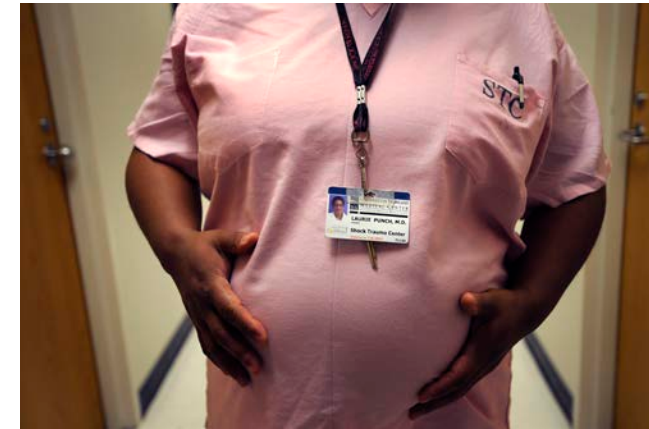


SHOWING (work x family) in Preview: A Project in the Making

Trudy Wilner Stack



Photography and family have long worked together to define identity, memory, and human connection. The visual syntax that family photography lends our personal histories signifies potently and privately, and it is hard to imagine our past without pictures. But can the photography of family help us better understand the present and how we make sense of family life? Can it help explain the social change with which public policy cannot keep pace? *SHOWING (work x family)* is a national cultural project that uses photography to narrate how Americans negotiate the competing and interdependent responsibilities of work and family. It trades on photography's historic partnership with family and its characteristic method of recording the momentary to memorialize and concretize, and it gathers more than 75 photographers to convey the experience of families who work. As digital photography and social media transform picture taking into a ubiquitous impulse to make and disseminate images of ourselves and our worlds at will, *SHOWING (work x family)* responds to that phenomenon and

also enlists photography's traditional role as a documentary and visionary medium for telling human stories. In this new project, commissioned, curated, and assigned photographs combine to ignite fresh conversation about the push and pull between work and family, a universal balancing act with no fixed equation.

SHOWING (work x family) was conceived and organized by the Working Assumptions Foundation, whose founders Jane Gottesman and Geoffrey Biddle previously created *Game Face: What Does a Female Athlete Look Like?*, the Random House book and touring exhibition that opened at the Smithsonian in 2001. *SHOWING* began with the simple construct of showing visibly pregnant women at work in whatever situation their work prescribed: at home, in an office, in a classroom, in a store, in the field, or in an actual field. But there were strangely few such pictures, contemporary or historical, and certainly an insufficient number to edit together into a meaningful and representative group. This lack of photography describing an increasingly and highly prevalent reality of life spoke to the very issues the project sought to address through imagery: that families must integrate the practical and emotional demands of earning a living and caring for a family, and that in contemporary American society it is almost always a privately managed challenge. Among the world's wealthiest nations, the United States is the only industrialized country without federally mandated paid maternity and family leave. Issues of inadequate, unavailable, and often unaffordable childcare and eldercare compound the national, irrational disinterest in our own wellbeing and future. The *SHOWING* project organizers decided to proactively correct these meager findings and initiated a commission of 45 photographers to depict women across the country in the latter stages of pregnancy in their work context, both literally showing and showing viewers the most commonly visible and inescapable merging of family and work, using the language and testimony of photography (Figures 1, 2, 3, and 4).

While organizers at Working Assumptions established a new archive on a previously under-documented subject, with commission results becoming moving symbols of the realities of work and family coexistence and interdependence, the story still felt underreported. Women working in the last trimester of pregnancy told one critical and overt strand of the narrative. The complexities of the trajectory of family life, the role of fathers, the perspectives of children, the accumulation of daily details that shuffle and reshuffle to constitute stories of support, love, frustration, and sometimes failure, felt like shades *SHOWING* needed to fill in. While women will forever remain the child-bearers, parenting and caring duties between the sexes are

Clockwise from above:

Figure 1. Andrea Modica, Julie, Psychology Professor, 2012. *SHOWING (work x family)* commission. © Andrea Modica

Figure 2. Geoffrey Biddle, Alicia, Supermarket Cashier, 2012. *SHOWING (work x family)* commission. © Geoffrey Biddle

Figure 3. Carol Guzy, Laurie, Surgeon, 2012. *SHOWING (work x family)* commission. © Carol Guzy

Figure 4. Cristiana Ceppas, Neyara, Housekeeper, 2012. *SHOWING (work x family)* commission. © Cristiana Ceppas

shifting; women work more, both by choice and by necessity, and families are less and less traditionally structured. They are frequently blended, patch-worked, multi-generational, and single-parented. To tell the story of the *(work x family)* equation, project organizers broadened their scope and began again to research contemporary photography, this time seeking projects and images that spoke to these pervasive issues. A powerful collection of work by professional photographers with diverse practices, intentions, backgrounds, and points of view were gathered and comingled with the *SHOWING* commission to deepen and more fully impart the complexity of living and working as part of a family (Figures 5, 6, and 7).

The resulting project statement was full of observed threads and themes that resonate with countless shared experiences people have growing up, having children, and supporting and caring for those who depend on them. While many sociologists, economists, researchers, and activists document and intensely debate questions around the conflicting and overlapping responsibilities of work and family in professional and public forums, this time creative and serious photography tackled the subject from a group perspective. But there remained a missing voice, a solution to the sense of emotional distance or formal remove that surfaces when expert imagemakers isolate mundane and messy human truths. In 2013, in the midst of the project's development, Gottesman met a local high school photography teacher who was a single mother who easily identified with the *SHOWING* story. She was interested in involving her advanced photography class in the topic, and Gottesman was, in her words, "genuinely curious how kids saw the multiple demands pulling on the adults in their lives. How would they express it in photographs? What did they know about the intimate rhythm of their families that no one else would know? How did teens describe the overlap of work and family?" From these questions a class assignment was devised by Working Assumptions that has since been refined and undertaken by 35 (mostly public) high school photography classes in four states: Arizona, California, Tennessee, and Washington, D.C. In 2017, the list will expand to include Colorado, Indiana, Maryland, New York, Texas, and Virginia. While the original intention was not to create a body of work to become an integral part of *SHOWING*, the student photographs are so present and fresh in their observations, so original, personal, and direct, that the addition of a select group of them to the larger project ultimately brought home the collective content: however diverse and unpredictable the definition of family and of work, the daily dance between the two is often difficult and sometimes divine (Figures 8, 9, and 10).



Together, *SHOWING (work x family)* now comprises more than 200 photographs from the commission, the high school assignment, and curated work. In 2016, prototypes of a touring multiscreen-based installation for public spaces, from galleries to libraries to office building lobbies to student unions, were test-run at the annual Work and Family Researchers Network biennial conference and at the U.S. Department of Labor, both in Washington, D.C. The final version will begin touring nationally in 2017, and a web-based experience of the images will be launched concurrently, with interactive social media integration and a future publication.

Trudy Wilner Stack is the consulting curator to *SHOWING (work x family)*. *SHOWING* is a project of the Working Assumptions Foundation, a nonprofit cultural organization based in Berkeley, California, that collaborates with artists to amplify and encourage the conversation about work and family. workingassumptions.org.

Top row, left to right:

Figure 5. Alice Proujansky, Children nap in the afternoon at Dee's Tots Childcare, 2014. © Alice Proujansky

Figure 6. Lauren Greenfield, Self-portrait (breast pumping in airplane toilet), 2000. © Lauren Greenfield

Figure 7. Nick Rodriguez, "...I looked up from my phone and saw what an interesting photo this would be, as it shows the role each member of the family has," 2015. From the *SHOWING (work x family)* assignment, Logan High School, Union City, Calif. © Nick Rodriguez

Bottom row, left to right:

Figure 8. Ka-Man Tse, Untitled (Father and Son), 2003. © Ka-Man Tse

Figure 9. Lauren Tom, Untitled, 2015. From the *SHOWING (work x family)* assignment, Westmoor High School, Daly City, Calif. © Lauren Tom

Figure 10. Sylvia Owens, "In my home, family time and work time are one and the same," 2015. From the *SHOWING (work x family)* assignment, Tucson High Magnet School, Ariz. © Sylvia Owens