From a disconnect to a celebrated reconnect—that’s the story of work and family told the last decade or so. Broadcast and print media regale us with the difficulties of “balancing” work and family so often that yesterday’s myth of their separation has become today’s cliché about their connection. More than a decade ago Gerstel and Gross (1987) called attention to the now generally acknowledged ways in which nineteenth century events and ideologies, particularly the notion of these as gender-segregated, spheres clouded understanding of an enduring, though historically variant, relationship between work and family. The changes attendant upon the continuing growth of industrial capitalism, commercialization and urbanization brought with them the physical as well as ideological separation of work-site from family- and home-site. These ideologically separated “spheres” constituted “work” as what drew wages outside the home (normatively associated with men’s “breadwinning”) and “family” as the privatized care of spouses, children and households (normatively associated with women’s “homemaking.”) With others we argued that the legacy of this historical construction of work and family as separate spheres no longer fits contemporary realities which, among other changes, usually require the waged and family work of both parents, assuming there are two, and often that of their teen-aged children as well.  

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1 I will hereafter forego the modifier “waged” to distinguish this labor from that of family or other kinds of “work”, e.g., volunteering, to avoid the clarifying but redundant phrasing.
Today, what constitute normatively-defined “work” and “family” are once again undergoing re-definition, as for example, home-based waged work and workplace sensitivity to family responsibilities further dislodge acceptance of these spheres as truly separate. This on-going re-constitution of work and family prompts the metaphor of a kaleidoscope—where what we think of as “work” and “family” shape and morph into each other revealing their mutual contingency. Just as in the past, today there is a relationship between the two that is protean, reciprocal and mutually constitutive. However interdependent, this relationship is not always well-understood, as current discomfiture with boundaries delineating the “where” and the “who” of efforts such as those involved in “caring”, associated with the home, and “production”, associated with the workplace, make clear. Though research and analysis has de-mystified the myth of separate spheres, it will be the thesis here that new problems now result from the acknowledged, but narrowly circumscribed, connection between work and family.

My purpose here is fourfold: (1) to critique this circumscribed relationship; (2) to argue that the narrowed version of the work/family linkage diverts attention away from the social and economic structural underpinnings of the most significant work and family consequences; (3) to analyze how this diversion misdirects policy; and (4) to suggest that this restricted and privatized focus also eclipses an important resource for addressing work/family issues--community-based support systems.