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Scott Coltrane

The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 2004; 596; 214

DOI: 10.1177/0002716204268776

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COMMENT

Elite Careers and Family Commitment: It's (Still) about Gender

By
SCOTT COLTRANE

Men and women are increasingly likely to pursue careers in elite professions, but gendered expectations about homemaking and breadwinning continue to shape opportunities for professional advancement and individual decisions to marry, have children, regulate employment hours, or use "family-friendly" programs. This article describes how the Victorian ideology of separate spheres and other gendered beliefs and practices have spawned a modern-day "career advancement double standard" in which professional women who marry or have children are considered less serious about their careers, whereas professional men who marry or become fathers are considered more likely candidates for promotion. Trends in the general population toward more gender equality in labor force attachment and family labor sharing are compared to slower changes among elite professionals such as doctors, lawyers, and bankers.

Keywords: family; fathers; housework; parenting; gender; elite professions; dual-career couples; work-family

When academic researchers first began studying work-family trade-offs in the 1970s, they turned their attention toward high-status dual-career professional couples. According to conventional wisdom, doctors, lawyers, scientists, and professors were most likely to overcome the sexist stereotyping and the gender discrimination that discouraged men and women from sharing breadwinning and family caregiving. More than a quarter-century later, men and women in high-status professional careers are likely to share breadwinning, but the accommodation of those careers to family concerns is limited by nostalgic family ideals and

Scott Coltrane is a professor of sociology and associate director of the Center for Family Studies at the University of California, Riverside (UCR). He is past president of the Pacific Sociological Association, recipient of the UCR Distinguished Teaching Award, and principal investigator on NIH-funded longitudinal studies of Mexican American and European American families. His books include Family Man, Gender and Families and Families and Society.

DOI: 10.1177/0002716204268776

gender stereotypes. Despite uneven progress in women's professional advancement, the basic assumption that family caregiving is the exclusive responsibility of women remains. As the articles in this volume attest, more women have entered elite professions, but they face difficult choices and are more likely than men in these professions to delay or forgo marriage or childbirth. In fact, I suspect that achieving work-family balance is now easier in middle- and working-class occupations than it is in the elite professions.

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The elite professions have been slow to accommodate changing family situations or to embrace fully the concept that family caregiving demands should allow a person to work part-time at various stages of the life course. These professions could do a much better job of providing flexibility and family-friendly options to those who receive training to be doctors, lawyers, bankers, scientists, or researchers. The articles presented here show some improvement but also continuing inequities in specializations, earnings, benefits, and promotions between women and men. Although much has changed since the 1970s, the ideal professional worker is still a man with a stay-at-home wife who fulfills *his* family obligations through being a breadwinner. To move through the professional ranks (e.g., receive promotions, become a partner, get tenure), one is still expected to devote huge amounts of time and emotional energy to the profession, an expectation that renders career advancement and raising a family virtually incompatible—at least for women.

Why is the work-family juggling act *not* a major issue for men in these professions? When men become husbands and fathers, coworkers and superiors perceive them as being more serious and more deserving of career advancement than their single or childless counterparts. "Family men" are seen as partner "material" and are assumed to possess the mature leadership qualities that qualify one to be a manager or CEO. Curiously, the opposite reasoning is applied to women. When they become wives and mothers, it is expected that family obligations will inevitably intrude on their ability to commit themselves to their demanding careers. Whereas previously they might have been on the "fast track," the act of getting

married or having children subtly renders these women “less qualified” for advancement. This career advancement double standard, reflected as much in informal interactions, workplace cultures, and personal beliefs as in official policies, comes out of Victorian-era cultural ideals that also brought us the sexual double standard (only men should have sexual affairs), exclusionary hiring practices (only men are worthy of employment), and differential wage rates (men should be paid more than women because they need a “family wage”). The career advancement double standard represents a last vestige of separate-spheres ideology, in which husbands are assumed to be breadwinners and wives are assumed to be homemakers (Coltrane 1998; Coontz 1992). Even recent federal efforts at welfare reform and child support selectively reinforce this ideal, insofar as they are designed to collect money from absent fathers and to encourage mothers to marry.

In *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood* (1996), Sharon Hays showed how separate-spheres ideology shapes personal as well as institutional expectations about women being more kind, caring, and nurturing than men. Women *do* provide more family care and emotional support than men, but Hays demonstrates that conventional expectations for “intensive mothering” are socially constructed and subject to historical change. New mothers often hope that a subliminal “maternal instinct” will show them how to parent but ultimately find that they must develop their parenting skills by reading books, talking to other mothers, and interacting with their children. Conversely, Nicholas Townsend (2002) described how separate-spheres ideology urges men to define their family contributions by their work commitments. Townsend showed that men embrace a “package deal” of marriage, work, fatherhood, and homeownership and strive to maintain a division of labor based on symbolic “father breadwinners” and “mother homemakers.” Even men whose wives are employed tend to define their family obligation as earning money, justifying their limited role in everyday family life by invoking the belief that children should be cared for by their mothers. Townsend showed how men’s parenting is mediated by wives who schedule and manage family life, as mothers and fathers collude in a gendered system of parenting that keeps fathers on the sidelines as helpers, playmates, and occasional disciplinarians.

What’s wrong with this picture? Such patterns contradict popular ideals about “new” fathers who participate in the details of raising children, but historical analyses show that fathering ideals and practices are not necessarily congruent (Coltrane 1996; Griswold 1993; LaRossa 1997; Mintz 1998). More to the point, the continued symbolic significance of intensive mothers and breadwinner fathers serves to reproduce unequal gender relations at a time when gender equality is gaining acceptance in education and in the workplace (Coontz 1992). Elsewhere, I have argued that nostalgic family policies based on breadwinner fathers and mothers who marry and avoid divorce “for the sake of the children” are predicated on false assumptions about the causes and consequences of changes in family structure (Coltrane 2001; Coltrane and Adams 2003). In contrast to jeremiads about family breakdown, the institution of marriage is not in danger of disappearing, and marriage promotion is unlikely to lift significant numbers of children out of poverty. The real problem is continued acceptance of separate-spheres ideology and

the failure of social institutions to accept gender equality in the home and in the workplace.

In the past several decades, Americans have witnessed huge changes in both the work and the family sides of the work-family equation. Women's labor force participation has risen dramatically, as have the educational achievement and occupational training of women. Women are now more likely to attend college than men (though their career trajectories and earnings continue to lag behind those of men). On the family side, dual-earner couples have become the norm. In 1960, there were more than twice as many breadwinner-father/homemaker-mother families as dual-earner families, but in 2000, there were more than twice as many dual-earner families as breadwinner-father/homemaker-mother families. And the number of other family types, including single-mother and single-father families, has grown even faster. Although patterns differ across subgroups of the population, American couples are having fewer children later in their lives. And women are increasingly able to have children outside of marriage, with the largest change coming for women older than thirty (see Coltrane and Collins 2001).

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Changes in the division of family labor between spouses have been relatively slow, and few couples report equal sharing. Nevertheless, men have increased their contributions significantly, especially on weekends (Coltrane 2000; Pleck and Masciadrelli 2003). Based on national time-diary studies, Robinson and Godbey (1997) reported that American women's time spent on housework declined by one-third from the 1960s to the late 1980s and men's relative contributions doubled, increasing from about 15 to 33 percent of the total. Even more change has occurred in American men's performance of child care. From the 1960s to early 1980s, fathers interacted with their children about a third as much as mothers and were available about half as much as mothers (Lamb et al. 1987). During the mid-1980s to early 1990s, the average coresident father interacted about two-fifths as much as the mother and was available to his children almost two-thirds as much (Pleck 1997). In the late 1990s, he was available to his children about three-fourths as much as the mother, interacting on weekdays about two-thirds as often but more than four-fifths as much on weekends (Pleck and Masciadrelli 2003; Yueng et al.

2001). At the same time, however, in most families, fathers and mothers share much less of the responsibility for the planning, scheduling, emotional management, and other behind-the-scenes activities associated with raising children (Coltrane 2004; Deutsch 1999).

Because the average woman still does about twice the amount of routine housework as the average man, and because findings of greater proportionate sharing among married couples are driven more by women's time adjustments than men's, researchers have focused on the continuing importance of gender in the allocation of domestic work (Coltrane 2000; Thompson and Walker 1989). Most researchers find that married men create as much (or more) demand for household labor than they perform, whereas women tend to perform domestic labor to meet the demands necessitated by the presence of children and husbands. We do know that when men perform more of the routine housework, employed women feel that the division of labor is fairer, are less depressed, and enjoy higher levels of marital satisfaction. We also know that the allocation of household tasks is associated with variation in the employment hours of both men and women, their relative earnings, their beliefs about gender and family, and their living arrangements. Family size, age, life stage, ethnicity, presence and contribution of children, and a host of other factors also enter into the household labor allocation process, but in general we can say that the person with less power and fewer resources does more of it (Coltrane 2000).

Unfortunately, most researchers study *either* housework *or* child care, so we have an incomplete picture of how they fit together. We do know that when men feel responsible for child development, they tend to share more of the daily parenting, including supervising, driving, helping with homework, and interacting. These patterns are also associated with more sharing of the cooking, meal cleanup, shopping, housecleaning, and laundry. In other words, when men participate in the more nurturing and supportive activities that serve children, they are also more likely to share in child and home maintenance activities. In contrast, when men participate in parenting as symbolic household heads, coaches, or playmates, they are somewhat less likely to share domestic work with their wives (Coltrane 2004; Coltrane and Adams 2001).

Changes in attitudes toward work and family opportunities and obligations for men and women have arguably changed more rapidly than actual behaviors. Most American men now say they value home and family over work. Young men and women now expect to share breadwinning, and most even say that housework and child care should be shared equally when both spouses are employed. Young men tend to expect that the workplace and family sharing they endorse will occur with little thought or effort, whereas most young women worry about the details. Young women anticipate that balancing career and family obligations, as well as negotiating fair sharing arrangements for housework and child care, will be difficult (Coltrane 1998, 2000, 2004). We can thus see that accommodations to new attitudes of sharing are partial and incomplete, with many women and their employers

still assuming that women will specialize in family work and cut back on work hours after marrying or having children. These patterns help explain why women in elite professions delay getting married or having children.

The forces driving changes in fathers' involvement in working- and middle-class families should continue. Women share more family work with their male partners when they are employed more hours, earn more money, have more education, and believe in sharing. All these trends are likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Similarly, men share more family work when they are employed fewer hours and believe in sharing and when their wives earn more. Whether these trends will exert enough pressure on men in dual-career professional couples to do more at home remains to be seen, but early indications are that change in the elite professions may be lagging behind change in the working class. It should also be noted that when women in elite professions hire working-class and immigrant women to provide domestic family services, it reduces their own hours of family labor but does little to challenge the privileged position of husbands in families and often contributes to perpetuating race, class, and gender hierarchies in the larger labor market. Thus, maintaining separate-spheres ideology has repercussions beyond the marriage and family patterns of the relatively privileged men and women who become doctors, lawyers, scientists, professors, and bankers.

*Most American men now say they value home
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In summary, belief in separate gender spheres continues to shape socialization into elite professions and the gendered organization of work and family life for individuals in these positions. Categorical distinctions between mothering and fathering perpetuate expectations that women will raise children and men will do little direct family work. These symbolic distinctions are theoretically linked to the maintenance of male dominance throughout the society (Coltrane 1996; Coltrane and Adams 2001; Connell 1987; Osmond and Thorne 1993). To counter such inequities, we should stop assuming that women should provide domestic services and emotional support to husbands, children, and other family members. We should also stop assuming that men are incapable of nurturing children and doing housework. In the long run, such a shift would promote earnings equity for women and lead to more work flexibility for elite professionals as well as for other workers. Only by focusing on the gender stereotypes inherent in our expectations for professionals will we be able to transcend them in the future.

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