6 Time Greedy Workplaces and Marriageable Men

The Paradox in Men’s Fathering Beliefs and Strategies

Pamela Kaufman, Kathleen Gerson

As we enter the second decade of the twenty-first century, more than 30 years of sweeping changes in the work and family life of post-industrial societies have transformed the lives of contemporary men. In the United States (US), dual-earner homes far outnumber the once-predominant pattern of sole-breadwinning fathers, which now account for less than 15 per cent of American households. Similarly, employed women now constitute half of all US workers, and they vie with men at every level of the occupational structure. In this context, contemporary American men face a set of countervailing pressures and constraints. The traditional gender divide, anchored by a securely employed and well-paid man as breadwinner, is no longer tenable. Yet the social structures that reinforced this arrangement, especially in the form of a labour force that presumes undiluted job commitment, have hardly disappeared. Even though more egalitarian and flexible divisions of home and market work have become more valued, equal sharing remains difficult to attain. This paradoxical mix of demographic shifts and persisting cultural and structural constraints sets the stage for strategies that are not just complex but also contradictory.

THE RISE OF CONFLICT BETWEEN MEN’S RHETORIC AND BEHAVIOUR

At the mid-twentieth century, a man’s personal and social worth stemmed primarily from his ability to succeed in the workforce, and active involvement in family caregiving took a backseat to providing financially in men’s identity development. These cultural ideologies were deeply embedded in a rigidly gendered social structure, which both encouraged and demanded that most men and women occupy separate social spheres. Indeed, most men could hardly succeed as breadwinners or fulfill their duties as ‘ideal workers’ without the support of a partner (read ‘wife’) who took care of the home in exchange for financial sustenance (Williams 2000). In the closing decades of the twentieth century, however, this caregiver-breadwinner divide, along with the ideologies that sustained it, became increasingly untenable (Moen and Roehling 2005).
Over the last several decades, a set of converging and deeply anchored social and economic shifts have undermined the once-ascendant caregiver-breadwinner divide. Perhaps first among equals is the rise of economic uncertainty. While the US, along with other post-industrial economies, recently underwent the greatest recession since the Great Depression, instability in the labour force has been growing since the early 1980s. A combination of deeply anchored economic shifts, including the decline of unionized manufacturing jobs, the rise of service work and the globalization of labour markets, has undermined predictability in the relationships between employees and employers. Loyalty and stability, once staples of a successful career—whether in white-collar organizations or unionized jobs—are increasingly rare (Ehrenreich 2001; Moen and Roehling 2005). Globalization has given employers more opportunities to hire inexpensive labour abroad, and work once performed locally is increasingly outsourced to workers elsewhere who are willing to work longer hours for fewer wages (Greenhouse 2008; Uchitelle 2006). As the demand for local jobs has become more urgent, employees have less power to negotiate and both parties have less incentive to remain loyal.

These shifts may be most noticeable among blue-collar workers, but changing workplace dynamics are occurring among all class and occupational groups. In professional arenas, those most willing to move to the next opportunity are most likely to find the most economic rewards. Remaining within one institution for an entire career is both increasingly unlikely and increasingly risky. Job stability and timely promotions, once given routinely to professionals, are no longer the norm, while the protections and rewards of union membership are increasingly elusive for working-class jobs (Kaufman 2010). Now that fewer men can count on a job to provide a secure income or continuity in the future, it is difficult, and potentially foolhardy, to expect to become or remain a sole breadwinner.

Today’s men also hold markedly different views than earlier generations about what it means to be a good partner and parent. In the US, for example, a recent study found that 58 per cent of adults believe a satisfying life includes having a marriage where both husband and wife hold a job and share in the care of the house and children, while only 37 per cent prefer a traditional marriage (Pew Research Center 2002). Men, like women, no longer want a strict division of labour that separates them into different spheres. While 15 years ago only 47 per cent of men believed sharing housework was very important for a successful marriage, 62 per cent of men believe this to be true today (Pew Research Center 2007). Equally telling, only 53 per cent of men now believe earning an adequate income is a very important component of marital success (Pew Research Center 2007). Men today express aspirations that are remarkably similar to those held by women: they prefer an egalitarian relationship and hope to integrate work and home in a reasonably balanced way (Gerson 2010). They view their lives and judge their accomplishments ‘in terms of a package deal in which
having children, being married, holding a steady job, and owning a home’ are all interrelated parts (Townsend 2002: 2). Also like women, whose attitudes toward equality are influenced by their employment status (Cunningham 2008), men’s support depends on their family and work situations. Men who are in a dual-career relationship or who depend financially on a spouse are more likely to hold an egalitarian ideology (Cha and Thebaud 2009; Gerson 1993; Wilkie 1993; Zuo 1997).

Yet despite these massive changes in household forms, workforce composition and gender ideologies, men tend to resist equality in their actions if not in their words. Although the gender gap in housework has declined, women in dual-income homes continue to perform the bulk of these duties, and they are far more likely than men to pull back from paid work to meet these demands. Women are more likely to actively search for ways to blend work with family life, despite having an equal desire for a rewarding career (Konrad 2003). In terms of housework, research shows that married mothers who work in full-time jobs still spend 1.2 hours per day on household activities, while fathers working full-time spend about 48 minutes (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2008).

In addition, not all domestic tasks are considered equal. National data show that women are still more likely than men to participate in food preparation, cleaning up and household management. Indeed, lawn and garden care, the activity with fewest participants overall, is the only activity in which men are more likely than women to take the lead (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2010). Men are thus more likely to participate in what are generally deemed more enjoyable activities, such as playing with children or working in the yard. As Coltrane (1997: 15) reports, for most men, ‘Child care [i]s the easy part . . . for that is what motivate[s] their attempts at sharing in the first place. For housework, on the other hand, things d[o] not evolve quite so effortlessly.’ Moreover, Gerson (1993) finds that even when men participate in childcare, they are still more likely to avoid the ‘dirty work’ or most unfavourable tasks. Taken as a whole, research makes it clear that the rise in men’s expressed support for more equal sharing stands in contrast to the more limited change in their behaviour.

EXPLAINING THE CONTRADICTION BETWEEN MEN’S WORDS AND ACTIONS

While men increasingly use the rhetoric of equality, they continue to act in ways that presume a stronger commitment to the workplace and that contribute to the reproduction of a gendered division of labour at home. To investigate this inconsistency, we examine how men create strategies to accommodate the wide variety of mixed messages they receive both at home and on the job. Yet, in contrast to perspectives that stress men’s desire to oppose equality even when they claim to support it, we argue that men’s strategies are more
complex. While the contradictory findings cited above make it clear that men’s actions are not congruent with their averred preferences, this does not necessarily reflect dishonesty or a desire to hide their ‘true’ beliefs amid new pressures to support women’s rights. Instead, we find that men’s work and parenting strategies reflect efforts to support equality while also maintaining the status of primary breadwinner in a cultural and social context that still judges men by a market standard. Contemporary men, like women, face competing cultural pressures and structural constraints that encourage—and even require—a set of behavioural and ideological strategies that appear contradictory. Our data show that many men are making efforts to find more flexible work environments that would allow greater autonomy and more opportunities to participate in caregiving. Yet their efforts inevitably encounter institutional resistances that place men’s egalitarian ideals out of reach. In this context, most men turn to a modified form of traditionalism that seeks a compromise between support for the ideal of ‘equality’ and the need to hold onto a breadwinning identity. These ‘fallback strategies’ help men resolve the contradictions they face, but they also contribute to the reinvention of gender divisions (Gerson 2010).

METHODS

To explore these issues, we combine data from two studies of changes in the lives of American men. Kaufman (2010) conducted in-depth interviews with 45 professional men between the ages of 36 and 50. To expand both the size and class representation of the sample, Kaufman’s (2010) sample is augmented with 60 in-depth interviews conducted by Gerson (2010). She interviewed men from a range of class backgrounds who were between the ages of 18 and 32. Interviews in both studies used open-ended but structured questionnaires to discover participants’ experiences, outlooks and life course trajectories. The full data set thus consists of 105 men who grew up during the recent period of change and are now formulating their own strategies for resolving work-family conflicts.

FINDINGS: SETTLING FOR SECOND BEST

It is tempting to conclude that men’s efforts to maintain the position of primary breadwinner and thus limit their domestic participation indicate a lack of commitment to the rhetoric of equality. As long as men continue to maintain a privileged position as primary earners and avoid the presumably ‘unmanly’ business of caregiving, how can they truly want equality? Yet, as our interviews reveal, men’s strategies do not necessarily reflect a refusal to honestly acknowledge opposition to egalitarian sharing. To the contrary, our data suggest that men are conscious of the contradiction between what
they say they believe and what they actually do. They struggle over this conflict and often vacillate between conflicting goals as their work and family options shift. Despite desires to share financial and caregiving responsibilities, men face growing pressures to put in long hours at work that clash with rising standards about what it means to be a good partner and father. Despite a rising desire for equality, most men confront obstacles that make equal sharing appear too costly. These obstacles prompt them to pursue a range of strategies that limit and redefine the meaning of equality. Yet these strategies also represent ‘second best’ options that emerge when more flexible ideals seem out of reach or prove to have unacceptable consequences.

Strategies at Work: The Paradoxical Implications of Seeking Work Flexibility

While men’s rhetoric increasingly indicates a desire to find a more equitable balance between work participation and domestic involvement, their behaviour often belies their words. While this gap between words and actions may appear to reflect insincerity at best and deception at worst, our research suggests that their actions are complex strategies of accommodation that emerge when aspirations and ideals are out of sync with more constrained options.

Our interviews show that men from diverse social backgrounds, including those who are well-educated professionals, are seriously concerned about the toll that time demands at work may take on their private lives. Many are making efforts to alter work schedules to make more room for family life and personal pursuits. Christopher, 39, for example, is married but does not yet have children. He has jumped from one company to another over the course of his career, but has worked consistently. As a successful businessman, he worries about how he can make room for children in his life and is attempting to find work that makes this possible without requiring too many ‘sacrifices’:

I think that I would choose a career that allows me to have the family life that I want. I choose to work at a certain company, in a certain position that allows me to have those outside interests. Because the minute you start saying your family or your child is taking away from something that you want, now you’ve got a conflict of interest. I don’t think that’s a good thing. So I think you need to, in life, to be able to balance out what you’re looking for and make your choices accordingly. I knew that I wanted to get married. I know that I want to have children. So I have a career that allows me to do just that, without having to really make sacrifices because then it will affect one or the other.

Aware of the struggle that awaits him, Christopher is trying to follow a conscious strategy that will support these desires. Others are not as confident.
Joel, for example, is 21 and still single, but he is already looking ahead with concern that he will not be able to handle the pressures of ‘doing it all’ as his career progresses:

I feel sometimes that my standards are too high, and I want it all, and it’s just not reasonable or feasible in this world. I don’t feel I’m as strong a person as that situation would require—someone who is on top of everything and sort of a superman. It doesn’t really seem like I’d be able to keep up that pace.

Christopher and Joel are not alone. In response to these insecurities, more of today’s workers—men as well as women—are more likely to change jobs in search of greater satisfaction and more flexibility to blend work and personal life. National data show that men’s median tenure dropped 10 per cent from 1983 to 2010 (Copeland 2010). Moreover, among men aged 45 to 49, or those at mid-career age, only 43.7 per cent experienced ten or more years tenure in 2010, down from 57.8 per cent in 1983 (Copeland 2010). Similarly, recent data indicate that self-employment is on the rise, both domestically and internationally. In fact, Müller and Arum (2004) find that by their early 50s, over 40 per cent of men in the US have been self-employed at some point in their career. While self-employment in the US has increased among both skilled and unskilled workers, descriptive analysis suggests that the self-employment category with the greatest increase is unskilled labour ‘such as childcare, housework, grounds-keeping, and motor vehicle operation’ (Arum 2004).

Job-hopping and self-employment are appealing because they offer more personal control, but they also require an intensive time commitment, which can paradoxically leave even less time for private pursuits. Julian, 42, recently relinquished a more secure job to become an entrepreneur. Although Julian has a serious girlfriend whom he plans to marry, he feels less pressure to balance his time in the short run. In the longer run, however, he hopes to have children and is acutely aware of the risks and difficulties that may ensue:

This startup is unbelievably intensive—immersive I think. And, I had no idea. [My business partner] has been through the startup mill several times, and he just said when we started out, ‘This is going to kick your ass.’ And, I’m like, ‘Yeah, okay, sure. I’m ready to have my ass kicked.’ Now I know what he means. . . I’m not saying I won’t do it again, but it’s a lot harder than anything I’ve ever done, emotionally. Because a lot of it is just so far out of your control and there are no rules and you can screw up and when you screw up, you can lose everything.

While Julian’s self-employment relieves him of the pressure of having to please a boss or be the last one to leave the office, he nevertheless faces daily
pressures to keep his venture alive. Hoping to avoid the constraints of a traditional job, Julian has unwittingly taken on even greater time demands.

While self-employment and job-hopping are becoming more popular, these options remain elusive for the majority. Without the financial, educational or familial resources to move from job to job or start a business of their own, most pursue a more traditional job path. Yet men on this trajectory do not necessarily hold a traditional outlook. Most share a desire for greater work flexibility with their less traditional peers.

At 28, Justin is married and contemplating the attraction of having a child. Yet he is frustrated that becoming a father, with its attendant financial demands, will tie him more tightly to his corporate career, even though he would rather leave it behind to pursue a more balanced life as a teacher:

If it weren't for the money, I would like to be a teacher and live a quiet life. But, it's not possible, I'm beginning to realize, because of the financial needs. The more likely scenario [is] I would have to continue this line of work. I don't feel there's a choice really.

Whether by choice or necessity, a number of men—among the middle as well as the working class—find themselves thinking about or actively seeking self-employment, moving from job to job, or searching for a new job in a declining labour market. Some, such as Justin, may resist making a change, but others may take the risk. Yet, whether they take the seemingly safe path or instead take a riskier route in search of greater autonomy and flexibility, rising economic insecurity leaves almost everyone facing strong pressures to demonstrate their work commitment by remaining on-call and being willing to work at any time and any place.

Henry, for example, is a 42-year-old married father of two, whose wife does not currently hold a paid job. After following jobs around the country and around the world, he felt frustrated and decided to launch his own business with a small group of colleagues. He wished to pursue more fulfilling work on his own terms and also sought greater flexibility. Hoping to spend more time taking his kids to school and being with them in the afternoons and evenings, he sought more freedom from the need to be at the office from early morning till late at night. While caretaking involvement had been almost impossible when he was trying to work his way up the corporate ladder, Henry found that launching his own business provided much more flexibility, but this came at the price of an even greater need to pay attention to work while also at home:

Now I get into the office after I drop my daughter off at school, so I get in about eight o'clock, eight fifteen. And then I usually leave here by one o'clock. But it's not the kind of business where you need to be sitting in an office, there aren't clients to call or anything like that. So
markets are open from about four o’clock in the afternoon on Sunday and then they close at one o’clock in the afternoon on Friday. And anytime in between then, you’re technically working.

*Interviewer: Do you end up working at home a lot?*

Yeah, working is really just thinking, and there is the physical work. The years when (I had) to impress somebody by physically sitting in front of a screen and proving that you're earning your money, those days are long past for me. So now it’s more about what I was hoping for when I first decided to go into trading, where it’s a true meritocracy, and it’s just about the production.

For Henry, self-employment provides the flexibility and autonomy he desires. Yet, while he spends far more time at home, he also spends about 120 hours a week ‘technically’ on the job, his schedule is more flexible, but his workload is greater.

Many men are searching for ways to adjust their work experience to accommodate the changing landscape of the workforce and family life. Some are turning to non-traditional work paths such as job-hopping and self-employment while others are trying to cope with more traditional arrangements. Whether men choose alternative work options or stay within a traditionally structured job, many are experiencing discontent over the continuing constraints that prevent them from finding a better balance between paid work and the other facets of their lives.

These strategies stem from a growing desire for greater personal balance, but they also reflect attempts to navigate an increasingly unpredictable economic environment, where the once-ascendant paradigm of loyalty to a single employer no longer offers the promise of financial security. The decline of stable work trajectories, which were once bolstered by employer loyalty in white-collar jobs and union protections in blue-collar ones, is likely to continue to produce new strategies among workers, including making lateral shifts among jobs, testing entrepreneurial skills through self-employment and seeking more flexibility and autonomy in traditional work environments.

Despite the hope that greater job autonomy and career flexibility will provide more opportunities for balancing work with family involvement, achieving this goal remains elusive. Indeed, strategies that may offer more autonomy and flexibility also require an intense commitment of time and attention. In this context, it is no surprise that even the most concerted and seemingly sincere efforts to become more involved in domestic work tend to falter. Men’s rising, yet still unequal, participation at home is not simply an indication of a desire to avoid equal sharing. It also represents an effort to reconcile the contradictory and competing demands of being both a committed breadwinner and an involved father.
Strategies at Home

While men’s participation in housework and caregiving has risen dramatically in the last several decades, it remains well below women’s. As Coltrane (2007) writes, ‘Since the 1960s, the time American women spend on housework has declined by about one-third, whereas men’s contributions have doubled. Overall, experts estimate that men’s relative contribution to routine indoor housework is now about half that of women’s.’ Moreover, while the time parents spend with their children has risen, the gap between men’s and women’s participation has lessened (Coltrane 2007). Although one consequence of this shrinking but nevertheless persistent gender gap is men’s continuing status as a breadwinner, the desire to hold onto this status is not necessarily the catalyst for it. Men continue to face intractable clashes between the demands of intensive parenting and the fear of falling behind in the marketplace, where jobs and income continue to shape men’s social status and sense of self-worth.

Nathan, who at 40 is married with two children, has switched jobs and companies several times to find the blend of hours and stimulation that he prefers. His wife works full-time and they share responsibilities at home, yet he worries that ‘having it all’ will become unattainable as work and family demands grow. Spending time with his children is his top priority, at least in the abstract, but he knows it will become problematic if success at work requires ‘massive’ attention:

My personal opinion is that, when your kids are young, it’s the most joyous time and you see them change everyday . . . I wouldn’t trade spending time with them for the world . . . Once you have kids, if you have a job that demands massive time commitments then you’re gonna have a problem, which means you’re either gonna sacrifice time with your children or you’re going to have to still do what you need to do at work but in less time.

For Nathan, the hope of working faster or more efficiently offers a possible alternative to giving up time with his children, but it is far from clear that he can put this strategy into practice. This concern that preferred options may not be realistic is widespread. With growing competition for jobs and growing pressures to work 10- to 12-hour days, cutting back at work often seems unacceptable and unsustainable. Whether they wish to or not, most men turn to a modified traditionalism at home by relying on partners to take on the lion’s share of caregiving that they regard as so critical. As Eric, a 36-year-old married father of two, explains:

I’ve always wanted to be a lot more involved, and I was for a while. I made sure I was home in time to spend time with my oldest son before my second son was born, made sure that I could read him a bedtime
story, that sort of thing. But (now) it’s a lot more where I say, all right, I’ve got to focus on my job because that’s bringing home the bacon. Don’t tear yourself apart and feel guilty when you can’t do something, do your best to be there, do your best to focus on that and enjoy it and be a part of the family when you’re there instead of being upset that you didn’t have more time or think about work or whatever. As much as I can, I try to compartmentalize it.

Since Eric’s wife does not work, they consider him the breadwinner. Although their situations differ, Eric and Nathan feel a similar conflict. Despite the high value Eric places on being with his children, he finds it necessary to stress the financial obligations of fatherhood. He may appear to simply place work above family time, but his focus on work emerges from an internal debate about the trade-offs between time and money. We know that contemporary women face a conflict between having a committed career and living up to the ideals of intensive parenthood, but men face this dilemma as well. Although the strategy of putting work first is rarely the preferred option, few men feel they have the option to pull back from paid work, even temporarily.

While most of our interviewees focus on the more apparently enjoyable aspects of parenting, such as playing with their children, some are careful to also include tasks that may appear less appealing, such as changing diapers, giving baths and doing the housework. Ken, who is married with two children at 40, has worked without pause for a number of companies throughout the US. Over the course of his career, he reports that rising work demands have left him unable to participate in tasks he once assumed were his responsibility:

It’s something that has sort of evolved, just because [in the past] I was getting home earlier. I would give the kids a bath every single night. Any night they would get one, I would give [it to] them. Now I get home closer to bedtime, so I don’t. Of course, I do it on the weekends, but I don’t really do it during the week any more. So it has fallen [into] a little bit more ‘traditional’ . . . I think I feel okay with it. I wish I could do a little bit more. I wish I could be there in the mornings more . . . But I don’t think that either of us would really complain that this one doesn’t do this or that one doesn’t do that. I’m sure both of us would have things to say if you got really down to it, but I don’t think either of us would complain that someone doesn’t hold up their end of the bargain.

While Ken is uncomfortable about pulling back from his earlier level of involvement, he cannot imagine or foresee an acceptable alternative. And although he believes his wife supports this arrangement, he is also aware that it has caused new stresses in the relationship.
Some men acknowledge their preference for avoiding the less desirable tasks, even if this stance creates tension with their partner. Single at 27, Mitch explains that there are certain jobs he will simply not do:

I’d like sharing equally—certainly child raising and also financially. I’d like my mate to be able to balance and maybe switch them, but I do not want to do cooking.

Nick, a 44-year-old father of four, runs a manufacturing business that once belonged to his wife’s parents. While his mother-in-law is still involved, he oversees the daily operation of the business while his wife has pulled back to part-time work and devoted the majority of her time to caring for the family. Nick resists what he deems to be the less desirable aspects of housework and parenting, but he admits his resistance to being a more equal partner has some unpleasant consequences:

I think we play different roles. My wife, almost to my regret—[but] not really—but she’s probably the primary caregiver. I would like to say that I believe that the kids are very open with me and involve me, and maybe even more in certain aspects than my wife. My wife sometimes regrets that she has to be the disciplinarian. She’s with them, and she rides them. ‘Are you doing your homework?’ Or . . . ‘this test grade wasn’t that great’. Not in a mean spirited way, but she’ll always bring them along and remind them that she’s observant of them and so forth. And with that comes the responsibility of being, in some ways, the heavy. So I know that there are times when she says, ‘you get to blow in and be the friend’. And I don’t want to take advantage of that, but I think she’s the one in charge of their upbringing probably more so than I am.

Nick enjoys playing the ‘good guy’, which gives him advantages that his wife does not enjoy, but he also uses this ‘role’ to make up for his inability to keep pace with his wife’s involvement. His focus on the enjoyable tasks is self-serving, but it also reflects a need to stress his responsibilities as the family provider over the pressures to be a more involved father.

By framing women’s work as optional, men resolve the conflict between being an involved parent and the primary earner. If a partner’s job is optional then his is essential, leaving little room to reduce hours or effort at the workplace in order to parent more. As long as men are judged—and judge themselves—by their success as breadwinners, they will find it useful and even necessary to define equality in relative terms. Darren, 40, is a father of two who has experienced great success within one company for over ten years. From this vantage point, his wife’s decision to leave her position as a lawyer to stay home with their children is straightforward and reasonable; her ability to shift her focus from work to family is an option made possible only by his ample earnings:
I think it was a combination of—she had been doing it for a long time. If you do anything for long enough, you’re ready to do something else. Second, I got to a point in my career where, at the risk of sounding immodest, the money from [her] being a lawyer was less relevant to how we were going to live. Thirdly, our kids were getting to an age where the amount of engagement you have with them on a daily basis is a lot. I think she just looked at it and said, ‘It will be more fun to do that than to do what I’m doing.’ So she hung it up.

When, moreover, Darren considers the daily needs of his children, he sees his wife as the parent who felt more attracted to meeting them. Their new arrangement is fair because his work commitment and success provide his wife with the option to define her legal career as optional. Yet this dynamic leaves Darren with even more pressure to provide for the family’s economic welfare. This cycle creates a growing discrepancy between his rhetoric of equality and his move toward a form of traditionalism that leaves room for women to work, but retains clear gender boundaries.

This dilemma spans class boundaries. Like the middle- to upper-middle-class professionals who lament the time demands required for career-building, Jim, a 27-year-old college dropout working his way up the civil service ladder, expresses similar sentiments about the pressure to maintain his status as a breadwinner:

Even though I didn’t go to school a lot, you can get by in school without being there every day. But now it’s different. How are you gonna get ahead if you’re not at work? So if somebody’s gonna be the breadwinner, it’s going to be me. I always feel the need to work.

Men’s reluctance to share equally at home clashes with their rising avowal of support for equality, a clash that is intensified by increasing pressures at work and at home. Caught between cultural constructions of masculinity that expect men to be work-committed breadwinners and a countervailing movement that valorizes egalitarian relationships and involved fathering, men turn to strategies to avoid the worst-case scenario of market failure by settling for a modified form of traditionalism. This may appear to be a rejection of egalitarian ideals, but it is a fallback position that emerges when more flexible and egalitarian options are out of reach.

CONCLUSION: THE DYNAMICS OF RESISTANCE AND CHANGE

Even if most men no longer prefer a traditional division of labour, they continue to face structural and cultural constraints that make other alternatives elusive. Egalitarian aspirations may be on the rise, but a host of obstacles leave men (and women) sceptical about attaining these ideals. It is an irony
of post-industrial life that, even as dual-career couples have become the marital norm, jobs have become more time-demanding. Salaried professionals face strong pressures to work long hours not just to move ahead but even to keep their jobs, and wage workers face similar pressures to work overtime or take a second job (if it can be found) (Epstein and Kalleberg 2004). Men who turn to seemingly more flexible work structures, such as self-employment, or who, either by force or by choice, find themselves moving from job to job face equally constraining pressures. Even though good fathering increasingly means more than just providing income, men face the risk of incurring large economic penalties if they seek a more egalitarian division at home (Epsing-Anderson 2009). Loyalty to employees may be dwindling in the workplace, but increasing competition makes it difficult for men to be loyal to anything other than the job.

Yet the gap between men’s rhetoric and behaviour is shrinking, if not disappearing; just as important, the shift in men’s ideals is significant in itself. As women pursue stronger ties to work and careers, men’s and women’s ideals are converging and new generations are especially likely to seek egalitarian strategies. Persisting structural and cultural obstacles prompt most men to seek modified versions of traditional arrangements, but the shift toward self-employment and job-hopping means that men, too, are increasingly likely to travel interrupted career pathways. These large-scale changes in the occupational structure and women’s lives require new blueprints for how men should navigate adulthood as they attempt to reconcile the countervailing pulls of work and family life.

Deeply embedded institutional arrangements encourage men to seek strategies that profess support for equality while resisting many of its implications. The structure of demanding careers and the concomitant belief that a stable, upward career trajectory is essential push most men to focus on work and rely on a partner for domestic work. Yet the forces that maintain these structural and cultural imperatives (which Moen and Roehling, 2005, call the ‘career mystique’ and Joan Williams, 2000, calls the ‘ideal worker’ ethos) are colliding with the forces fueling ideological change.

On the surface, men’s rhetoric of equality may appear to be a superficial bow to women’s aspirations and demands. Yet it would be a mistake to interpret men’s expressed desires as merely ‘dishonest’, while viewing their less egalitarian strategies as a ‘true’ reflection of their wishes (much the way it is misleading to reduce a woman’s worldview to ‘false consciousness’). Even if many men believe that supporting equality is the socially desirable response, this signals a sea change in their cultural conceptions of good fathering and desirable manhood. Rather than rejecting or denying the emergence of a new discourse among contemporary men, the challenge is to understand how and why men’s perceptions are shifting. We need to listen to men’s voices, take their views seriously and discover the social contexts that encourage and produce them.
Today’s men are caught between the attractions of sharing and the appeal of traditional privileges. Faced with rising uncertainty in both the labour and marriage markets, men are navigating uncharted waters. The traditional division of labour is no longer tenable and egalitarian ideologies are on the rise, but institutional obstacles persist. Yet, as gender boundaries continue to blur, the best chance for helping men build lasting relationships and satisfying ties to work is to help them pursue egalitarian ideals rather than fall back on more traditional strategies.

The erosion of traditional marital and work ideals—and the rise of more egalitarian aspirations—signals a need to redefine the cultural beliefs and structural arrangements that once supported men’s breadwinning. Since most men can no longer presume that they will be able to secure a stable job that promises long-term financial security and pays enough to support a household, we need policies that value paid and domestic work for everyone and that support alternative career structures such as flexible schedules and career ladders that allow men, no less than women, to pursue their work goals in concert with the ebb and flow of family needs throughout adulthood. Only fundamental change in the organization of earning and caretaking will allow men to span the gulf between their ideals and their strategies. In the absence of new, more flexible forms of work and family care, they are more likely to pursue strategies that uphold the principles of equality, while re-creating inequality in a new guise.

NOTES


2. All interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Analysis is based on the examination of men within a variety of career trajectories, including interrupted and non-interrupted pathways, in order to understand how they develop responses to work-family conflicts and how they understand and experience these strategies. Rather than making a causal argument, we instead provide an analysis of men’s coping strategies and the processes by which these trajectories unfold.

3. While a decline in men’s tenure is observable from the early 1980s until the present, data indicate a slight rise over the last year (Copeland 2010). We believe it is too early to say this indicates an upward spring as it may be a temporary consequence of recent economic events.

REFERENCES