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Changing Lives, Resistant Institutions: A New Generation Negotiates Gender, Work, and Family Change[1]

Kathleen Gerson[2]

Sociology's enduring concern with explaining the links between individual and social change has never been more relevant. We are poised at a moment when changing lives are colliding with resistant institutions. These tensions have created social conflicts and personal dilemmas for women and men alike. To explain the interplay between lives and institutions and to develop effective strategies for transcending the impasse between public demands and private needs, we need a deeper understanding of how these structural and cultural conflicts play out in the lives of young women and men. This article proposes a framework for such an inquiry.

KEY WORDS: family; gender; marriage; social change; social institutions; work.

INTRODUCTION

Fifty years ago, in *The Sociological Imagination*, C. Wright Mills (1959) famously urged social science to locate itself at the intersection of biography, history, and social structure. By focusing on social structure, he called on sociology to investigate how specific social contexts—embedded in time and space—shape individual lives. By focusing on biography, he recognized that social theories need to account for how lives develop over time. By focusing on history, he placed the nexus between social and individual change at the heart of the sociological enterprise.

Five decades later, at the outset of a new century, sociology's enduring concern with explaining the links between individual and social change has never been more relevant. We are poised at a moment when changing lives are colliding with resistant institutions. On the one hand, growing demographic

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[2] Department of Sociology, New York University, 295 Lafayette Street, 4th Floor, New York, New York 10012.

and cultural diversity has given people new ways to live, work, and build families. Dual-earner, single-parent, and same-sex couple homes now greatly outnumber the once-ascendant homemaker-breadwinner family.[3] Legions of work- and career-committed women, including married and single women with and without children, have taken their place alongside and now outnumber home-centered mothers. The "traditional" career, where male workers of all classes (though not all races) could gain economic security through loyalty to their employers and earn enough to support wives and children, has been supplanted by a myriad of time-demanding but insecure jobs. The life course has become more fluid and unpredictable as people travel new paths through work and family in adulthood.[4]

Yet these intertwined social shifts—revolutions in family life, gender arrangements, work trajectories, and life-course patterns—face great resistance from institutions rooted in earlier eras. At the workplace, employers reward "ideal workers" who provide uninterrupted full-time—often overtime—commitment, an ideal that workers now perceive as not just a requirement to move up but even to keep their place.[5] In the home, privatized caretaking leaves parents, especially mothers, facing the seemingly endless demands of "intensive parenting."[6] The ideal of permanent marriage persists for relationships despite the fluid and uncertain nature of intimate commitment.

The tensions between changing lives and resistant institutions have created personal dilemmas for women and men alike. Even though children increasingly depend on their mother's earnings, women remain primarily responsible for caretaking. And however much men would like to be involved fathers, their success in the job market remains the prime measure of their "marriageability" and social status.[7] To explain and develop effective strategies for transcending the impasse between public demands and private needs, we need a deeper understanding of how these structural and cultural conflicts play out in the lives of young women and men.

[3] The homemaker-breadwinner household reached it height in the 1950s, when post-World War II prosperity made this arrangement possible for the majority of U.S. households. Yet many families never conformed to this model, especially among working-class and minority communities where many adults lacked the resources or the desire to attain this cultural ideal. By 2000, 60% of all married couples had two earners, while only 26% depended only on a husband's income. During this same period, single-parent homes, overwhelmingly headed by women, claimed a growing proportion of U.S. households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006a,b). There is also a great deal of variation in children's living situation across racial groups, with 17% of Asian children, 24% of non-Hispanic white children, 34% of Hispanic children, and 65% of black children living with either one parent or neither parent (Blow, 2008).

[4] For some overviews of these varied changes, see Cherlin (2009), Coontz (2005), Edgell and Docka (2007), Furstenberg *et al*. (2004), Jacobs and Gerson (2004), Moen and Roehling (2005), and Springer (2007).

[5] Williams (2000). For compelling analyses of the power of time norms in professional jobs, see Blair-Loy (2003), Epstein *et al*. (1999), and Roth (2006).

[6] Hays (1996).

[7] Wilson (1987).

"CHILDREN OF THE GENDER REVOLUTION" AS A LENS FOR MAPPING CHANGE

The lives of young adults growing up in a period of large-scale institutional restructuring provide a fulcrum point of social change. It is they who face the most intense conflicts and they who will be forging new directions and strategies. Norman Ryder aptly termed young adulthood a strategic phase in the "demographic metabolism" of birth, aging, and death."[8] Poised between the dependency of childhood and the irrevocable investments of later adulthood, this life stage represents both a time of individual transition and a potential engine for social change.

Each generation's choices are both a judgment about the past and a statement about the future, but the life strategies of today's young adults are especially consequential. They came of age in an era of unprecedented change, and they are building lives in a world that bears little resemblance to that of their parents and grandparents. Their experiences illuminate the ways that diverse work, family, and gender arrangements shape life chances and how, in turn, people use their experiences to craft strategies that influence the trajectory of change.

Members of this generation are "children of the gender revolution" in two senses. They grew up watching their parents cope with new family forms, unexpected economic insecurities, and expanding options for women. Facing dilemmas about whether and how to craft their own ties to partners, offspring, and jobs, they are also negotiating their own transition to adulthood. To discover the experiences of this strategically situated generation, I interviewed a carefully selected group of 18 to 32 year-olds about their experiences growing up, their current work and family strategies, and their outlooks on the future.[9] Their lives provide a window through which to view the consequences of social change and its future prospects.

The Ambiguity of Family Structure: Divided Views on Parents' Work and Marital Choices

The young women and men who were interviewed experienced the full range of changes that have been taking place in U.S. homes. Most lived in

[8] Ryder (1965).

[9] My research team interviewed 120 randomly selected respondents from a wide range of urban and suburban communities. (I personally conducted 80 interviews, and my research assistants, Stephanie Byrd and Jordana Pestrong, conducted an additional 40 interviews.) Although practical considerations restricted the sample to the New York metropolitan area, the respondents grew up in all corners of the United States, from Texas and South Carolina to California and Illinois. They have varied racial and ethnic identities and class backgrounds, with 55% identifying as non-Hispanic white, 22% as African American, 17% as Latino or Latina, and 6% as Asian. Forty-six percent grew up in a middle- or upper-middle-class home, while 38% had a working-class background, and 16% lived in a lower-working-class or poor home. Although this group may not reflect small town or rural experiences, most Americans now live in metropolitan areas, where family and gender change have taken root most deeply. For a full description of my sampling strategy, see Gerson (2009).

some form of "nontraditional" household before reaching 18. About 40% experienced a parental separation or divorce at some point, and among the 60% who grew up with both biological parents, more than half of these parental couples relied on two paychecks to keep the family afloat. Although the remainder lived in a more traditional home, where mothers worked intermittently, secondarily, or not at all, many of these marriages also changed in significant ways as children grew to adulthood.[10]

How do these children view their parents' diverse arrangements and choices? While the conventional wisdom argues that children do best in families with two biological parents and a home-centered mother, the young women and men in my study hold more complicated and divided assessments.[11] Among those who lived in homes where mothers did not work for pay in a committed way, almost half (48%) wished their mothers had pursued a different alternative. When domesticity appeared to undermine their mother's satisfaction, disturb the household's harmony, or threaten its economic security, a child concluded it would have been better if his or her mother had pursued a more sustained commitment to paid work.

In contrast, almost 8 out of 10 of those who grew up in a home with a work-committed mother believe this was the best option. Although a minority concluded that long working hours, blocked opportunities, and family-unfriendly workplaces made their mothers feel overburdened and time-stressed, most focused on the increased economic resources, financial stability, and personal self-confidence that employment provided to mothers as well as fathers.

Young people are even more divided about whether their parents should have stayed together. Among those whose parents broke up (or never married), a slight majority wished they had stayed together. Yet close to half concluded that, while not ideal, a parental separation was better than living in a conflict-ridden or silently unhappy home. More surprising, although most children whose parents did stay together thought this was the best arrangement, 4 out of 10 felt their parents might have been better off apart. Whether their parents remained together or broke up, young people drew lessons from the long-term consequences. When married parents appeared to grow more distant and unhappy, children developed doubts about the wisdom of sticking it out. When divorced parents were able to get back on

[10] Despite its ubiquity, "traditional" is a misleading term for the homemaker-breadwinner household, which is actually a relatively modern, short-lived arrangement that rose to prominence in the mid-twentieth century, but then steadily eroded in the later decades of the twentieth century.

[11] Prominent proponents of the perspective that children do best in so-called traditional families, typically defined as a heterosexual couple with a home-centered mother, include David Blankenhorn (1995) and David Popenoe (1988, 1996). However, most research demonstrates that diversity *within* family types, however defined, is as large as the differences *between* them and that most of the negative consequences of single parenthood can be traced to the limited economic resources in these homes. Acock and Demo (1994) show, for example, that family composition does not predict children's well-being. Parcel and Menaghan (1994) make the same case for different forms of parental employment. Barnett and Rivers (1996, 2004) argue, moreover, that children are better off in two-earner homes.

their feet and create a better life, children developed a positive outlook on the decision to separate.

In all these circumstances, we cannot deduce children's outlooks and reactions from the *form* of family arrangements. Instead, children focused on how well their parents (and other caretakers) were able to meet the twin challenges of providing economic and emotional support.

From Family Structures to Family Pathways

Family life matters, but family "type" provides a limited and ambiguous framework for explaining children's perceptions. Such bulky categories as traditional, dual-earner, and single-parent mask more complex and subtle variations *within* family types. These static categories also draw attention away from how families *change* in both form and functioning as children grow up. In contrast to the image of a static family "structure," my respondents recounted dynamic processes that unfolded in unexpected ways, creating "family paths" that often involved dramatic shifts in a child's sense of support.

Even when children did not experience a clear change in the composition of their household, such as a parental breakup, most recalled living in different "families" as their parents' relationships, economic circumstances, and job statuses shifted over time, thus expanding or eroding their sense of support. About a third described families that remained generally stable and supportive, while less than 1 in 10 faced chronic domestic conflict and insecurity; but almost a quarter believed their families improved over time, while more than a third experienced eroding support as family life seemed to unravel. Despite their diverse destinations, these trajectories underscore how families are fluid and dynamic. Family life is a film, not a snapshot.

Family paths are crucial for charting children's views, but they cannot be reduced to changes in family form. Among those whose families remained or became traditional, slightly more than half report that their homes became more supportive while slightly less than half report eroding support. Similarly, while the majority of children exposed to a parental breakup described an eroding family path, 44% experienced improving domestic circumstances after a parental breakup. Even though most children in dual-earning families recounted stable or expanding support, a quarter of these children disagreed. Expanding and eroding support could occur in the context of either lasting marriages or parental separations as well as in both dual-earner and single-earner households.

Family Paths and Gender Strategies

If trajectories in family form do not explain a child's perceptions of support, then what does? The answer lies in how parents developed strategies

for breadwinning and caretaking in the face of unexpected economic contingencies and interpersonal crises.[12] *Gender flexibility* helped households meet children's financial and emotional needs, while *gender inflexibility* left them ill-prepared to cope with unpredictable economic squeezes and declining parental morale.[13]

Gender Flexibility and Expanding Support Gender flexibility can take different forms and unfold in a variety of ways. For children who grew up in a two-parent home, a mother's decision to take a job and build a career created more sharing and parental satisfaction. When Josh's depressed mother went to work, her morale improved and his father became a more involved caretaker.[14] When Chris's mother agreed to become the family's main breadwinner, his father was able to leave a frustrating job and retrain for a more satisfying career. In these cases, two-parent homes became more egalitarian, cohesive, and financially secure.

In one-parent homes, parental separations sometimes reduced domestic conflict, enhanced a custodial parent's morale, and helped households establish greater financial stability. For Danisha, divorce reduced the turmoil swirling in her household and prompted her parents to better collaborate in caring for her and her siblings. After Miranda's mother's left her father, a kind but "stubborn" man who could not keep a job but did not want his wife to work, it marked a turning point when Miranda's family life became more economically stable. When Mariela's philandering mother moved out, her father remarried someone who became, in Mariela's words, a "real mother" who gave her more attention and also contributed much-needed financial resources.

Family support also expanded when parents were able to rely on a broader network of caretakers and breadwinners. When their single working mothers moved near their grandparents, Nate and Isabella both gained "another parent." In the face of his parents' job setbacks and losses, Ray's family relied on his grandparents' financial contributions to weather their economic storms.

Though the changes took different forms, these families encountered unexpected crises that prompted their custodial parents and other guardians to transgress traditional gender boundaries and create new ways of earning and caring. For everyone with an improving family trajectory, more domestic equality in lasting marriages, beneficial parental breakups, new—and better—remarriages, and expanded care networks all encouraged rising parental morale and increased economic stability.

[12] Hochschild, with Machung (1989).

[13] Gender flexibility is a broad term that encompasses a variety of behavioral and mental strategies. The key is that all these strategies transgress rigidly drawn structural and cultural boundaries between women as caretakers and men as breadwinners (or, in the categories proposed by Parsons and Bales [1955], women as "expressive" specialists and men as "instrumental" specialists). Zerubavel (1991, 2006) discusses the advantages of "mental flexibility." For a full analysis of the varied forms that gender flexibility takes in different families, see Gerson (2009).

[14] Respondent names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

Gender Inflexibility and Eroding Support Gender inflexibility left other families ill-equipped to cope with unavoidable, but unanticipated, challenges. Parents in some two-parent homes were unable to develop new ways to share working and caretaking, despite dissatisfaction with rigidly gender-divided arrangements. Joel's parents, for example, "got stuck" in a traditional division of responsibilities even though his mother grew increasingly unhappy at home and his father felt trapped in a dead-end job. Sarah's mother became depressed and "overinvolved" when she faced an unexpected pregnancy and relinquished a teaching career to stay home.

Dual-earner homes do not guarantee happier outcomes, however. When parents became mired in power struggles or overwork, domestic contexts were also demoralizing. Michelle's father, for example, opposed her mother's career and refused to help at home. Patricia's mother insisted on doing all the cooking and cleaning, even though she provided the lion's share of the family's income. Michelle's parents ultimately parted after she left home, and Patricia wished her mother would do the same.

It is not surprising that parental morale and financial resources decline in the wake of a breakup, but these consequences also reflect parental difficulties in transcending gender boundaries. Nina's home fell into poverty not just because her father abandoned them, but because her mother never held a job and feared joining the workforce after his departure. When Hank's father "walked out," his stay-at-home mother not only resisted going to work but, even worse, turned to alcohol. On the other side of the gender divide, William's mother had no trouble supporting the family on her banker's income, but his once-involved father left to marry a younger woman and no longer spent time caring for him and his brothers.

Finally, the loss of support from other caretakers contributed to an eroding family path, especially when it coincided with the loss of parental support. When Jasmine's grandmother died shortly after her parents' breakup, it felt like a larger loss than her father's departure. Whether the problem was a marital impasse, a problematic parental breakup, or a smaller care network, when rigid gender boundaries prevented mothers from taking jobs or fathers and others from becoming or remaining involved caretakers, declining family support followed.

Families and Gender in a Changing Social Context The nature of parents' and other guardians' gender strategies shaped children's perceptions of their families' pathways. Gender flexibility in breadwinning and caretaking helped parents and others meet children's economic and emotional needs. Gender inflexibility left them poorly prepared for a host of unavoidable challenges to a traditional division of tasks and responsibilities. Although these challenges were unexpected, they are not random. They reflect widespread and inexorable social shifts that have undermined the "family wage" and the organized "male" career, raised expectations for marital happiness and provided new

opportunities to remain single or leave unhappy marriages, and fueled women's growing need and desire to pursue a life beyond domesticity and dead-end jobs.

In the context of rising economic uncertainty, expanding options and fluidity in intimate relationships, and the rising work aspirations of women, most families will confront economic, social, and interpersonal contingencies that encourage, and often force, family change. Homes that are flexible in their strategies for breadwinning and caretaking are better equipped to cope with—and prevail over—these unpredictable, but inescapable, challenges. Homes that are unable or unwilling to transgress gender boundaries are, in contrast, ill-prepared to cope with economic squeezes, a mother's declining morale, or a father's inability (or refusal) to provide support.

Negotiating the Future: High Hopes, Guarded Strategies

So what do young adults want for themselves? Despite their diverse childhood experiences, they have notably similar aspirations for adulthood. The overwhelming majority (95%) hope to create a life-long intimate bond with one partner. It would be misleading, however, to equate the ideal of a lasting relationship with the desire for a traditional one. To the contrary, 80% of women and 68% of men wish to build an egalitarian partnership with room for considerable personal autonomy. Not surprisingly, three-fourths of those who grew up in a dual-earner home want their spouses to share breadwinning and caretaking; but so do more than two-thirds of those from a more traditional home and close to nine-tenths of those with a single parent. Whether reared by traditional, dual-earning, or single parents, the overwhelming majority of men as well women want to forge a committed bond where both partners share paid work and family caretaking flexibly and equally.[15]

When it comes to their aspirations, young women and men are thus more alike than different. Both hope to integrate family and work in their own lives and to balance care and autonomy in their relationships. Yet they are also worried that seemingly insurmountable obstacles block the path to integrating work and family life in an egalitarian way. They hold deep and realistic fears that time-demanding jobs, a dearth of child-care and family-leave options, and their own high standards for an intimate relationship will place their ideal scenarios out of reach.

Confronted with so many obstacles, young women and men are preparing for less ideal circumstances by pursuing fall-back strategies that offer some insurance against their worst fears. Despite the large overlap in women's and men's aspirations, their second-best strategies point to a new gender divide

[15] These shared aspirations span class and race differences as well. More than 80% of children from middle- and upper-middle-class backgrounds and almost three-quarters of those from working-class and poor backgrounds want to achieve an egalitarian partnership, as do 72% of whites, 88% of African Americans, 82% of Latinos and Latinas, and 67% of Asians.

that differs starkly with the one touted by media analysts and social critics. In contrast to the popular argument that young women are "opting out" of the workplace, almost three-quarters of the women are preparing to fall back on "self-reliance." They see work as essential to their survival and marriage as an appropriate option only if and when they can find the right partner. Men, however, worry that equal parenting will cost them at work, which they believe must remain their first priority. Seventy percent of men are planning to fall back on a neotraditional arrangement that leaves room for their partner to work but reserves the status of primary breadwinner for themselves. These fall-back strategies are not only different but also at odds. Despite the shared desire to strike a balance between work and caretaking in the context of an egalitarian relationship, "self-reliant" women and "neotraditional" men are on a collision course.

Women's Search for Self-Reliance In contrast to the media-driven message that young women are "opting out" of the workplace for marriage and caretaking, almost three-quarters of the interviewed women are reluctant to surrender their autonomy in a traditional marriage and are determined to seek financial and emotional self-reliance.[16] To these young women, the fragility of marital bonds makes relying on a husband for economic security seem foolhardy. Self-reliance offers protection against the dangers of fragile relationships, economic dependence in marriage, and the social devaluation of domesticity. Accordingly, they seek both economic self-sufficiency and a separate identity by establishing strong ties to paid work. Danisha, an African American who grew up in an inner-city, working-class neighborhood, declared:

> Let's say that my marriage doesn't work. Just in case, I want to establish myself, because I don't ever want to end up, like, "What am I going to do?" I want to be able to do what I have to do and still be okay.

Jennifer, who was raised in a middle-class, predominantly white suburb, agreed:

> I have to have a job and some kind of stability before considering marriage. Too many of my mother's friends went for that—"Let him provide everything"—and they're stuck in a very unhappy relationship, but can't leave because they can't provide for themselves or the children they now have.

These young women do not believe their search for a nonnegotiable base in the world of paid work precludes having a life partner, but they are

[16] Although the preference for self-reliance as a fall-back strategy exists among women with diverse racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds, working-class and African-American women are especially likely to assert this position. While 59% of white women and 71% of Latinas prefer self-reliance, 100% of African-American women concur. In addition, 82% of women with a working-class or poor background agree, compared to 62% of those who grew up in a middle- or upper-middle-class home. Although Belkin (2003) coined the phrase "opt out revolution," subsequent analysis has made it clear that no such trend is occurring. Most women are not leaving the workforce, and those who do are more likely to be pushed out than to opt out. See, for example, Boushey (2005, 2008), Percheski (2008), Stone (2007), and Williams (2007).

determined to set a high standard for a worthy relationship. Economic self-reliance and personal independence make it possible to resist "settling" for anything less than a satisfying, mutually supportive bond. This outlook, in turn, encourages them to postpone commitment and to view marriage as both optional and reversible. Rachel, whose own parents separated, explained:

> I'm not afraid of being alone, but I am afraid of being with somebody's who's a jerk. I want to get married and have children, but it has to be under the right circumstances, with the right person.

Self-reliant women also concur that if a worthy relationship ultimately proves out of reach, remaining single need not mean rejecting motherhood or becoming socially disconnected. Just as they are redesigning relationships, they are also redesigning motherhood. These women would prefer to raise children with a committed partner, but they are willing to do so without one. They see breadwinning as an aspect of good mothering; and they hope to create a support network of kin and friends with whom to share care and who, if needed, can substitute for an intimate partner. As Maria, a Latina reared by two teachers who had a "wonderful relationship," explained:

> I can't settle. So if I don't find it, do I live in sorrow? To me, it's not one thing that's ultimately important. If I didn't have my family or a career or my friends, I would be equally unhappy … Maybe [not getting married] takes away a bit of the pie, but it's still just a slice.

Rather than depending on traditional marriage for their own—or their children's—financial and emotional well-being, self-reliant young women seek autonomy by combining support from kin and friends with a financial base of their own. This strategy may or may not ultimately lead to marriage, but in the interim it offers what appears to be the safest and most responsible way to prepare for the an uncertain future.[17]

Men's Search for Neotraditionalism Men, in contrast, are more inclined to fall back on a more traditional relationship, although in a modified form. Faced with escalating time pressures, rising insecurity at work, and a cultural paradigm that sees men's earnings as the core measure of their "marriageability," 70% of men concluded that equal sharing, however appealing, is too costly. Yet these men also felt torn between their desire to succeed—or at least survive—in the marketplace and growing pressures for egalitarian sharing in their relationships. To reconcile these conflicts, they hope to soften the boundaries between earning and caring without relinquishing their claim to breadwinning prerogatives.

[17] Of course, not all the women I interviewed are falling back on "self-reliance," with slightly more than a quarter preferring a modified form of traditionalism. Faced with limited job prospects and convinced they could not find an egalitarian partner, they hoped to avoid the conundrum of combining women's "second shift" with the heavy demands of time-greedy jobs in demoralizing, dead-end work settings. Yet even these women rejected full-time, permanent domesticity in favor of opting out temporarily and then returning to paid work.

In a variety of ways, these men seek to create a neotraditional alternative in an age of women's work.[18] Breadwinning remains an integral, nonnegotiable aspect of their own identity and thus forms the bedrock of their family commitments. Involvement in caretaking, though crucially important, must nevertheless take second place. As a corollary, they distinguish between a woman's "choice" to work and a man's "responsibility" and "right" to do so.[19] Jim believed he needed to work "full-time, all the time," which meant that his wife would be the one to "fit work in" when a child arrived.

> 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 …. This may sound sexist, but she'll just have to take time off.

By shifting the meaning of equality from equal sharing to "women's choice," this outlook makes room for an employed partner without undermining men's position as specialists in breadwinning. Because this strategy frames women's—but not men's—work as "optional," it converts belief in a child's need for intensive parenting into an injunction for "intensive mothering."[20] Hank argued a mother's presence in the home would make up for his absence.

> I can't sit home and have a woman pay the bills. Sharing the childcare—I would do it once I'm home, but the kids have to have somebody to come home to …. If there's someone who represents you at home and doing the same thing I would, hopefully that makes up for it.

These ideological and behavioral strategies create room for two earners and provide a buffer against the dangers and difficulties of living on one income without challenging men's position as the primary earner or imposing the costs of equal parenting on them. These more flexible, but still gendered boundaries between breadwinning and caretaking appear to be a good compromise when the costs of equality remain so high. When push comes to shove, however, men's efforts to craft a neotraditionalism that pays lip service to equality while protecting their economic prerogatives collides with women's growing desire for equality at home and independence in the wider world.[21]

[18] Just as self-reliant women exist in all class, ethnic, and racial groups, so do neotraditional men, although a higher percentage can be found among whites and those with middle-class backgrounds. While 73% of men who grew up in middle- or upper-middle-class homes prefer neotraditionalism as a fall-back strategy, so do 68% of men with a working-class or poor background. Almost three-quarters (73%) of white men seek a neotraditional fallback, and 64% of African-American men and 63% of Latinos agree.

[19] For discussions of how the state has defined jobs as the citizenship rights of men, but not women, see Haney (2002) and Fraser (1989).

[20] Hays (1996).

[21] About a third of men prefer self-reliance. Like self-reliant women, these men hoped to avoid women's dependence in marriage, but had different rationales for this position. Worried about job security, they put work stability before marriage (even if they had already fathered a child) and looked for a partner who (as Patrick put it) "can take care of herself." In this way, self-reliance has a different meaning for men, who focus on the roadblocks to both breadwinning *and* equal sharing and see marital commitment as possible only in the context of having a good job.

A New Gender Divide Young women and men have formulated both ideal and fall-back positions. Although most wish to forge a life-long partnership that eschews rigid gender boundaries and shares work and parenting, they are also convinced they must prepare for options that may put their ideals out of reach. The combination of an "ideal worker" paradigm that leaves little time for caretaking and an "intensive parenting" paradigm that relies on privatized care creates obstacles for everyone. Facing these barriers, women and men are formulating fall-back strategies that are not just different, but conflicting. If a lasting, egalitarian partnership is not possible, most women prefer self-reliance over the perils of traditional marriage, while most men prefer a neotraditional arrangement to the risks and penalties of equal parenting.

Reaching Across the Gender Divide?

Young women and men face different dilemmas, but shared uncertainties. The social and economic shifts that have pushed and pulled women into the paid workforce have also eroded stable career paths for men in both white- and blue-collar occupations. These changes have prompted young people to develop new strategies for career and family building.

Young workers are losing faith in the "career mystique" that once promised steady, predictable movement up a structured occupational trajectory.[22] Fearful that a career tied to an organizational hierarchy may leave them on a ladder that collapses before they reach its higher rungs, young men as well as women hope instead to personally tailor their own careers by shifting jobs and even occupations as new opportunities arise or older ones are foreclosed. After watching his father suffer a career-ending layoff after 25 years of service, Joel rejected the notion that remaining a loyal employee would ensure job security or a rising income:

> He was figuring to retire with that place. It came as a shock. I used it as a learning experience—that things aren't as stable as you might think, and not to make a choice just because of security. Consciously or subconsciously, I don't want to fall in that situation.

Although Miranda worried more about getting bored than losing her job, she also vowed to follow her "heart" rather than pledging loyalty to one employer:

> The ladder seems kind of old-fashioned. I see myself moving around. And as much as I've changed jobs and done different things, I don't know that I would go back to doing the same thing. I like learning. And just about every job that I've gotten into, I've been over my head … and then I get in there and learn it and I'm ready to move on. I like the challenge of new stuff.

Though less predictable, a "personal career" offers more autonomy and flexibility. By stressing economic independence over loyalty to an employer, it

[22] Moen and Roehling (2005).

undermines the definition of an "ideal worker" as someone who puts the job before all else.

Young workers also hope to integrate their public and personal lives by balancing work and family. Men as well as women hoped to cross the spatial and temporal boundaries that separate work and care, both by bringing work home and taking children to work. William sought a small biotechnology firm with a relaxed, child-friendly environment after finishing his chemistry degree.

> I'm hoping to work in a small company which is really informal, so I can bring the kids in the office and play around, work odd hours that make me able to do it all.

Daniel planned to use the long breaks in his schedule as a firefighter to be an involved, hands-on parent.

> Working as a firefighter, I'm around [home] a lot more than people who have a regular job. As far as daytime, I can be with the kids. So I'm hoping I'll get married and be very happy raising my kids.

Women and men also refashioned definitions of ideal parents and partners. Rather than focusing on differences between mothers and fathers, they emphasized that a good parent provides *both* financial support and devoted care. Joel's parents divided their tasks in distinctly gendered ways, but he believed an ideal family consists of a web of supportive relationships, not a set of roles or legal ties:

> An ideal father is someone who can do the juggling act. Same way for the mother. I really don't want to make any distinctions, like this specified role is for either one. I really don't believe that.

Rather than focusing on differences between husbands and wives, they argued that a good partner is *both* an earner and a caretaker. Although Ken was reared in a traditional middle-class family, he knew searching for a work-committed partner implies providing not just moral, but practical, support at home.

> [I'm looking for] the opposite of what my parents have—someone who's professional, with mutual admiration and support. Showing respect for what the other person does. Not just saying that you love somebody, but showing it through actions. So I hope we split things right down the middle.

With a pool of such men to draw from, some women felt better positioned to find a partner who supports them at home and enables them to achieve in the wider world. Nina and her fiancée both worked full time, and he did not shy away from the nurturing labor as well.

> I feel a need to financially take care of things, and Tim's more, if I had an illness, he'd be there by my bedside taking care. He tells me that as long as he can cook or clean or help out in that way, if that can make me happy, then that makes him happy. Did I expect it? Not to the extent of what he does. I definitely do feel lucky.

Finally, young women and men are remaking family values. Their experiences in changing families have left them attuned to the fluid and contingent

nature of family life. They are wary of passing judgment on others or assuming a stable future for themselves, but they have not surrendered a belief in core values. Rather, their focus has shifted from family forms to family processes. This emerging moral frame does not view responsible behavior as a matter of creating a specific type of family or living up to a rigid notion of gender "roles";[23] instead, it means providing emotional and financial support to loved ones, regardless of one's gender, marital status, sexual orientation, or family circumstances. Chrystal, reared in a dual-earner African-American home and now a single mother, explained:

> "Family" to me is when you have more than one person who [are] really there for each other, really able to give as well as take, complementing the other people or other person.

Although Sarah grew up in a traditional home, she agreed, adding that an ideal family provides a better balance between autonomy and commitment than her parents had achieved:

> To me, an ideal family functions well as a unit but functions well separately, too. I think of it as being very close and nurturing and warm and all those things that we were taught, but also individuated, where my family didn't do so well.

In sum, these children of the gender revolution seek to personally craft their own careers, to transcend the spatial and temporal boundaries between home and the workplace, to redefine the meaning of an ideal parent and an ideal partner, and to reject rigid judgments about "better" and "worse" family forms. These behavioral and ideological strategies are responses to changing social and economic contingencies, but they also offer new templates for enacting more flexible, egalitarian gender ideals.

Institutions and Changing Lives: Reframing the Theoretical and Political Debate

Growing up during the gender revolution has prompted young adults to see family life as an unfolding process that responds to changing social and interpersonal contingencies. It has encouraged them to develop a set of shared aspirations, including wanting to forge a life-long intimate partnership, to balance committed work with devoted parenting, and to craft flexible, egalitarian ways of sharing earning and caretaking. Yet encounters with resistant institutions

[23] The term "sex role" implies—and often explicitly assumes—that gender differences are intrinsic, static, and necessary for the smooth functioning of families and societies (see, e.g., Parsons and Bales, 1955). As feminist sociologists and theorists have shown, the concept is of limited use in explaining gender arrangements because "gender" represents a dynamic relationship that is embedded in social arrangements, reflects power differences, and changes its shape across time and space. (For an early critique of the "sex roles" framework, see Stacey and Thorne [1985].) Acker (1990), Ferree (1990), Lorber (1994), and Risman (1998), among others, discuss how gender is an institution. West and Zimmerman (1987) focus on gender as a set of relationships that are created as people "do gender" in their everyday interactions. All these frameworks stress the ways that gender is a mutable structure rather than an immutable individual trait.

have also convinced young women and men to develop fall-back strategies to survive in the (all-too-likely) event that their options fall short of their ideals. The lives of this crucial generation should prompt us to reframe the theoretical debate about family change and to rethink the ways that culture influences processes of social change. Their experiences and worldviews also provide telling lessons about how to transcend the growing impasse between changing lives and resistant institutions.

Families as Pathways The broad categories of "family type" that continue to take center stage in the debate about U.S. families miss more fundamental changes in the *pathways of families*. Categories such as dual-earner, single-parent, and traditional can capture only snapshots of a moving picture. In addition to such predictable turning points as the birth of children and their passage through school and out of the home, postindustrial families face a variety of unexpected challenges that prompt unpredictable change. Because adult commitments are voluntary and fluid, a two-parent household can become a single-parent home through separation or divorce, while a single-parent home can become a two-parent home through remarriage. Because careers are less stable, a two-earner home can become a one-paycheck home if a mother pulls back from paid work, and a homemaker-breadwinner home can shift to a dual-earner one if she takes a paid job. These new options for adults create new social contexts for children. To understand how family life shapes a child's outlook and well-being, we need to see them as unfolding trajectories that can take unexpected directions and develop in unforeseeable ways.

Gender Flexibility as the Key to Family Resilience Postindustrial life poses risks and challenges to *all* types of households. Single-parent and dual-earning homes may face difficulties balancing paid and domestic work, but sole-breadwinner homes may face equally perplexing dilemmas about how to survive on one paycheck or avoid the perils of feeling stuck in rigid gender "roles." Since few contemporary families are immune from some type of crisis, a household's ability to resolve the specific conflicts it faces are more consequential than the form it takes at one point along the way. Why, then, did some children conclude their homes became more supportive and stable while others recounted a cascade of destabilizing events?

Only a gender lens can make sense of these divergent family pathways. Across diverse family types, the flexibility of parents' and other caretakers' gender strategies shaped a child's perception of expanding or eroding support. When families encountered unanticipated contingencies, flexible approaches to breadwinning and caregiving helped them overcome economic uncertainties and interpersonal tensions. When mothers, fathers, and others could not transcend gender divisions that prevented them from providing financial support or gaining personal satisfaction, children watched their caretakers endure the

difficulties of unhappy marriages, dissatisfying jobs, and a dwindling safety net. Amid a social and economic landscape that is undermining clearly drawn divisions between earning and caring, flexible gender strategies help families meet children's economic and emotional needs, while rigid gender boundaries leave them ill-prepared to cope with twenty-first-century contingencies.

Social Change as a Clash Between Changing Lives and Resistant Institutions Analysts of family and gender change have posed starkly divergent and contradictory scenarios for the future. Some argue that a rising tide of "opt-out" mothers foreshadows a return to tradition, especially among educated women. Others see a deepening "decline of commitment" in the growing number of single adults.[24] Although profound changes are undoubtedly occurring, this debate poses a false dichotomy between turning back to a more stable but unequal family order versus moving toward a society of frayed social bonds. Instead, the experiences and strategies of today's 20- and 30-somethings reveal a growing clash between new needs and intransigent institutions. While most seek to blend the traditional value of commitment with the modern values of gender equality and work-family balance, they face workplaces and communities that expect them to choose between sustained work commitment and intimate caretaking. The direction of social change thus depends on whether the structures of work and caretaking can change to support the revolutionary and irreversible shifts in individual aspirations and family needs.

Culture as Ideals and Enacted Strategies A focus on family paths, gender strategies, and the clash between changing lives and resistant institutions offers a way to resolve the debate about family and gender change. The first-hand recipients of these changes are neither apathetic nor eager to join a culture war; instead, they are grappling with a complex mix of high ideals and realistic concerns. To make sense of the contradictions between worldviews and actions, it is necessary to distinguish between ideals and enacted strategies.

In terms of their aspirations, young women and men from all family backgrounds overwhelmingly affirm pro-family values—including a desire to marry (or create a marriage-like relationship), have children, and build lasting partnerships. Alongside their ideals, however, young women and men have legitimate fears. The mismatch between women who fear the dangers of ceding self-reliance and men who fear the costs of equal parenting produces different strategies to prepare for an uncertain and risky future. Resistant structures and contradictory pressures have thus created a complicated mix of shared ideals and divergent fall-back positions. The consequent gender divide in fall-back strategies stems from intensifying conflicts between ideals and fears, not

[24] In addition to Blankenhorn (1995) and Popenoe (1988, 1996), other discussions of the "family decline" perspective include Popenoe *et al.* (1996) and Whitehead (1997). For rebuttals, see Bengston *et al.* (1992, 2002), Moore *et al.* (2002), Skolnick (2006), Stacey (1996), and Wilcox and Nock (2007).

from a decline in moral values or an inherent, deeply entrenched gender chasm.

Transcending the Impasse How can we transcend the impasse between resistant institutions and changing lives? The best hope lies in creating social institutions that allow new generations to create the work lives and families they *want* rather than those for which they fear they must settle. This means shifting the theoretical and political debate from individual to institutional morality. Intransigent workplace structures and privatized child-rearing practices, not individual values, pose the greatest threat to family and child well-being. We thus need to worry less about the values of a new generation and more about the institutional barriers that make them so difficult to achieve.

Gender flexibility needs to be a centerpiece of collective efforts to restructure work and caretaking. Not only do most young adults want to create flexible, egalitarian partnerships, but a mother's earnings and a father's involvement are both increasingly integral to the economic and emotional welfare of children. We can thus achieve the best family values by creating flexible workplaces, providing equal economic opportunity for women, outlawing discrimination against all parents, and building child-friendly communities with plentiful, affordable, and high-quality care. Amid new economic and marital uncertainties, institutional support for flexible, egalitarian options to blend earning and caring provides the key to fostering both individual and collective well-being. Gender flexibility and equality are not in conflict with family well-being, but are necessary ingredients to achieve it. The answer to twenty-first-century work and family conundrums is to finish the gender revolution, not turn back the clock.

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