, attention, and role modeling to the children, and in the process help out the parents.

**Corday:** How can the work of academics and researchers support families' efforts to construct care networks?

**Hansen:** That's a really important question. One of my frustrations with the literature on families is that it's so nuclear-family focused. This reflects our culture as a whole, which assumes that nuclear families are independent, autonomous entities. American families, in all their diversity, have not historically lived in extended family households, and are therefore not seen as connected to other parts of their kin network. This is just plain wrong. That is not to say that there isn't variation in how people approach their extended families (working class and immigrant families being the clear examples), but in each of the networks I studied, extended kin relationships were very important. People made decisions about where to live based on where their mother or brother lived; they took their extended families into consideration when thinking about accepting jobs. Scholars who study families must pay attention to extra household involvement in family life -- connections to neighbors and kin.

At one conference I attended a few years ago, someone presented findings from a cross-national study on child care, comparing the United States to the very significant support systems available in the European

Union and other places in the world and enumerating different kinds of available child care. The study discussed child care centers, babysitters, and state supported afterschool care—but kin was not even a category! When you look at the Census data, you realize that kin are the most common form of care for school age children. This reality needs to be acknowledged as part of the caregiving system and incorporated into research design. This is true of policy research, ethnography, and large scale quantitative studies—the relationships are essential and they so often go unrecognized.

**Casey:** Why do you think that is? Why don't people see the role of extended family?

**Hansen:** It goes so much against the grain of how Americans think about families and individual achievement. There has been such a focus on the individual and self-sufficiency that I think interdependence is a real blind spot for people. Even after I'd done my interviews and was researching the demographic context for the book, I was looking at the Census data and thinking I had interpreting it wrongly! I've been a family sociologist for twenty years, and was still struggling with the data that says very clearly that grandparents, aunts, uncles and siblings are the key caregivers to school age children. Stories about alienation, isolation and independence resonate with our sense of the hardship out there. Of course, I don't deny that there is hardship – many people are raising children alone and with inadequate resources. And even if one has help from kin, the helping relationships may not be easy. However, care provided by kin is the most common kind. Those kin caregivers cannot be ignored.

**Corday:** What can workplace practitioners do to help employees balance work with caretaking responsibilities?

**Hansen:** Based on what my subjects told me, the most important support is flexibility in work. When you're taking care of children, if you want to stay employed, you must have an employer that understands that you can still be a good worker and have responsibilities to people outside of the workplace. Flexibility in scheduling and start time is hugely important. Employers should also recognize that employees' care obligations don't necessarily apply just to one's children and parents. Employers have made the most progress in recognizing that many workers are, in fact, parents. Some have gone as far to recognize that employees may also be children of an elderly parent that needs attention. However, other people make commitments to help with caretaking. The Beckers are a great example of the depth to which aunts, uncles and grandparents can be involved in caring for children. These relationships are critical to the family network. If employers could recognize these systematic obligations, that would be a huge benefit to employees. There have been inroads in regards to domestic partner policies, and that's a very good example of how an employee can say, "I have a primary responsibility to this person. I am their caretaker if they need me." However, it's not just about romantic or biological connection; one can have a social commitment that is not immediately obvious. For example, a person may have a close relationship with their ex-husband's stepmother and may end up as her primary caretaker. I understand that employers must have standards, but they also must have the capacity to recognize and support all kinds of caregiving relationships.

**Corday:** What is the role of state policy makers?

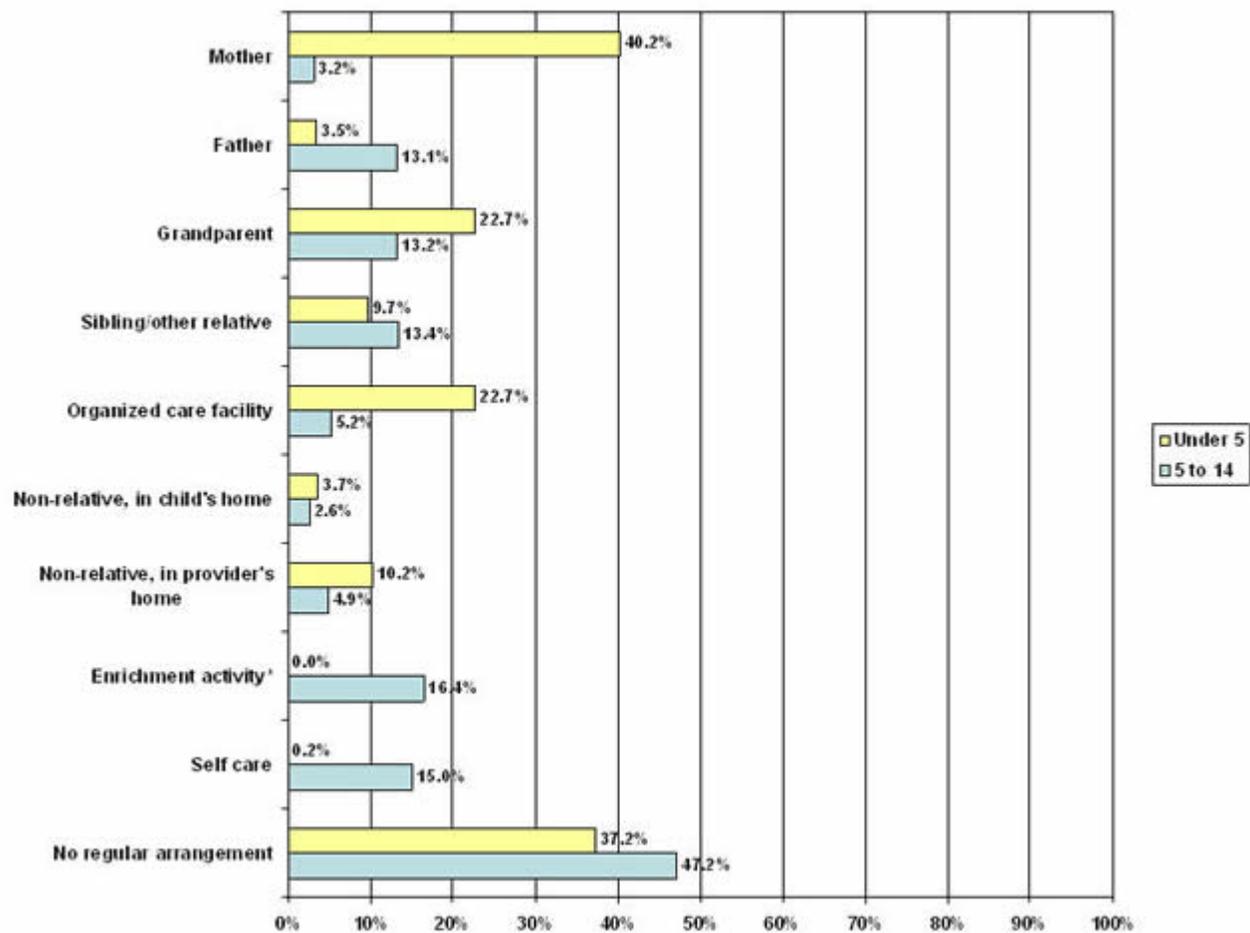
**Hansen:** Policy makers have to understand the kind of binds that people are in when they're trying to be responsible family members, workers and citizens all at the same time. In terms of regulating workplaces, the state could make them more family-friendly in many ways, including some sort of national health care policy. In my book, I interviewed Patricia Crane, who had a lot of energy, commitment and a strong work ethic. Despite these qualities, when her mother got sick with cancer, she had to quit her job to be able to care for her. A subsidized medical support system would allow her mother to receive care and Patricia to keep her job. Another bind is the public school system. Anyone who has school-age children knows that one day school ends at 2:20, another day it's over at 1:00, then there's a soccer game on Fridays until 4:45. Working parents are expected to accommodate all these different pick-up times. The beginning and end of a school day has a profound effect on care arrangements and what jobs people can take. Policy makers could work on facilitating a conversation between school systems, teachers' unions, and parents to try to work out these conflicts.

Families need help whether they're rich or poor. The upper class family's case study revealed this—even with plenty of financial resources, the family was still struggling to care for their children. Raising children requires a major social commitment to mobilize resources and to facilitate networks of care.

[\*Not-so-Nuclear Families: Class, Gender, and Networks of Care\*](#) is available at amazon.com.

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### Percentages of Preschoolers and Grade-School Age Children in Types of Child Care Arrangements



\* Includes sports, lessons, clubs and before- or after-school programs.

**Source:** Johnson, J.O. (2005). *Who's minding the kids?: Child care arrangements: Winter 2002*. Retrieved December 15, 2006 from the U.S. Census Bureau web site: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2005pubs/p70-101.pdf>.

### Additional Resources Related to Child Care

**Child Care Law Center:** "The Child Care Law Center (CCLC) is a national nonprofit legal services organization that uses legal tools to make high quality, affordable child care available to every child, every family, and every community. Our diverse substantive work encompasses public benefits, civil rights, housing, economic development, regulation and licensing, and land use."

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.childcarelaw.org/index.shtml>.

**National Alliance for Family, Friend, and Neighbor Kin:** "The National Alliance for Family, Friend and Neighbor Child Care (NAFFNCC) is a work group of individuals and organizations that share a common interest in kith and kin child care. It consists of a diverse group of practitioners, researchers, and policy makers who are at the forefront of work in this field."

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.bankstreet.edu/iccc/html>.

**National Child Care Information Center:** "A national clearinghouse and technical assistance center that links parents, providers, policy-makers, researchers and the public to early care and education information." From the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services.

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.nccic.org>.

**National Network for Child Care:** “NNCC unites the expertise of many of the nation's leading universities through the outreach system of Cooperative Extension. Our goal is to share knowledge about children and child care from the vast resources of the landgrant universities with parents, professionals, practitioners, and the general public.” Includes over 1,000 relevant publications, a listserv, and a newsletter.

- To access the website, click here: <http://www.nncc.org>.

**U.S. Office of Personnel Management: Child Care Resources Handbook:** This online handbook from the U.S. government is a guide for parents and other caretakers considering child care options. It includes sample questions for potential caretakers, on-site checklists and details on federally sponsored centers as well as financial assistance for low-income families.

- To access the website, click here:  
[http://www.opm.gov/Employment\\_and\\_Benefits/WorkLife/OfficialDocuments/HandbooksGuides/ChildcareResources/index.asp](http://www.opm.gov/Employment_and_Benefits/WorkLife/OfficialDocuments/HandbooksGuides/ChildcareResources/index.asp).

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