MORAL DILEMMAS, MORAL STRATEGIES, AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF GENDER
Lessons from Two Generations of Work and Family Change

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Modern societies have reconciled the dilemma between self-interest and caring for others by dividing women and men into different moral categories. Women have been expected to seek personal development by caring for others, while men care for others by sharing the rewards of their independent work achievements. Changes in work and family life have undermined this framework but have failed to offer a clear avenue for creating new resolutions. Instead contradictory social changes have produced new moral dilemmas. Women must now seek economic self-sufficiency even as they continue to bear responsibility for the care of others. Men can reject the obligation to provide for others, but they face new pressures to become more involved fathers and partners. Facing these dilemmas, young women and men must develop innovative moral strategies to renegotiate work-family conflicts and transform traditional views of gender, but persisting institutional obstacles thwart their emerging aspirations to balance personal autonomy with caring for others. To overcome these obstacles, we need to create more humane, less gendered theoretical and social frameworks for understanding and apportioning moral obligation.

Choosing between self-interest and caring for others is one of the most fundamental dilemmas facing all of us. To reconcile this dilemma, modern societies in general—and American society in particular—have tried to divide women and men into different moral categories. Since the rise of industrialism, the social organization of moral responsibility has expected women to seek personal development by caring for others and men to care for others by sharing the rewards of independent achievement.

Although labeled “traditional,” this gendered division of moral labor represents a social form and cultural mandate that rose to prominence in the mid-twentieth century but reached an impasse as the postindustrial era opened new avenues for work and family life. (Among the voluminous works on this subject, see Kimmel 1996; Ryan 1981; Welter 1966.) At the outset of the twenty-first century, women...
and men face rising conflicts over how to resolve the basic tensions between family and work, public and private, autonomy and commitment. They are searching for new strategies for reconciling an “independent self” with commitment to others.

While the long-term trajectory of change remains unclear, new social conditions have severely undermined the link between gender and moral obligation. The young women and men who have come of age amid this changing social landscape face risks and dangers, but they also inherit an unprecedented opportunity to forge new, more egalitarian ways to balance self-development with commitment to others. To enable them to do so, however, we must reshape work and family institutions in ways that overcome beliefs and practices that presume gender differences in moral responsibility.

Drawing on insights from my research on how contemporary young women and men negotiate the conflicts between family and work, I explore how new social conditions are compelling them to reconsider traditional strategies for reconciling self-development with caring for others. Social change has undermined earlier resolutions to these dilemmas but does not offer clear avenues for creating new ones. My research on the “children of the gender revolution” suggests that young women and men cannot rely on inflexible gender categories to resolve the conflict between autonomy and care, but they are encountering social and cultural obstacles to creating gender-neutral strategies for apportioning moral labor.

GENDER, SOCIAL THEORY, AND THE DIVISION OF MORAL LABOR

Across a wide range of traditions, social theorists remain concerned with the tension between autonomy and commitment. From de Tocqueville to Bellah, cultural theorists have spoken of a conflict between individualism and commitment in American life (Bellah et al. 1985; de Tocqueville [1832] 1969). From Parsons on, functionalist sociologists have distinguished between instrumental and expressive functions. And economists, especially those who advocate human capital and rational choice approaches, separate the public domain of the market from the private sphere of the home (Becker 1981).

Despite their differences, all of these theoretical approaches rely on gender difference, either implicitly or explicitly, to reconcile the theoretical and practical conflicts between self-interest and social obligation. Psychological approaches, for example, emphasize that early childhood socialization leads girls and boys to develop contrasting orientations toward morality and care, self and others. Even rational choice approaches, which argue that self-interested calculation underlies all human action, assume that women and men possess different tastes and abilities, making it more efficient for women to specialize in domestic care and men to specialize in the world of paid work (for another critique, see England 1993).

Despite a vast amount of research demonstrating that the temperamental differences among women and among men are far greater than the differences between
them, the appeal of a theoretical lens assuming a gender dichotomy in moral orientation remains strong.\(^3\) It provides a way to resolve the universal human tension between self-interest and self-sacrifice as well as the social tensions between the marketplace and domestic work. Yet, it does so at a great cost. In its starkest terms, this framework justifies gender inequality by cloaking socially constructed gender categories with moral authority. It draws a sharp gender divide, suggesting that women can be for themselves by being for others, while men can be for others by being for themselves. Transgressing these boundaries continues to risk social disapproval or worse.\(^4\)

Feminists have been understandably ambivalent about the moral dichotomization of gender. Some have implicitly adopted the classical framework while criticizing its underpinnings and consequences. Those emphasizing psychological processes have most clearly restated the idea that women and men diverge in their orientations toward self and others, although they see women’s caring capacities as a special strength and mark of virtue. Gilligan argues, for example, that women’s “ethic of care” should be as valued and esteemed as men’s “ethic of rights” (Gilligan 1982; Gilligan, Ward, and Taylor 1989). And Chodorow’s theory of mothering contends that the unequal, asymmetrical social organization of parenting causes women to seek connection and men to seek separation.\(^5\) Most of those who emphasize women’s distinct “moral voice” acknowledge that it is socially constructed and that it deserves to be accorded equal (or greater) value. Yet, they stop short of asking whether women and men—as social groups—actually possess different moral capacities and outlooks.

While it is important to assert that it is just as valuable to pursue emotional connection and provide care as it is to create an independent self or provide economically for a family, it is also critical to question the premise that women and men can be separated into distinct, opposed, or unchanging moral categories. As Epstein argues, any vision of dichotomous gender distinctions is not only inaccurate; it is also an ideological construct that justifies and reinforces inequality. Connell points out that “masculinities” and “femininities” vary across historical time and space. Lorber and Risman, among others, question the concept of gender itself, pointing to the social paradoxes and cultural contradictions to which all human actors must respond in constructing their public and private selves. These theorists recognize that gender is a social institution, not an inherent trait, and that it shapes organizations and opportunity structures as well as personal experiences (Connell 1995, 1987; Epstein 1988; Lorber 1994; Risman 1998).

There are good analytic and empirical reasons to reject the use of gender to resolve the knotty moral conflicts between public and private, work and family, self and other. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that using gender in this way is more prescriptive than descriptive. Such approaches may depict how women and men should behave, but they do not provide an accurate description or explanation of how women and men actually do behave or how they would behave if alternative options were available. Certainly, the proportion who have conformed to gendered injunctions about appropriate moral choices has varied substantially across
societies, subcultures, and historical periods. Countless women and men have been labeled “deviant” for their reluctance or inability to uphold idealized conceptions of gender. A framework of gendered moralities helps justify inequalities and stigmatize those who do not conform.

THE INSTITUTIONAL ROOTS OF THE CURRENT IMPASSE

Assigning women and men to distinct, homogeneous moral groups may have seemed natural, desirable, and inevitable when social majorities lived in, or aspired to live in, male breadwinner/female caretaker households, but the demographic and ideological underpinnings of this framework are eroding. At the outset of a new century, new generations of young adults cannot rely on notions of gendered differences in moral capacities to make viable or satisfying work and family choices. Yet, they face a set of contradictory institutional changes that makes it difficult to devise new ways of responding to moral conflicts.

Changes in women’s economic and social fortunes have both allowed them to work and required them to seek self-sufficiency. More diverse and fluid sexual partnerships have given women more choice about when or whether to marry and have children, but they have also left women less able to count on a male partner for economic support. The expansion of women’s employment has offered them new opportunities to seek personal and social commitments outside the home, but it has also intensified the devaluation of full-time domesticity. And the decline of the male “family wage” has left even stably married women in need of independent earnings. In short, a deeply rooted set of institutional transformations has given women new options to pursue an independent life while eroding the opportunity to confine their commitments to domestic care (Gerson 1985).

The fading of the male breadwinner household has altered men’s options as well, albeit in different ways. Men, like women, have more freedom to enter or leave a relationship, making it easier to avoid long-term commitment. Yet, they are also less able to compel a female partner to stay in a relationship or to confine herself to the home. Men who find it difficult to support a household on their own are less empowered to claim the privileges accorded a “household head” or to set the terms under which wives and children will live. As a group, men thus now have more opportunity to flee moral obligations to support women and children, but they also face new pressures to become more involved in caring for others (Gerson 1993).

Women now claim the right and the need to seek autonomy and personal gratification beyond caring commitments, and men are no longer routinely able or willing to provide care by supporting others economically. While these changes have undermined established systems of gender difference, they have not provided a clear avenue for creating a new balance between autonomy and connection. To the contrary, a lack of change in other gendered arrangements has created new
structural and cultural contradictions. At the workplace, employers no longer routinely pay enough to support a partner at home, but they are, if anything, more demanding of a worker’s time, asking parents to risk short- and long-run penalties for the time they take to care for their families (Fuchs Epstein et al. 1999; Gerson and Jacobs 2001; Jacobs and Gerson 2001; Raymon 2001). And although divorce and out-of-wedlock childbearing have left more children dependent on their mothers’ earnings, women continue to face constricted work and career opportunities (Jacobs 1989, forthcoming; Reskin and Roos 1990; Williams 1995). These persistent inequalities, which give priority to paid work and to men’s earnings, clash with women’s and men’s changing options and constraints.

FROM MORAL DIFFERENCE TO MORAL DILEMMAS

The erosion of social supports for traditional conceptions of moral obligation has prompted the search for new ways to balance family and work, but the contradictory nature of this change has also produced enduring political debates and rising social dilemmas. Cultural conservatives decry the rise of nontraditional families and the expansion of public opportunities for women, claiming that these changes represent a decline of morality in America. Social progressives, in contrast, applaud the expansion of opportunity, personal choice, and tolerance for diversity but are concerned that the spheres of family and work are colliding. Workplaces seem more demanding, local communities seem to be losing civic engagement, and families seem starved for time and resources (Hochschild 1997; Jacobs and Gerson forthcoming; Putnam 2000; Schor 1992). As it has become increasingly difficult to carve out equal space for the unpaid caring work that women have historically performed, women and men alike are facing apparently irreconcilable choices between caring and self-sufficiency. The classic tension between individualism and commitment now assumes new forms and is being experienced in intensified ways.

In a context where broad, multilayered social changes clash with continuing inequalities, it is more fruitful to focus on moral dilemmas than on moral differences. A dilemma is a difficult, perplexing, or ambiguous choice between equally undesirable (or desirable) alternatives, while moral involves a concern with the rules of right conduct (Webster’s dictionary 1992). Of course, we experience many moral dilemmas in deeply personal ways. They become social, however, when institutional and cultural contexts make it difficult or impossible for individuals to make a socially sanctioned choice—when, for example, all options invite disapproval but action is nevertheless required.8

The current period poses many such situations. In forming adult relationships, how do women and men weigh the need and desire for achieving autonomy with the hope of establishing an enduring commitment? In caring for a new generation, how do parents balance the need to spend time with their children and the need to earn enough to support them? In crafting a personal identity, how do individuals choose
between attaining independence and building connections to others? These situations are dilemmas because they pose choices that have no institutionalized or unambiguously “correct” resolutions. They are social because they arise from the way that social change structures available options and creates conflicts, ambiguities, and inconsistencies. They are moral because others judge our choices, forcing new generations either to change or to reproduce prevailing moral codes. Socially structured moral dilemmas force us to move beyond habits and routines to develop and justify new actions and beliefs.9

Studying the creation of, and strategic responses to, socially structured moral dilemmas helps to illuminate the processes of gender change. It allows us to see how the definitions and practices of gender unfold as individuals develop responses to contradictory social options. Focusing on dilemmas allows us to view gender as an “incomplete” institution. Gendered responses do not reflect inherent gender differences but are instead strategies developed by differently situated social actors coping with ambiguous circumstances. Change is possible in this framework but never guaranteed. It becomes more likely when social arrangements create conflicts that require innovative responses. To expand on West and Zimmerman’s (1987) notion of “doing gender,” such circumstances create conditions in which it becomes possible to “redo” gender and, potentially, to “undo” gender, that is, to either recreate or change the daily experiences and practices of gender. Contemporary young women and men confront just such circumstances. Analyzing their coping strategies provides a lens through which to view the contours of the future of gender.

STUDYING GENDER CHANGE: FINDINGS FROM A NEW GENERATION

During the last several decades, I have studied two pivotal generations. My earlier research examined how the women and men who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s helped forge changes in gender, work, and family life as they reacted to new structural and cultural conditions (Gerson 1985, 1993). My current research focuses on how the generation who grew up in these changing households and are now entering adulthood are responding to a world where nontraditional family forms predominate and gender inequality has been seriously questioned. In significant ways, the older group can be viewed as the “parents of the gender revolution” and the generation now coming of age as the “children of the revolution” (Gerson 2001). They have watched their parents cope with the erosion of the breadwinner-homemaker ethos, and they must now devise their own strategies in the face of continuing work and family change.

To discover how new generations are experiencing and responding to these vast social changes, I have conducted in-depth, life history interviews with 120 young women and men between the ages of 18 and 32. They were randomly selected from a range of economic and social contexts, including inner-city, outer-city, and
suburban neighborhoods throughout the New York metropolitan area. They are evenly divided between women and men, with an average age of 24, and are economically and racially diverse, with 54 percent non-Hispanic whites, 21 percent African Americans, 18 percent Hispanics, and 8 percent Asians.

Most lived in families that underwent changes that cannot be captured in the static categories of household types. That said, a large majority lived in some form of nontraditional arrangement before reaching 18. About 40 percent lived in a single-parent home at some point in their childhood, and 7 percent saw their parents break up after they left home. About one-third grew up in homes where both parents held full-time jobs of relatively equal importance, at least at some point during their childhood. The remaining 27 percent described growing up in homes that were generally traditional in the sense that mothers worked intermittently, secondarily, or not at all, although most of these households underwent some form of change as mothers went to work or marriages faced crises. As a whole, the group experienced the full range of changes now emerging in family, work, and gender arrangements.

The interviews reveal how growing up amid a shifting gender and family order has prompted a new generation to rethink the age-old conflict between self-interest and responsibility to others. Taking lessons from their parents and their parents’ generation, but facing new quandaries of their own, these young women and men are crafting moral strategies that challenge traditional views of gender. Their emerging views on how to balance autonomy and commitment, to define care, and to develop a personal identity amid ambiguous social shifts are presented below. While these views suggest a blurring of gender boundaries, they also underscore how persisting obstacles are creating a gap between young women’s and men’s emerging egalitarian aspirations and their far more limited opportunities for achieving them. The next section thus considers how pervasive barriers to both gender equality and work-family integration are creating a new gender divide between women who seek personal independence and men who worry about losing traditional privileges.

NEW DILEMMAS, AMBIGUOUS STRATEGIES

How does this generation view its moral choices? As adult partnerships have become more fluid and voluntary, they are grappling with how to form relationships that balance commitment with autonomy and self-sufficiency. As their mothers have become essential and often sole breadwinners for their households, they are searching for new ways to define care that do not force them to choose between spending time with their children and earning an income. And in the face of rising work-family conflicts, they are looking for definitions of personal identity that do not pit their own development against creating committed ties to others. As young women and men wrestle with these dilemmas, they are questioning a division of
moral responsibility that poses a conflict between personal development and caring for others.

**Seeking Autonomy, Establishing Commitment**

The decline of permanent marriage has raised new and perplexing questions about how to weigh the need and desire for self-sufficiency against the hope of creating an enduring partnership. In wrestling with this quandary, young women and men draw on lessons learned in their families and personal relationships. Yet, they also recognize that past experiences and encounters can provide, at best, a partial and uncertain blueprint for the future.

Few of the women and men who were interviewed reacted in a rigidly moralistic way to their parents’ choices. Among those whose parents chose to divorce (or never marry), about 45 percent viewed the breakup as a prelude to growing difficulty, but the other 55 percent supported the separation and felt relief in its aftermath. Danisha, a 21-year-old African American, concluded that conflict would have emerged had her parents stayed together:

I have personally met a lot of miserable children whose parents stayed together. For me, it would have been worse—because eventually, a lot of the civility they had toward each other would have broken down into hostility. They got out while it was good.

And at 26, Erica, who grew up in a white middle-class suburb, supported her parents decision to separate and received more support from each of them in its aftermath:

I knew my parents were going to get divorced, because I could tell they weren’t getting along. They were acting out roles rather than being involved. They were really drifting apart, so it was something perfectly natural to me. In the new situation, I spent more valuable time with my parents as individuals. So time with my father and mother was more meaningful to me and more productive.

Among those whose parents stayed together, almost 60 percent were pleased with and, indeed, inspired by, their parents’ lifelong commitment, but about 40 percent concluded that a breakup would have been better than the persistently unhappy, conflict-ridden relationship they watched unfold. Amy, a 24-year-old Asian American, explains:

I always felt my parents would have divorced if they didn’t have kids and didn’t feel it was so morally wrong. They didn’t really stick together because they were in love. I know all couples go through fights and stuff, but growing up, it seemed like they fought a lot, and each of them has made passing comments like “Oh, I would have divorced your mom by now” or “I would have left your dad a thousand times.” (So) I wouldn’t have broken down or been emotionally stressed if my parents
divorced. I didn’t want to hear the shouting, and I didn’t want to see my mom cry anymore. And I was also afraid of my dad, because he would never lay a hand on my mom, but he’s scary. He could be violent.

Whether their parents stayed together or parted, most concluded that neither steadfast commitment nor choosing to leave has moral meaning in the abstract. The value of enduring commitment depends on the quality of the relationship it embodies.

When considering their own aspirations, almost everyone hopes to establish a committed, lasting relationship with one partner. Yet, they also hold high standards for what a relationship should provide and anticipate risks in sustaining such a commitment. Across the divides of gender, race, and class, most agree that a satisfying and worthwhile relationship should offer a balance between autonomy and sharing, sacrifice and support. At 26, Michael, an African American who was raised by his mother in a working-class suburb, is convinced that only economic independence can provide a proper base for commitment with his girlfriend:

I don’t want the fifties type of marriage, where I come home with a briefcase and she’s cooking. She doesn’t have to cook. I just want her to have a career of her own. I want things to be comfortable. And somewhere down the line, if I lose my job or things start going crazy in the marriage, I want to be able to set my goals, and she can do what she wants, because we both have this economic base and the attitude to do it. That’s what marriage is about.

Amy imagines a partnership that is equal and fluid, capable of adapting to circumstances without relinquishing equity:

I want a fifty-fifty relationship, where we both have the potential of doing everything. Both of us working, and in dealing with kids, it would be a matter of who has more flexibility with regard to their career. And if neither does, then one of us will have to sacrifice for one period, and the other for another.

Most acknowledge, however, that finding a lasting and satisfying relationship represents an ideal that is hard to reach. If it proves unattainable, they agree that being alone is better than remaining in an unhappy or destructive union. Building a full life thus means developing the self in multiple ways. At 29, Maria, who grew up in a close-knit Hispanic household where both parents worked, is careful to build her life in many directions:

I want to be with somebody, to have this person to share your life with—that you’re there for as much as they’re there for you. But I can’t settle. If I don’t find it, then I cannot live in sorrow. It’s not the only thing that’s ultimately important. If I didn’t have my family, if I didn’t have a career, if I didn’t have friends, or if I didn’t have the things that I enjoy doing, I would be equally unhappy. This is just one thing. Maybe it takes a little bit more of the pie than some other things—but it’s still just a slice of the pie.
Across the range of personal family experiences, most also agree that children suffer more from an unhappy home than from separated parents.12 Miranda, whose parents parted when her father returned to Mexico in her teens, looks back from the vantage point of 27 and concludes,

For people to stay together in spite of themselves, just for the child, they’re damaging the child. It’s almost like a false assumption that you can do something for the sake of the child while you’re being drained. Because the life is getting sucked out of you. How can you give life when it’s sucked out of you?

Women and men both wonder if it is possible to establish relationships that strike a good balance between self-affirmation and commitment, providing and receiving support. Having observed their parents and others struggle with varying degrees of success against the strictures of traditional gender categories, they are hopeful but guarded about the possibilities for resolving the tension between autonomy and commitment in their own lives.13 At 20, Chris, a Native American whose parents shared work and caretaking, is thus beginning to wonder:

I thought you could have just a relationship, that love and being happy was always needed in life, and I’ve learned that you’ve got to be able to draw that line. It’s a difficult thing, and you’ve got to know how to do it. And that would be my fear. Where am I cutting into my job too much? Where am I cutting into the relationship too much? And how do I divide it, and can it actually be done at all? Can you blend these two parts of your world?

Care as Time, Care as Money

If the rise of fluid adult partnerships has heightened the strains between commitment and autonomy, then the rise of employed mothers and the decline of male breadwinners have made the meaning of care ambiguous. Now that most children—whether living in single-parent or two-parent households—depend on the earnings of their mothers, parents face conflicts in balancing the need to provide economic support with the need to devote time and attention.

Rigid notions of gendered caring do not fit well with most family experiences, and the majority express support for parents who transgressed traditional gender categories. Among those who grew up in two-earner households, four out of five support such an arrangement, most with enthusiasm. Across race, class, and gender groups, they believe that two incomes provided the family with increased economic resources, more flexibility against the buffeting of economic winds, and greater financial security. For Serena, a 26-year-old African American, her parents’ two jobs allowed her to avoid the privations of her friends and peers:

Both my parents worked, and a lot of parents in this neighborhood, one stayed home or some were on welfare. So a lot of my peers thought we were, like, upper class because
both parents had cars and we went to private schools. When I was in my late teens and actually realized where I fit into the picture, it made me really appreciate my parents.

And Jason, also 26 and white, finds inspiration in his upwardly mobile parents’ example as hard workers who made things better for their children in the process:

I would say (both parents working) made things better for the family because their being so dedicated to providing, to working, they helped that ethic of having to work and not wasting time. So it’s instilled in me and my sister the ethic to work.

Of course, this means they see a mother’s employment as largely beneficial. Whether in a two-parent or single-parent home, women and men agree that an independent base enhanced a mother’s sense of self, contributed to greater parental equality, and provided an uplifting model. Rachel, 24 and from a white, working-class background, explains,

I don’t think that I missed out on anything. I think it served as a more realistic model. I’ve heard all that stuff about how children need a parent at home, but I don’t think that having her stay home with me, particularly considering her temper, would have been anything other than counterproductive. The reality is that I’m going to have to work, and a lot of women in her generation chose not to work and did or didn’t have the option. She had a choice, and she did what she wanted, and I think that’s really great.

Kevin, 25 and from a middle-class, white family, agrees:

For quite a while, my mom was the main breadwinner. She was the one who was the driving force in earning money. My mother’s persona was really hard working, and that’s something I’ve strived to be with and to emulate. I didn’t think it was wrong in any way. I actually feel it’s a very positive thing. Whatever my relationships, I always want and appreciate people who work, and I’m talking about female involvement. It’s part of who I am, and it makes me very optimistic knowing that hard work can get you somewhere.

They also deemed highly involved fathers, whether in two-earner or single-parent households, as worthy examples. Daniel, now 23, describes his Irish father’s atypical working hours and parental involvement:

My father was always around. He’s a fire fighter, so he had a lot of free time. When he was home, he was usually coaching me and my brother or cooking dinner or taking us wherever we wanted to go. He was the only cook up until me and my brother started doing it. So I want to make sure that, if I get married and have kids, I’m there for my kids.

In contrast, those who grew up in a largely traditional household expressed more ambivalence. Although half felt fortunate to have had a mother devoted primarily to
their care, the other half would have preferred for their mothers to pursue a more independent life. At 21, Justin, who grew up in a white, largely middle-class suburb, looks back on his mother’s domestic focus with a strong conviction that it took its toll on the whole household:

She was very involved [and] always around. And I appreciated it, but I felt guilty that maybe I was taking too much. It’s just that she wasn’t happy. And she didn’t give us any responsibilities at all. I guess that made her feel good to have someone rely on her. She felt needed more. And in the long run, obviously that’s not something good.

And at 30, Sarah, also white and middle-class, agreed, pointing out that a mother’s “sacrifice” may evoke mixed feelings:

I wish my mom had worked so that she would have been happier. Her identity was very much as a mother, and that was a sort of a void and pain. Because that’s all she was, and that was not enough. She would say that it was, but that’s not what I saw. She just seemed really unhappy a lot of time. She was just overinvolved with us, and if we did something separate from her, that was a major problem. I wouldn’t mind her being supermom if that was really okay with her. But I got the message that she was giving up all of this other stuff to do it, and we should feel bad about it.

Breadwinning fathers may also elicit mixed reactions. Their economic contributions are appreciated but not necessarily deemed sufficient. A good father, most concluded, takes time and offers emotional support as well. At 29, Nick, who grew up in a white working-class neighborhood and remembers feeling frustrated by his own father’s distance, is seeking joint custody of his own young daughter:

I have seen a lot of guys who have kids and have never changed a diaper, have never done anything for this child. Don’t call yourself daddy. Even when she was saying, “Oh, she might not be yours,” it didn’t matter to me. This child is counting on me.

In this context, care becomes a slippery concept. Across family circumstances, these young adults judge an ideal parent—whether mother or father—to be one who supports her or his children both economically and emotionally. At 21, Antonio, who grew up in a three-generational Hispanic household and whose father died of alcoholism, has concluded that fathers should give their children the time and emotional support typically expected of a mother:

[An ideal father] is a strong, balanced man. He’s a daddy but he has the understanding of a mommy. He can care for you and protect you and guide you. . . . That’s what I want to do with my kids. I want to make sure that I have time. I don’t want to leave them in front of a TV set all day, because what they’re learning is not coming from me. So I want to be there or, if not, I want to be in a position where I can take you with me.

If fathers should resemble traditional conceptions of mothers, then mothers should resemble fathers when it comes to work outside the home. Gabriel, a white
25-year-old who was raised by his father after his parents divorced when he was in grade school, explains,

In terms of splitting parental stuff, it should be even. Kids need a mother and a father. And I’m really not high on the woman giving up her job. I have never wanted to have a wife who didn’t make a salary. But not for the sake of leeching off of her, but so that she was independent.

And Miranda agrees that mothering means providing money as well as care:

My mother has completely and entirely dedicated herself to me in the true sense; she has always been very selfless and very involved and fully responsible for me financially. I wouldn’t feel comfortable if I didn’t think I could make that kind of commitment.

If such an ideal proves beyond reach, as many expect it will be, women and men agree that families should apportion moral labor however best fits their circumstances—whether or not this means conforming to classic notions of gender difference. Mothers can and often do demonstrate care through paid work and fathers through involvement. Now 26 and raising a child on her own, Crystal, an African American, rejects a natural basis for mothering:

I don’t really believe in the mother instinct. I don’t believe that’s natural. Some people really connect with their children, and some people just don’t. I think it should be whoever is really going to be able to be there for that child.

In the end, the material and emotional support a child receives matters more than the type of household arrangement in which it is provided. Michelle, a 24-year-old of Asian descent who watched her parents struggle in an unhappy marriage and then separate after she and her brother left home, focuses on emotional support rather than family composition:

As long as the child feels supported and loved, that’s the most important thing. Whether it’s a two-parent home, a single-parent home, the mother is working, or anything, it’s just really important for the child to have a good strong foundation.

**Identity through Love, Identity through Work**

In a world where partnerships are fragile and domesticity is devalued, young women and men are confronting basic questions about identity and self-interest. Do they base their personal well-being and sense of self on public pursuits or private attachments? What balance can or should be struck between them?

In pondering their parents’ lives, most could find no simple way to define or measure “self-interest.” While a minority uphold traditional gendered identities, most do not find such resolutions viable. Women are especially likely to conclude that it is perilous to look to the home as the sole source of satisfaction or survival.
Reflecting on the many examples of mothers and other women who languished at home, who were bereft when marriages broke up, or who found esteem in the world of paid work, 9 out of 10 express the hope that their lives will include strong ties to the workplace and public pursuits. Sarah, now a psychologist with a long-term lesbian partner who works “constantly,” has high hopes but also nagging worries:

I have a lot of conflicts now—work versus home and all of that stuff. But I would feel successful if I had a life with a lot of balance and that I’d made time for people who were important to me and made a real commitment to the people that I care about. And also, to work—I would be dedicated to work. And work and home would be connected. It would all be integrated, and it would be an outgrowth of my general way of being.

On the other side of the gender divide, many men have also become skeptical of work-centered definitions of masculine identity. As traditional jobs have given way to unpredictable shifts in work prospects, they are generally guarded about the prospect of achieving stable work careers. Having observed fathers and friends who found work either dissatisfying or too demanding, two-thirds of the men concluded that, while important, work alone could not provide their lives with meaning. These young men hope to balance paid work and personal attachments without having to sacrifice the self for a job or paycheck. Traditional views persist, but they increasingly compete with perspectives that define identity in more fluid ways. Widely shared by those who grew up in different types of families, these outlooks also transcend class and race differences. They cast doubt on some postfeminist assertions that a “new traditionalism” predominates among young women and men (Crittenden 1999). When asked how he would like to divide caretaking and breadwinning, Kevin considers the possibilities:

Whoever can do it and whoever’s capable of doing it, but it should be divided evenly. If there’s something I can’t do, just that I don’t have the talent to do it, I would hope the other person would be able to. And the same goes the other way. My parents were like that. It was a matter of who was able to do what. There were hundreds of times when my dad made our lunches. And my sister claims that his were better than my mom’s.

Yet, beyond the apparent similarities, a gender divide emerges. With one-third of men—but almost no women—preferring traditional arrangements over all others, women are more likely to uphold flexible views of gender for themselves and their partners. More important, women and men both distinguish between their ideals and their chances of achieving them. If most hope to integrate family and work—and to find partners with whom to share the rewards and burdens of both—far fewer believe they can achieve this lofty aspiration. It is difficult to imagine integrating private with public obligations when most workplaces continue to make it difficult to balance family and job. And it is risky to build a life dependent on another adult when relationships are unpredictable. In this context, both women and men acknowledge that their actual options may fall substantially short of their ideals.
For women, finding the right job and the right partner may seem too much to expect. Maria laments,

Sometimes I ask myself if it’s unrealistic to want everything. I think a lot of people would settle for something that is not what they wished, and, to me, that feels worse. It’s a Catch 22, because you could wait so long, you never get anything, or you could settle for something and then be cut off from something else.

And men agree, although they are more likely to focus on the constraints of the workplace, as Peter, 27 and white, implies: “I want as even a split as possible. But with my hours, I don’t think it could be very even.”

AN EMERGING GENDER DIVIDE: AUTONOMY AND NEOTRADITIONALISM AS FALBACK POSITIONS

The ideal of a balanced self continues to collide with an intransigent social world. New generations must thus develop contingent strategies for less than ideal circumstances. If egalitarian aspirations cannot be reached, what options remain? Here, women and men tend to diverge. Indeed, even as they are developing similar ideals, they are preparing for different outcomes. If an egalitarian commitment proves unworkable, most men would prefer a form of “modified traditionalism” in which they remain the primary if not sole family breadwinner and look to a partner to provide the lion’s share of domestic care. Women, in contrast, tend to look toward autonomy as preferable to any form of traditionalism that would leave them and their children economically dependent on someone else.

As young women and men consider the difficulties of building balanced, integrated lives, they move from ideals to consider the fallback positions that would help them avert worst-case scenarios. Here, as we see below, the gender gap widens. Women, in hoping to avoid economic and social dependence, look toward autonomy, while men, in hoping to retain some traditional privileges, look toward modified forms of traditional arrangements. Yet, both groups hope to resolve these conflicts as they construct their lives over time.

Women and Autonomy

Among the women, 9 out of 10 hope to share family and work in a committed, mutually supportive, and egalitarian way. Yet, most are skeptical that they can find a partner or a work situation that will allow them to achieve this ideal. Integrating caretaking with committed work remains an uphill struggle, and it seems risky to count on a partner to sustain a shared vision in the long run. Even a modified version of traditionalism appears fraught with danger, for it creates economic vulnerability and constricted options in the event that a relationship sours or a partner decides to
leave. Four out of five women thus prefer autonomy to a traditional marriage, concluding that going it alone is better than being trapped in an unhappy relationship or being abandoned by an unreliable partner. Danisha explains,

> Let’s say that my marriage doesn’t work. I won’t ever go into marriage believing that, but just in case, I want to establish myself, because I don’t ever want to end up, like, “What am I gonna do?” I want to be able to do what I have to do and still be okay. You can’t take a cavalier attitude that things will just work out. Things will work out if you put some effort into making it work out.

Autonomy for women means, at its core, economic self-sufficiency. A life that is firmly rooted in the world of paid work provides the best safeguard against being stuck in a destructive relationship or being left without the means to support a family. Healthy relationships, they reason, are based on a form of economic individualism in which they do not place their economic fate in the hands of someone else. Rachel declares,

> I’m not afraid of being alone, but I am afraid of being with somebody’s who’s a jerk. I can spend the rest of my life alone, and as long as I have my sisters and my friends, I’m okay. I want to get married and have children, but I’m not willing to just do it. It has to be under the right circumstances with the right person.

**Men and Neotraditionalism**

Young men express more ambivalence about the choice between autonomy and traditionalism. If a committed, egalitarian ideal proves out of reach, about 40 percent would opt for independence, preferring to stress the autonomous self so long associated with manhood and now increasingly affirmed by women as well. But six out of 10 men would prefer a modified traditionalism in which two earners need not mean complete equality. This split among men reflects the mix of options they confront. Work remains central to constructing a masculine identity, but it is difficult to find work that offers either economic security or good opportunities for family involvement. Without these supports, men are torn between avoiding family commitments and trying to retain some central advantages provided by traditional arrangements.

From men’s perspective, opting for the autonomy conferred by remaining unmarried, unattached, or childless relieves them of the economic burden of earning a family wage in an uncertain economy, but it also risks cutting them off from close, committed, and lasting intimate connections. A neotraditional arrangement, in contrast, offers the chance to create a family built around shared breadwinning but less than equal caretaking. In this scenario, men may envision a dual-earner arrangement but still expect their partner to place family first and weave work around it. Josh, a white 27-year-old who was raised by his father after his mother was diagnosed with severe mental illness, asserts,
All things being equal, it should be shared. It may sound sexist, but if somebody’s gonna be the breadwinner, it’s going to be me. First of all, I make a better salary. If she made a much better salary, then I would stay home, but I always feel the need to work, even if it’s in the evenings or something. And I just think the child really needs the mother more than the father at a young age.

Modified traditionalism provides a way for men to cope with economic uncertainties and women’s shifting status without surrendering some valued privileges. It collides, however, with women’s growing desire for equality and rising need for economic self-sufficiency.

**Resolving Moral Dilemmas over Time**

In the absence of institutional supports, postponing ultimate decisions becomes a key strategy for resolving the conflicts between commitment and self-development. For women as much as men, the general refrain is, “You can’t take care of others if you don’t take care of yourself.” Michael wants to be certain his girlfriend has created a base for herself at the workplace before they marry, hoping to increase the chances the marriage will succeed and to create a safety net if it fails:

> There are a lot of problems when two people are not compatible socially, economically. When Kim gets these goals under her belt, and I have my goals established, it’ll be a great marriage. You have to nurture the kind of marriage you want. You have to draw it out before you can go into it.

For Jennifer, 19 and white, autonomy also comes first. Commitment may follow, but only when she knows there is an escape route if the relationship deteriorates:

> I will 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 relationship they’re not happy with because they can’t provide for themselves or the children they now have. The man is not providing for them the way they need, or he’s just not a good person. Most of them have husbands who make a lot more money, or they don’t even work at all, and they’re very unhappy, but they can’t leave. So it’s either welfare or putting up with somebody else’s crap.

Establishing an independent base becomes an essential step on the road to other goals, and autonomy becomes a prerequisite for commitment. This developmental view rejects the idea that individualism and commitment are in conflict by defining the search for independence as a necessary part of the process of becoming able to care for others. To do that, women as well as men tend to look to work, and its promise of autonomy, to complete the self. For those with children as well as the childless, lifelong commitments can be established when “you feel good enough about yourself to create a good relationship.” Shauna, a 30-year-old African American who was raised by her mother and stepfather, explains,
If you’re not happy with yourself, then you can’t be happy with someone else. I’m not looking for someone to fill a void. I think that’s what a lot of people do when they look for relationships, and that’s not what it’s about. It’s about sharing yourself with the other person, and when you’re content and happy with who you are, then you can give more of yourself to someone else, and that’s the type of person that I want to be with.

These strategies are deeply felt and intensely private responses to social and personal conflicts that seem intractable. More fundamental solutions await the creation of systematic supports for balancing work and family and for providing women and men with equal opportunities at the workplace and in the home. Without these supports, new generations must cope as best they can, remaining both flexible and guarded. Andrew, a white 27-year-old, has concluded that rigid positions are not helpful in an unpredictable world:

I would like to have an equal relationship, but I don’t have a set definition for what that would be like. I would be fine if both of us were working and we were doing the same thing, but it would depend on what she wants, too. If she thought, “Well, at this point in my life, I don’t want to work,” or if I felt that way, then it would be fine for one person to do more work in some respects. But I would like it to be equal—just from what I was exposed to and what attracts me.

Anita, a 26-year-old Hispanic, agrees:

I don’t want to be on my own for the rest of my life, but right now it’s fine, so I can figure out who I am. I don’t want to look back later and say I totally ignored my needs. I’m realizing that things are so impermanent, and my expectations can only get me so far.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD A NEW MORAL ORDER?

Deeply rooted social and cultural changes have created new moral dilemmas while undermining a traditional gendered division of moral labor. The widespread and interconnected nature of these changes suggests that a fundamental, irreversible realignment is under way. Less clear is whether it will produce a more gender-equal moral order or will, instead, create new forms of inequality. The long-term implications are necessarily cloudy, but this ambiguity has created some new opportunities along with new risks.

While large-scale social forces are propelling change in a general direction, the specific forms it takes will depend on how women and men respond, individually and collectively, to the dilemmas they face. Those who have come of age during this period are adopting a growing diversity of moral orientations that defies dichotomous gender categories. Their experiences point to a growing desire for a social order in which women and men alike are afforded the opportunity to integrate the essential life tasks of achieving autonomy and caring for others.
Yet, persistent inequalities continue to pose dilemmas, especially for those who aspire to integrate home and work in a balanced, egalitarian way. To understand these processes, we need to focus on the social conditions that create such dilemmas and can transform, and potentially dissolve, the link between gender and moral responsibility. Of course, eradicating this link might only mean that women are allowed to adopt the moral strategies once reserved for men. We also need to discover how to enable everyone, regardless of gender, class, or family situation, to balance care of others with care of the self.

The possibilities have never been greater for creating humanistic, rather than gendered, conceptions of moral obligation. New moral dilemmas have prompted women and men to develop innovative strategies, but the long-term resolution of these dilemmas depends on reorganizing our social institutions to foster gender equality and a better balance between family and work. Freud once commented that a healthy person is able “to love and to work.” Achieving this vision depends on creating a healthy society, where all citizens are able to combine love and work in the ways they deem best.

NOTES

1. My deep thanks go to Sociologists for Women in Society for honoring me with the 1998 Feminist Lectureship and to the sociology departments and Women’s Studies Programs at the University of Georgia and the University of North Texas for their generous support and warm hospitality.

2. See, especially, Parsons and Bales (1955). In important ways, Parsons’s focus on instrumental and expressive functions parallels the psychoanalytic focus on the developmental processes of attachment and separation, such as those presented by Bowlby (1969, 1973).

3. Kimmel (2000) presents an excellent summary of the evidence on the temperamental variability within gender groups and the smaller and shrinking differences between them.

4. The concept of vicarious identity, for example, was once used to argue that women can meet their identity needs by taking pride in the achievements of their husbands and children.

5. Chodorow (1978, 1990) distinguished between women’s “permeable” and men’s “impermeable” ego boundaries, a distinction that parallels the analysis of Parsons and Bales (1955), which relies on notions of “expressive” and “instrumental” functions and predispositions to explain why women are more involved in, and responsible for, family caretaking.

6. The transformation from welfare to workfare as a framework for providing support for poor, single mothers provides an example of this process. Another is the rise of “mommy wars,” in which both full-time and employed mothers feel compelled to defend their respective choices by contesting the appropriateness of each other’s parenting strategies.

7. Even at its height, male breadwinning was largely confined to white, middle-class households. Today, however, women, men, and children across all races and classes now live in circumstances that depart significantly from this once predominant model. Current trends show that two-thirds of mothers with preschool children are employed outside the home, 60 percent of married couples have two earners (while 77 percent of cohabiting couples have two earners), and 47 percent of the labor force is female. Among children under 18 in 2000, 27 percent live with a single parent (22 percent live with a single mother, and 5 percent with a single father), and one in three births is to an unmarried mother (Lewin 2001).
8. A vivid example of a “damned if you do and damned if you don’t” situation can be found in Hays’s (1996) analysis of the “cultural contradictions of motherhood,” in which women are expected to practice intensive mothering even as they seek a life outside the home.

9. In Giddens’s (1979) language, they cause people to move from “practical consciousness” to “discursive consciousness.” Behavior becomes action because it is now new social meaning.

10. Of this group, more than 27 percent lived largely with a single parent, including 7 percent whose parents shared joint custody and 5 percent who lived with single, custodial fathers. The rest saw one or both of their parents remarry and form a new, two-parent household.

11. A larger proportion of households were dual-earning, but they varied in the degree of equality between parents’ jobs and did not necessarily include both biological parents.

12. Amato and Booth (1997) confirmed this viewpoint. Respondents also argue that both parents should sustain strong ties to their children whether or not they remain together.

13. Cancian (1987) provided an in-depth analysis of innovative attempts among couples to create interdependent relationships, in which both women and men are responsible for love.

REFERENCES


