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Gender: Work-Family Ideologies and Roles[1]

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Feminist scholars and social scientists make distinctions between sex and gender (Hawkesworth, 1997; Nicholson, 1994; Wiley, 1995). Sex refers to biological features, such as chromosomes, hormones, and reproductive organs; simplified, the categories for sex are "female" and "male." Gender refers to the set of culturally expected personality, behavior, and attitude attributes associated with being one sex or another in any given society, and is perpetuated through institutionalized gender symbolism and gender structures; categories for gender in many societies are "feminine" and "masculine" (Hawkesworth, 1997).

Gender or sex identity is the psychological sense of oneself as a woman/girl or a man/boy; often, but not always, females "feel like" women/girls, and males "feel like" men/boys. Gender or sex roles are socially expected behavior patterns determined by an individual's sex; these almost always differ across societies and there is often social censure for not conforming to notions of what is appropriate for a boy/man or girl/woman. Gender or sex role identity is the extent to which a person approves of and participates in feelings and behaviors deemed appropriate in society for her/his gender; that is, the extent to which a woman behaves in feminine ways, or a man in masculine ways (Hawkesworth, 1997; Nicholson, 1994; Wiley, 1995). It is important to note the differences in these concepts. For example, it is possible to have a clear sense of oneself as a woman (gender identity) yet not identify with and/or refuse to act according to prevailing notions of femininity (gender role identity; Hawkesworth, 1997).

Much gendering takes place in the context of family, where the feminine social ideals are what makes a "good mother" or a "good daughter" or a "good wife," and the masculine social ideals are reflected in notions of the "ideal father" or the "ideal husband" (Simon, 1995). With respect to gendered roles in the family, our society tends to define being a good wife and mother as being continually available for emotional nurturing of the husband, children and other dependents, assuming primary responsibility for the physical and developmental care of dependents, and being warm and welcoming, whereas our concept of a good husband or father is someone who provides economic goods to the family, and (secondarily) is a disciplinarian, authority figure, and plays with the children (Andersen, 1991; Cooper, 2000; Gerstel, 2000; Hochschild, 1989; Simon, 1995). In sum, although heterosexual couples conform to this norm to different degrees, women's roles in the family are socio-emotional, whereas men's roles are instrumental (Wiley, 1995).

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[1] Material in this article also appears as part of the Sloan Work-Family Encyclopedia at http://www.bc.edu/bc_org/avp/wfnetwork/rft/wfpedia/wfpGWFIRent.html

Our society's expectations for "ideal worker" are also gendered. Businesses define the ideal worker through performance appraisals and promotion criteria as an employee who is aggressive, independent, single-mindedly devoted to the firm or the profession, non-emotional, and rational; these are masculine characteristics (Collinson & Hearn, 1994; Williams, 2000).

Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies

Masculine family roles (i.e., provider) and the role of ideal worker are interdependent and complementary; however, feminine family roles (i.e., available nurturer) and the role of ideal worker are independent and conflicting (Simon, 1995). The ideal worker is almost constantly available to his (her) employer. This is consistent with being the family provider, but not with being the constantly available nurturer. Therefore, women generally experience roles that are incompatible, which raises the stress of pursuing work and family roles for women (Duxbury & Higgins, 1991; Simon, 1995; Sirianni & Negrey, 2000; Williams, 2000). Men who want to be more involved in the direct care of their children may experience this same conflict, plus additional censure at the workplace because not only do they not fulfill expectations for the ideal worker, they are also not exhibiting ideal masculine characteristics (Cooper, 2000).

Scholars have defined "work-family" as "the relationship between paid employment and commitment to kin" and as "individuals and family units, broadly defined, combining paid labor force participation (work) with family obligations" (e.g., Drago & Kashain, 2001). Nowhere in this basic definition of the field are gender differences mentioned. However, gender is fundamental to the study of work-family and to societal polices and programs related to work-family precisely because work and family roles in our society are predicated on gender expectations, as discussed above.

Social scientists have found that men and women who want to assume both work and family roles experience mental health and economic benefits when they do so (Kirchmeyer, 1992; McBride, 1990; Simon, 1995). Assuming dual roles may also lead to role overload and stress (Duxbury & Higgins, 1991; Kopelman, Greenhaus, and Connolly, 1983). Virtually all research on the topic shows that women end up doing their paid jobs and the majority of the home- related work; this is the "second shift" faced by women when they get home from their full time jobs only to face another full time job in the home (Drago & Kashain, 2001; Hochschild, 1989). This is a contributory factor to the glass ceiling women face in corporate America (Catalyst, 1998; Williams, 2000).

State of the Body of Knowledge

Much of the gender role research and theory reflects assumptions that couples are heterosexual, married, and parents. In addition, discussions about gender and work-family experiences often reflect a white, middle-class reality. Individuals who identify as members of other ethnic groups, races, socio-economic classes, and sexual orientations may experience gendered work and family roles in ways that also reveal class and race effects, as well as heterosexism (Wiley, 1995). For example, one gay and lesbian work-family link that is not often discussed is that if one is "out" to family members, that person is more likely to be out at work, and being out at work in turn has implications for work and life satisfaction and attitudes (Friskopp & Silverstein, 1995).

A lot of the current writing on gender and work-family focuses on care work and dependency (e.g., Gerstel, 2000, Kittay, 1995; Reeves, 1994). When women entered the labor force in the 1960s and 1970s, much care work that had previously been done without pay by women now went to the marketplace in at least two ways. First, the availability of work-family programs to an employee depends on that employee's labor market status and the responsiveness of the employer to work-family issues. Second, much more care work is now being done by child care workers, teachers, elder care workers, nannies, and other paid care workers. Care work is historically and currently undervalued in the labor market, as is much "women's" work (Sirianni & Negrey, 2000). Another important focus is the inclusion of the study of fathering and men's care work. One interesting study finds that there is a category of men who are equal partners in fatherhood, however there are still many men who leave the primary care work to their wives, whether those wives are working outside the home or not (Cooper, 2000).

Some work-family leaders are rethinking the notions of the "ideal worker." Some companies are trying to change the notion that the ideal, or "promote-able," worker works excessively long hours (Catalyst, 1998; Williams, 2000). More research is needed on all these topics.

Implications for Practice & Research

In the last few decades, the way that women in society spend their time has fundamentally changed from spending time primarily in unpaid dependent care and homemaking activities to spending significant amounts of time in paid labor force participation. However, very little about the way jobs were designed or structured changed, nor did the fact that dependents still needed to be cared for and homes still needed to be created and nurtured. This may be due to the fact that businesses and individuals expect to have to modify their private lives, and don't often expect organizations to change (Williams, 2000). It is interesting to note that the primacy of work and the work organizations is pervasive. In almost all writing, this topic is called "work-family" not "family-work." Work comes first, as is even seen in Hochschild's (1989) title; the second shift refers to the care- and home- related work that comes after the first job.

In fact, it may take legislation to get organizations to change (Kelley & Dobbins, 1999). Business organizations have responded with some welcome programs and policies, however many of these policies have been criticized for being more work supports than family supports; that is, they free the worker from their family obligations (e.g., child care, emergency child care, concierge services) or re-arrange existing work time (e.g., flextime, telecommuting) rather than freeing the worker up to fulfill their family obligations personally. Therefore, we are still largely left with a situation in which jobs and career tracks that were fundamentally designed for a man who was what Joan Williams (2000) calls "supported by a flow of family work from the mother of his children (p. 8)" In other words, him doing his job as the ideal worker required his time at work, and her time at home, to support it. With the entry of women into the labor force, not only did he now not have as much of her flow of family work supporting his job, she also had no one to support her in her efforts to become an ideal worker.

Some observers have noted that the heterosexual nuclear family went through a fundamental shift from two people doing two jobs (one paid job, one unpaid job doing home- and child-

related work) to two people doing three jobs (his paid job, her paid job, and the home- and child-related work), without corresponding fundamental shifts in the assumptions about what a job or career should look like, how long most jobs should take, what men should do in the home, and without major changes in the system of support for of dependent care workers (Christensen and Gormory, 1999; Cooper, 2000; Drago & Kashain, 2001; Kittay, 1995; Williams, 2000). Note again, even in this discussion, the assumption of married heterosexuality with children which excludes single parents, gay and lesbian parents, and people caring for dependents other than children (also see Robson, 1994 and Rothausen, 1999).

Employers' interest in work-family grew out of the movement of women into the workplace, but even more so from Title VII of the Civil Rights Act (CRA) of 1964, which prohibits discrimination in employment on the basis of sex; in the late 1960s and early 1970s, in response to this legislation and laws that followed, employers implemented maternity leaves, and began to investigate other "benefits" for work-family (Kelly & Dobbins, 2000). Often, these programs were called "women's" programs or issues. After criticism that calling these issues "women's" left men out, some organizations began calling these programs and policies "work-family," and then "work-life," policies and programs, because these terms are perceived as being more gender- and parental status- neutral, respectively.

Thus, there has been a concerted effort on the part of employers to "de-gender" these issues, and some for admirable reasons. However, the ideal worker profile and most job designs still assume a man with a "flow of family work" from a woman, and within the family, women still tend to take on the majority of the (feminine gendered) house work and child rearing, and this is reinforced systemically within the family and in our work organizations. Thus, until we address the gendered nature of work-family directly, we have little hope of helping women advance equally in our workplaces or of resolving the tensions and challenges with which our changed social realities have presented us (Pitt-Catsouphes, 2001; Williams, 2000).

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