

Different Ways of *Not* Having It All

Work, Care, and Shifting Gender Arrangements in the New Economy

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Just as the industrial revolution created a new way of life by separating earning an income from domestic caretaking, the rise of a new economy is again reshaping the ways people organize work and care. This new economic revolution, however, is undoing the clear division that once assigned women and men to different physical, social, and economic spheres. At the height of this period, in the mid-20th century, three out of five US households consisted of a breadwinning husband and homemaking wife. While this option was never available to everyone, structured career ladders and secure unionized jobs made it possible for the majority of middle- and working-class men to become their household's primary provider, while stable marital bonds gave most women access to men's earnings. Even among the large proportions of working-class and minority families who were unable to attain this ideal, the norm itself held great sway.

Since that period, however, widespread and deeply anchored economic and social shifts have eroded the institutional underpinnings of this gender-divided arrangement.¹ The rise of what is often termed a "new economy" (characterized by the dominance of technological, information, and service-based economic activity) has included a decline in stable jobs and a rise in insecure work, creating unpredictable occupational prospects for all but the most privileged men and women.² In a parallel shift, the decline of stable marriages and the rise of more fluid intimate partnerships have created similarly uncertain interpersonal prospects. The rise in interpersonal uncertainties has implications for women and men of all class backgrounds, with the more educated more likely to postpone marriage and the less educated more likely to see

marriage as a “luxury” they cannot afford.³ However diverse the consequences, the rise in financial and interpersonal uncertainty has undermined the institutions and blurred the boundaries that once demarcated a clear division between work and care as well as distinct pathways for American women and men.

Although a system of separate spheres neither meets the needs nor reflects the aspirations of most twenty-first century adults, the contours of a new system—and its implications for gender arrangements—remain unsettled and contested.⁴ Some argue that the gender revolution has stalled (England, 2010) and may have reached its end (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman, 2011). There is certainly considerable evidence to support this view, including a plateau in women’s labor force participation, a continuing gender gap in earnings and occupational attainment, an intensification of cultural pressures to practice “intensive mothering” (Hays, 1996), and the decision among some professional women to “opt out” (Belkin, 2003; Stone, 2007).

Others posit a countervailing trend. Pointing to evidence that women are outpacing men in educational attainment and men are falling behind in earnings and ambition (Rosin, 2012; DiPrete and Buchmann, 2013), these analysts see women’s aspirations on the upswing and men becoming increasingly adrift as opportunities to secure stable blue- and white-collar jobs contract. For some, these shifts in the fortunes and outlooks of women and men represent not just a declining gender gap but a growing gender reversal. Others see related developments—such as the rise of cohabitation, postponed marriage, single motherhood, and single adults living alone—as a troubling trend toward unmoored individualism and away from enduring commitments to work or care (Wilcox, 2010; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2001).

There are elements of truth in both arguments, but they are partial truths. Like the proverbial blind men who touch different parts of the elephant, those looking at only a parts of the whole is are likely to reach different conclusions that are misleading if taken alone. Uncertain, uneven change may prompt even the most careful analysts to reach different conclusions, but this unevenness should also make us wary of uni-linear views about the direction of change. Whether the stress is on a return to tradition or a new world of disconnected adults, neither scenario represents the only way forward. It is more accurate—and, I argue, more useful—to consider the full range of patterns emerging in response to the fundamental economic and social shifts that are dissolving the boundaries between home and work and creating new insecurities at work and in relationships.

Charting the New Landscape of Work and Care

To understand how today’s adults are navigating the increasingly uncertain occupational and family waters wrought by the new economy, I conducted in-depth interviews with a randomly selected sample of women and men currently residing in the area in and around Silicon Valley. As home to the high-tech economy and its ancillary occupations, this location offers a high concentration of cutting-edge jobs that form the core of the new economy. Since the area contains a mix of both old and new occupational niches, as well as what Kalleberg terms “good” and “bad” jobs (Kalleberg, 2011), it provides fertile ground for examining how new jobs and occupational trajectories compare with more traditional ones as well as how the growth of new workplace and career structures is shaping the social and economic options for everyone.

To discover the work-care strategies emerging in this context, I interviewed women and men between the ages of thirty and forty-five, when pressures to build a family life and establish an occupational career are most intense. Finally, to explore the ways that class and financial resources shape options and strategies, people were selected from areas containing a diverse mix of educational and economic backgrounds (excluding the very affluent who are insulated from many of the challenges facing others).

Using these sampling criteria yielded a sample that includes an equal number of women and men from a range of backgrounds who are currently working at a variety of jobs—including service, technical, managerial, and professional occupations—and currently living in an array of family situations—including singles, childless couples, and couples with children.⁵ Despite these differences, each respondent resides in a climate of “boom and bust” opportunities, increasingly blurred boundaries between home and work, and unpredictable work and family options.

How are these women and men experiencing and responding to the new challenges of earning a living and caring for others? And what are the implications for gender—and class—inequality? Amid the diversity of my respondents’ lives, four general patterns emerge. One, which I call “neo-traditionalism,” conforms to the images of a stalled revolution in which the arrival of children prompts parents to divide paid work and caretaking in gender-specific ways, usually despite their preferences.

Another, which can be described as “on one’s own,” embodies the concerns of those who see a trend away from marital commitment.⁶ This pattern encompasses a variety of situations, from those who are single parents rearing children without the help of a partner to those single, childless adults living on their own. (Although most single parents are mothers, Gretchen Livingston [2013], reports that the proportion of single-parent households headed by a father has

risen to 24 percent, which accounts for 8 percent of all US households). Despite the differences between singles who are childless and those rearing children, both circumstances share contain the challenges posed by living outside the context of a stable intimate relationship.⁷

These two patterns are well represented in my sample, with slightly more than a third of my interviewees living on their own or as a single parent and another third in a relationship with a clear gender division in earning and caretaking. Taken together, they exemplify the dual, if divergent, concerns of those who argue we are either in the midst of a stalled revolution or a rise in uncommitted individualism. Yet these patterns do not tell the whole story, since another third are neither on their own nor pursuing a traditional strategy. These individuals, instead, are transgressing historic gender divisions in a variety of ways, including some who are reversing work and care domains and others who are taking conscious steps to share these domains as equally as possible. About percent are “reversers,” who are in relationships that divide primary responsibility for earning and caretaking, but not in a way that conforms to stereotypic gender assignments. Although the gender arrangements in these households differ from those in more traditional ones, the reversed pattern reflects a different response to similar work-family conflicts. The basic economic changes that have produced both time-demanding jobs and insecure work requires many households to assign work and caregiving in a way that leaves each partner mainly responsible for one, even though reversed couples find themselves relying primarily on a woman’s earnings.⁸

The final percent are “egalitarians” who are taking extraordinary steps to resist gender divisions and share the work of earning and caretaking in a relationship. These women and men are determined to seek a more equal balance between work and care, but usually find themselves, in the words of one respondent, “swimming against the tide.” For some, this means a

heavy load of caretaking in addition to working, while others have concluded that equality means forgoing parenthood to preserve equal commitments to work.

From a longer-term historical perspective, reversers and egalitarians are more innovative and thus easier to overlook, yet they are also on the rise. A recent Pew study reports, for example, that among households with children younger than eighteen, the share consisting of married mothers who out-earn their husbands and are considered the breadwinner now hovers around 15 percent, compared to just 4 percent in 1960 (Wang, Parker, and Taylor, 2013).⁹

Each of these patterns illustrates diversity in how people cope with the conflicts and tradeoffs between work and care (as the examples below will amply illustrate), and the distinctions among them can become blurry as some people move from one category to another in response to changes in their economic and interpersonal fortunes. Taken together, however, they provide a framework for charting the options people face today and the strategies individuals are developing as they build life paths amid the contradictions and conflicts of today's uncertain economic and interpersonal landscape.

Becoming Traditional, Like It or Not:

About one-third of my interviewees—of whom 45 percent are women and 55 percent men—are engaged in what we have come to call traditional strategies for dividing work and caretaking.¹⁰

Rearing children in committed marriages, they have adopted a clear division between who is responsible for breadwinning and who for caretaking. Yet even these couples rarely conform to the classic image of a satisfied stay-at-home caretaker and securely employed breadwinner.

While a minority depended on one income, most were in a relationship where the primary caretaking partner either worked to some extent or wished to do so. These “neo-trationals,”

including both husbands and wives, more often moved toward specializing in either work or care despite an earlier and often enduring preference for a more balanced, flexible, and equal arrangement. Why and how did these reluctant traditionals become so? Some clues can be found in the experiences of two respondents—not married to each other—who found themselves in a gender-traditional situation. Neither Kyra, currently a stay-at-home parent, nor Tim, a primary earner, had foreseen or preferred their current positions. First, Kyra’s story:

Reared primarily by her mother after her father died when she was a preschooler, Kyra assumed she would support herself. She managed to work her way through a small local college near her home in Michigan, although strained finances left her juggling the demands of school with a series of part-time jobs. After finishing her degree, she found full-time work in a small public relations firm in Detroit, where her energy, managerial skills, and outgoing personality helped propel her up the ladder and on to a series of increasingly influential and better paying positions. A decade later, Kyra was committed to her career, optimistic about her future prospects, and comfortable living on her own.

Around this time, Kyra met Tony, an industrial engineer who dreamed of designing cars. Having weathered a series of unhappy relationships, she was surprised to see her relationship with Tony grow deeper and stronger. After a year of dating, she surrendered her skepticism and agreed to cement their status as a couple by living together. Several years later, they married and made plans to start a family. Two years later, they had their first child.

Kyra continued to work full-time and helped to support Tony as he moved from job to job in the unpredictable world of design consultancies. With the car industry in free fall, however, his prospects looked bleak and his spirits were plummeting. As the tensions in their marriage mounted, two unexpected developments converged: Kyra became pregnant again, and Tony was offered the chance to work at a small startup design firm in California. With though another baby was on the way, Kyra feared the time to make a career change could not be worse. But despite the toll a move might take on her own hard-won success, she could not ask Tony to relinquish what seemed like a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to follow his dream. With decidedly mixed feelings, she joined Tony in California.

Today, Kyra is at home with two young children and working as a part-time free lance instructor teaching an online course for very little money. She has applied for dozens of full-time positions—some well below her qualifications—and lost count of the number of in-person interviews, but none has produced an offer. Despite her experience, past achievements, and glowing recommendations, employers have hinted—and, in some cases, explicitly stated—that they are wary of hiring a mother with young children who might not be able or willing to put in the long hours they expect.¹¹

Kyra notes, with a mix of cynicism and irony, that no one seems concerned about Tony's status as a father. To the contrary, his employer has made it clear that he is expected to spend long days at the office and be on call 24/7. The company cannot survive, he is told, unless everyone works from early

morning into the night and is available to answer emails and phone calls that arrive on weekends and even after midnight.

Sifted through the lens of Kyra's distilled account, a series of unforeseeable events have left her out of work and caring almost singlehandedly for their two young children, an arrangement she did not seek and does not prefer. In a mirror image to Kyra's conundrum, Tim finds himself on the other side of the work-care divide, feeling frustrated that the pressure to work long hours has left him unable to carve out enough time for caretaking:

As far back as he can remember, Tim has been committed to building a relationship of equal sharing with his wife, Margaret. Married in their twenties, they have fostered each other's work aspirations from the outset. For his part, that has meant supporting Margaret through the many years she worked toward her medical degree and post-medical school training in family practice.

Margaret has been equally supportive of Tim, but his aspirations have not followed such an organized track. Born in the Midwest to parents of modest means, he felt lucky to attend college and gave little thought to his future plans. Looking for a job after college, he stumbled into public relations when offered a job in a local firm. When Margaret's medical training brought them to the West Coast, he landed a series of jobs with a variety of small companies whose fortunes rose and fell in the fast-changing technology sector. For most of their married life, this arrangement has served Tim and Margaret well. Margaret's career has offered economic security and stable earnings, which has allowed Tim to work at jobs with less certain prospects.

As they entered their thirties and decided it was the time to start a family, they began to realize that their long work weeks, once an acceptable fact of life, had become a big drawback. With a child on the way, they both sought ways to cut back but soon discovered that only Margaret had the option. As part of a large practice, her partners agreed share the patient workload. Tim's employers, however, did not welcome any decision that would let his new family responsibilities come before his "loyalty" to the job.

Now the father of a six-month-old, Tim worries that his marriage and his career are both teetering. For the first time in their long relationship, Margaret is expressing sustained anger. While she is content to work fewer days a week to care for their son, she resents his lack of involvement. For his part, Tim wants to spend more time with both of them, but he feels even greater pressure to prove his worth by working as much as possible. Amid the pressures of an uncertain local economy, he does not believe he can afford to pull back without risking the loss of his job to "someone in India or Russia who will work for a third of what they're paying me."

A constellation of work pressures, gendered obstacles, and economic forces have left both Kyra and Tim contending with a division of work and care that neither intended nor finds satisfying. Not all couples in traditional situations would prefer another arrangement, but over half of those I interviewed do.¹² Their stories are instructive not just because they demonstrate that behavior cannot be assumed to reflect preferences. Equally important, they illustrate how and why institutions that reinforce a strict division of work and care along gender lines are out of sync with the needs and desires of a large proportion of contemporary workers.

On Their Own, But Not Alike:

If traditional strategies sit at one end of the work-care spectrum, the other end is inhabited by those who—at a similar age—remain single and on their own. This includes people living alone who have decided to forgo parenthood as well as single parents raising children without the help of a committed partner. Though diverse, this group is united by the single status of its members. On the surface, Michelle, a single mother, and Jason, a bachelor with no children, may appear to have little in common, but both of their lives illuminate the social forces that are prompting a growing number to go it alone:

Although Michelle always expected to have at least one child, she never imagined she would do it on her own. Growing up in the Midwest, she was reared by parents who had a long and apparently happy marriage. Her dad earned a stable income as a mid-level manager and family breadwinner. She did not excel at school, but she knew it was important to attend college and be able to support herself.

After graduation, she worked at a few uninspiring sales jobs and then decided to move to the West Coast, where she could live with an aunt until she found work and could pay her own bills. A series of dead-end jobs made it possible for Michelle to find her own place, but they left her feeling bored and adrift. Hoping to find more challenging, meaningful work, she took some night courses in business, which led to an entry-level position at a small non-profit that provided services for the poor and disabled.

To her own surprise, Michelle proved to be a gifted administrator and moved steadily up the organization's ladder. After several years, the director retired and she landed the top spot. Being responsible for the survival and smooth-running of the organization left little time for life outside the office and often pushed her beyond her "comfort zone," but the payoff in self-esteem and a sense of making a difference in people's lives made the hard work worthwhile.

In contrast to her work life, Michelle's personal life did not proceed so smoothly. As she entered her mid-thirties, a series of ill-fated relationships left her wondering if she would ever find a life partner. Then, on a business trip to Arizona, she met Gary and began a whirlwind courtship. Though separated by many miles, they took turns visiting each other and began to consider ways to be together. Michelle pondered a move, even though that would require giving up her job and starting over in another city.

Just as the Michelle was weighing these options, she discovered—to her surprise—that she was pregnant. Though unplanned, the pregnancy provided one more reason to leave her life and start a new one with Gary. But when Michelle shared the news on her next visit, Gary reacted with anger and dismay, making it clear he did not want a child or any involvement as a father. She returned in a "state of shock," knowing the relationship was over.

After much soul-searching, Michelle decided that she would not let her single status prevent her from having a child. Although the circumstances were far from ideal, she concluded this might be her "last chance." If Gary had greeted the news of her pregnancy with enthusiasm, Michelle might have found herself in

Kyra's shoes—moving to a new city with a young child, limited employment options, and a partner too busy to share caretaking. Instead, she became a single mother.

Today, Michelle is rearing her two-year daughter, Courtney, with the help of a dedicated paid caretaker and a network of close friends, but no financial support or involvement from Gary. She remains single, although she recently began dating someone who is divorced and shares custody of his son. Courtney appears to be thriving and Michelle has no regrets about her decision, but being a single mother has required a change in her work situation. Though continuing to work full-time, she has reluctantly relinquished her non-profit directorship to take a more secure, if less inspiring, job in the human resources division of a well-established research institute (where, not coincidentally, women at her company are concentrated). Her new position offers neither the influence nor challenges she once enjoyed, but it provides a steady income, demands less time, and has a predictable schedule, all of which make it easier to juggle the twin responsibilities of supporting and caring for Courtney.

While Michelle must shoulder the load of both work and care without a life partner, Jason is coping with a deficit of each. If she is “doing it all” and ultimately responsible for it all, he is largely on his own. As Eric Klinenberg (2012) has documented, “going solo” is an increasingly common choice for women and men of all ages, but the thirty- and forty-something's in this category are doing so at an age when most people are forging family bonds of some kind. By rejecting commitments to marriage and children, Jason stands at the far end of the singles spectrum:

Growing up in a suburban neighborhood of tract housing in southern California, Jason felt shy and reticent in most social situations. Good at math, he won a scholarship to a local college, where he learned the language of computer coding. Several years later, when a teacher recommended him for a job at a nearby small company, he left school without a degree to make his way in the growing high-tech world. When a Silicon Valley employer made an offer in his late twenties, he jumped at the opportunity to move there.

Over the last decade, Jason has moved through a series of jobs, as the companies he joined have either downsized, went gone out of business, or simply changed direction and with no further need for his skills. In parallel fashion, he has had a series of relationships that he describes as “not serious” and has never felt comfortable making a permanent commitment. Although he lived briefly with his last girlfriend, it felt more like an arrangement of convenience until she was able to find a job and pay her own rent.

Now thirty-nine, Jason lives alone with his cat. During the day, he goes to local coffee house, where he works on his laptop amid a scattering of similarly occupied coffee drinkers. Single again, after his last girlfriend moved out, and laid off a year ago from his last job as a programmer, he spends most of his time in the solitary pursuit of a new computer code, with occasional breaks to hang out with other non-employed aspiring coders and go to dinner with his new girlfriend.

Considering his disappointments in love and thwarted opportunities at work, Jason has concluded that his marginal employment and modest social skills leave him ill positioned either to find a stable job or to settle down with a life

partner. He hopes to live off his savings until he is able to “get back in the game” or, even better, make it big on his own. In the meantime, the coffee house will remain his workplace and his second home.

Although Michelle is a single mother raising a child on her own and Jason lives alone without close family ties of any kind, they are both coping without the support—or demands—of a committed partner. Like their traditional counterparts, neither Michelle nor Jason anticipated being where they are now. Yet work options and personal circumstances converged to leave them in a state of sustained singlehood. Though wistful about their single status, they also take solace—and a degree of pride—in their own self-reliance.

Uneasy Reversals:

A small, but telling group of respondents are in relationships that reverse the classic gender division between earning and caring.¹³ Not surprisingly, none of these women or men had sought or planned for this arrangement, which still contradicts deeply ingrained and widely held beliefs about who should be responsible for what. Yet a reversal of economic fortunes, with wives able to find more secure employment, made gender reversal not just the most sensible option, but often the only one. Dolores, a medical researcher, and Adam, a self-employed website developer, illustrate this dynamic:

Dolores grew up in southern California in a modest working-class neighborhood. Reared mostly by her mother after her parents divorced, she helped care for her younger sisters and felt fortunate to attend a nearby community college. Choosing a biology class because it did fit with her work schedule, she discovered a love for the subject and decided to major in it. This

decision proved fortunate in two ways: she found a calling and also met her husband-to-be, Steve. Also a biology major, he shared her interests and fully supported her growing desire to become a scientist.

At the urging of her favorite professor, Dolores applied and earned a fellowship to continue her studies at a four-year university. Around the same time, she also married Steve, who took a job working in a lab at a pharmaceutical company. Between Steve's job and her fellowship, they were able to make ends meet, and when she became pregnant unexpectedly, they decided to start a family. Despite the challenges of school, work, and limited finances, their past experiences overcoming financial hardship had left them feeling confident about handling the extra load.

As her graduation approached, Dolores faced a crossroads. Dolores received a generous fellowship to attend graduate school in Oregon just as Steve began to worry that his job was imperiled by impending layoffs. Knowing Steve would need to find another position in any case, they decided to move. In the beginning, all went well. Dolores made steady progress through her program, while Steve found another, albeit less promising, job as a lab technician. With fewer demands—or challenges—at work, Steve was able to take on the bulk of childcare, and they decided to have another child. Then matters took a downward turn. As Dolores approached the completion of her graduate degree, Steve lost his job. Unable to find another one, he grew increasingly withdrawn and depressed. Dolores hoped his prospects—and spirits—would improve when she received an offer to move back to California to join a research project at a medical school.

Now resettled again, Steve has still not been able to find a job and has become not just the family's primary caretaker, but a stay-at-home dad. Dolores continues to love her work, but she has become demoralized about the state of her marriage. Steve's emotional state continues to slide, and she feels torn between gratitude for his support at home and a mixture of worry and anger that their marital tensions signal a breakup to come.

As Dolores's career blossomed and her husband's job prospects shriveled, Dolores became her family's primary breadwinner. Adam, in contrast, became his family's primary caretaker when his wife's steady paycheck made it possible for him to follow a riskier work path:

As far back as Adam can remember, he has preferred what he called "adventure." Estranged from his largely absent father and raised almost singlehandedly by his mother, he could hardly wait to leave school and join the military, which he did right after high school graduation. Rather than joining the infantry, however, he was assigned to data processing, where he discovered an interest and facility for computing.

After several stints in the Army, Adam returned to his hometown, Kansas City, where he took a job at a local computer company. Several years later, however, the business began to falter and his job disappeared. He moved on to a new Internet venture that had just been started by a friend and co-worker. Even if his earnings fluctuated with the ups and downs of a business whose future was unknown, he enjoyed working on a risky venture with a small group of friends.

At about the same time, Adam met Tatiana. Because she shared his sense of adventure, he began to relax his doubts about settling down and several months later moved in with her. Living together allowed them to pool their incomes, and Tatiana's steady job as an administrative assistant in a well-established national corporation provided a measure of financial security (albeit at the modest level typically found in women-dominated office jobs) that they had never known. Several years later, when Tatiana was offered a transfer to California, they decided to marry and move to the heart of high-tech innovation.

Today, Adam and Tatiana are living in a small apartment with their young son, Ethan. As the main breadwinner, Tatiana earns just enough to pay the family's bills but not enough to afford more spacious quarters, to save for the future, or even to afford childcare. She goes to work every day and relies on Adam to look after Ethan. Adam is affiliated with a "computer cooperative" that houses a self-styled group of hackers who share the rent on a small building. Every afternoon, Adam takes Ethan to his "office," where he works on his projects alongside other self-styled "nerds." He has some misgivings about depending on Tatiana's earnings, but he enjoys being a hands-on dad and believes his dream of making it big will eventually pay off for everyone. In the meantime, he does his best to ignore the looks and comments that sometimes come his way from neighbors and others who do not entirely approve.

Dolores and Adam are members of a small, but growing group of couples who have reversed the traditional division between breadwinning and caretaking. Given the persisting pressures on men to be “good providers” (Bernard, 1981; Townsend, 2002), it is not surprising that these arrangements prompt varying degrees of discomfort. While Adam welcomed the opportunity to rely on his wife’s paycheck so that he could work in a riskier but more satisfying way, he nevertheless could not escape the subtle and overt expressions of curiosity and skepticism when he tried to explain his situation to neighbors, acquaintances, and even friends. Dolores, too, appreciated the support of her husband, which made it possible for her to succeed beyond her anything she had dared to expect; but watching her husband fall into a chronic state of depression and disillusionment seemed a heavy price for both of them to pay. These diverse reactions reflect the cultural ambivalence that persists despite the growing changes in gender arrangements. Persisting cultural norms—especially those that stress the importance of paid work in measuring a man’s worth in a market economy—exert a powerful force on people’s emotional responses, even when their own preferences do not align with these values. It is not possible to escape the cultural context, even when one is not able or willing to conform.

It would be a mistake, however, to presume that only couples who trade places experience frustration. Most traditional couples also express disappointment about having to divide earning and caretaking.¹⁴ Although the gender assignments differ, both arrangements stem from economic forces that are fueling the rise of both excessively time-demanding jobs and insecure work. In reversed cases, husbands face uncertain job prospects and financial insecurity while wives are able to find more secure employment with a steady income stream. Whether reversed or traditional, a similar set of economic pushes and pulls prompts couples to divide rather than share work and care.

Practicing Equality:

Whether traditional, reversed, or on their own, most of the women and men I interviewed sought to find meaning and satisfaction in their work-care arrangements. Yet most also hoped for a more integrated and equal balance than they had been able to achieve. A small group, however, did more than hope. About 15 percent had managed, usually against the odds and with great effort, to share work and care more or less equally. I use the modifier “more or less” because it is not easy either to define what equality means or to achieve it. All of these cases involve committed couples in which both partners are committed to sharing work and care, but their strategies for accomplishing these goals take varied—and not altogether satisfying—forms. Danny, for example, is determined to share everything with his wife, but he feels “like a salmon swimming upstream”:

Danny grew up in a Latino community near San Francisco with his parents and three siblings. His father worked hard in construction to “keep a roof over our heads,” and his mother devoted herself to the care and feeding of the family. Then, just as Danny finished high school, his father died suddenly of a heart attack.

Danny had always known he would need to work to put himself through college, but his father’s death meant postponing college as well as plans to move out on his own. After several years of working in construction, Danny was able to save enough money to move out and enroll in a two-year college. Even though he continued to work full-time to support himself and pay for his educational expenses, he was able to perform well enough in his classes to transfer to a four-

year college several hours away. Finally, he was able to live on his savings and devote his time to school.

After graduating with a major in business and finance, Danny took a job at a large brokerage firm. He liked the work, and his disciplined work habits and outgoing personality served him well. But the best part of this job was meeting Francesca, who worked on the same floor, several aisles over. After years of “playing the field,” he realized he had found his “soulmate.” As their relationship grew closer, they both moved onto jobs at different firms, which eased the discomfort of dating a co-worker.

Describing himself as “old fashioned,” Danny did not live with Francesca until they were ready to marry. By then, Danny had set out on his own as a financial management consultant, while Francesca continued her work at an investment firm. When they realized a baby was on the way, they agreed it was important to raise their daughter, Alyssa, together. Neither felt comfortable hiring someone else to care for Alyssa, nor did they find it possible or desirable for either to quit work altogether.

Today Danny and Francesca are doing their best to share Alyssa’s care and juggle it with their equally demanding jobs. Danny works at home every morning and hands the childcare off to Francesca in the afternoon, when she returns early from the office. Danny is convinced that parents are the best caretakers and is determined to do everything without hiring anyone else, even though he feels chronically exhausted. He worries that the meager childcare available in his community is both too expensive and not of high quality. He is

eager to have another child, but wonders how they will manage and if they have the time, money, or energy to try.

Like Danny, Carmen also shares work and care with her spouse, Julio. In her case, however, they are caring for nieces and nephews who have become their “surrogate kids” even though they chose not to have their own biological children:

Carmen grew up in Colorado in a large, close-knit family, overseen by her father, the child of Mexican immigrants, and her mother, who emigrated from the Philippines. Without the funds to go to college, she joined the military after high school, where she spent the next decade living in different parts of the country, working in a variety of office jobs, and taking college-level courses. By the time she decided to return to civilian life, she was living in Northern California and decided to stay. She had also gained enough experience to land a job as an office manager in a small start-up.

Carmen proved to be an inspired and inspiring administrator. Her ability to oversee and motivate others more than compensated for her lack of technical acumen, and she soon became a valued member of the work team. After a few years, however, the company floundered and went out of business. Carmen, like most of her co-workers, moved to another startup. This pattern repeated itself with unnerving regularity as one company after another went out of business. But changing jobs also brought a network of contacts, which finally led her to a startup filled with past co-workers and friends. This time, instead of failing, the company was purchased by a major firm with a global presence, where Carmen now works as the division’s administrative head.

In the midst of this dizzying series of job changes, Carmen met and married Jose, the “love of my life.” Unlike the unpredictable nature of her work life, Carmen’s marriage has proved strong and stable. They are, in Carmen’s words, “a team.” As a construction worker and small contractor, Jose has never been able to match Carmen’s earnings; but he has worked steadily, and together, they have been able to buy a small house. Their home has become the center of a large extended family and a refuge for relatives who have fallen on hard times, including a niece and nephew who live with them because their own parents could not provide the stability they needed. They make every effort to share the load amid their frenetic schedules. With more flexibility during weekdays, Jose gets the kids to school and prepares evening dinners, while Carmen steps in on the weekends.

Today, Carmen marvels at how far she has come, but she nevertheless is prepared to move on, aware that her new employer could decide at any time to “take a different direction and leave us out on the street.” At home, she takes pleasure and pride in her “adopted” children, which offset the wistfulness that her busy life with Jose did not leave time for them to have children of their own.

Carmen and Danny are both in stable relationships marked by a commitment to sharing work and care. Compared to their traditional, single, and reversed peers, they have come closer to achieving their aspirations. Yet they also feel, as Danny put it, “like I’m swimming against the tide.” As a result, Danny is struggling to find the time to share care or to have another child, while Carmen has opted to care for other people’s children rather than having her own. They both know their financial fortunes could change at any time, knowledge which adds to their

worries about meeting the care obligations they now shoulder whether or not they dare to take on new ones. Practicing equality is not the same as “having it all.” To the contrary, it is an insecure position that requires hard work, concerted effort, and countless sacrifices, and it may be lost at any time with little warning.

Explaining Divergent Strategies: Shared Dilemmas, Different Compromises

Contemporary adults are fashioning a variety of strategies to meet the challenges of earning a living and caring for others in a transforming economic and social landscape. This diversity includes couples who are recreating separate gender spheres and singles who are living without support from or obligations to a committed partner, but it also includes women and men who find themselves in gender-reversed relationships and those who are dividing work and care more equally. Why did people fashion such divergent strategies?

Individual preferences and desires cannot explain the differences among traditionalists, reversers, egalitarians, and do-it-on-their-owners. To the contrary, most women and men aspired to a better balance and integration of work and care than they were able to achieve. Neither gender identity nor individual personal preferences can thus account for the shape of a person’s work-care strategy. Instead, a set of factors in the workplace and the domestic sphere converged in different combinations to prompt diverse reactions to work-care conflicts.

In the case of traditional and reversed couples, the partner with the more stable, but also more time-demanding job became the main breadwinner, leaving the partner with less promising work options to take on the lion’s share of caretaking. In most instances, men enjoyed the best prospects at work but also faced the highest work demands and pressures; but when a woman’s

job offered more security, income, and/or advancement opportunities, she became the primary financial provider despite the cultural injunction that places this responsibility on men. Whether the job of breadwinning fell to a man or a woman, the need for one person to hold onto a job and build a career by working long hours without letup placed stringent limits on the options of the other. As the default, if not preferred, arrangement became leaving responsibility for caretaking to the person with fewer opportunities at work, the process of dividing work and care became self-sustaining.

In contrast, many people were unable to establish a stable, enduring intimate relationship, although this situation had different implications for men and women. When men were unable or (in some cases) unmotivated to find secure work, they often became wary of making a long-term commitment as well. Accepting the traditional view that a married man should provide for his family, many concluded they were therefore “unmarriageable.” Among those who were able to find secure work, marriage appeared to entail the loss of too much autonomy in choosing a work path that did not offer a sufficiently large or steady paycheck. Yet the freedom from the pressure to be a family provider also left these men searching for ways to create close ties to others amid a dearth of commitments to work or care.

Single women were more likely to face a different dilemma. While some women opted to remain childless (and thus faced challenges similar to those of single, childless men), most were rearing children without the help or support of an intimate partner. Far from having too few commitments or responsibilities, these single mothers were the primary providers of both income and care. While they looked to others to help with care, they also had to scale back work commitments—and often ambitions. More often than not, it meant shifting to less time-demanding work that also offered fewer financial rewards and less potential for advancement.

Finally, egalitarians confronted a different set of options than their traditional, reversed, or single peers. They were able to find jobs they found satisfying and to create relationships with partners who were equally committed to work. Some concluded that this equal commitment to work left little room for having a child and taking on care responsibilities without risking the strength of their relationship as well as their own mental and physical health. Yet other egalitarians endeavored to share work and care despite the obstacles. They chose work that offered some degree of flexibility as well as a partner who was also willing to do the same, even if it meant sacrificing some degree of work security. Yet these egalitarian parents could rely on few supports—either at work or in their communities—to help sustain a shared arrangement. Pulling back from work, even temporarily, threatened their long-term financial security, while working long hours threatened their relationship and emotional well-being. Like single parents, egalitarian parents found that doing it all did not mean having it all. Whether they opted to remain childless or to share caretaking, all egalitarian partnerships faced a distinct, if different, set of pressures and trade-offs.

Stepping back to survey the entire landscape, it is clear that changes in both the nature of jobs and the shape of relationships are generating a diverse set of work-care strategies. The growth in economic insecurity and job uncertainty makes change inevitable and unavoidable, but the shape that change assumes also depends on how people navigate their personal lives in this new economic context. These two domains—that is, access (or lack of access) to secure work and the ability (or inability) to establish a stable relationship—can converge in different ways for individuals. And for those with partners, her or his partner’s work options are added to the complex mix that is generating a mosaic of strategies.

Despite their differences, all these strategies represent efforts to fashion a coherent life path amid rising job uncertainty, increasingly fragile relationships, and mounting work-family conflicts. In an earlier era, gender offered a resolution to the institutional conflicts between work and care; for better or worse, men specialized in market work and women in the nonmarket activities of caretaking. Today, the rise of both unpredictable work paths and optional relationships has undermined this once strong link between gender, work, and care. Yet work and parenting structures and norms forged in an earlier era have actually intensified in this new one, not just continuing to presume that the “ideal worker” always puts work first (Williams, 2000) and the ideal parent practices “intensive” caretaking (Hays, 1996) but even raising the standard for how much time should be devoted to both. The traditional bargain between breadwinning husbands and caretaking wives is increasingly unappealing and out of reach, but the cultural and structural supports for more balanced and egalitarian resolutions have yet to emerge. This context of incomplete change creates intractable dilemmas. It is not surprising that these dilemmas prompt diverse strategies, each unsatisfactory in its own way.

Beyond “Having It All”:

Despite an almost universally expressed desire to strike a more equal and integrated balance between earning and caring, my respondents developed a range of strategies that nevertheless fall far short of this aspiration. Even those who strove for equal sharing faced exhausting schedules and strains in their relationships. The new economy has irreversibly eroded a system of strict gender differences, with secure work available to most men and secure marriages available to most women; but it has not replaced this once-entrenched order with newly

institutionalized and satisfying ways to resolve the dilemmas and conflicts between paid work and private care.

In this context, “having it all” is a misleading and even dangerous metaphor that obscures the institutional roots of everyone’s difficulties. Most often used to assert that no one can have it all, the phrase implies that those who try—especially if they are women—are selfish, greedy, and doomed to fail. Yet there is no necessary conflict between work and care. This conflict is rooted, instead, in institutional arrangements that continue to separate private caretaking from paid work, to devalue and privatize carework of any kind, to presume that market activities should always take precedence, and to assume that households can depend on a family breadwinner (presumably, a man) with access to a secure, well-paying job. Amid the new job and relationship uncertainties facing women and men alike, the wish to combine paid work and caretaking is anything but selfish. To the contrary, secure work and gender-neutral options for integrating work and care are now key requirements for insuring the well-being of children, the stability of relationships, and the economic health of societies. Freud once declared that the ability to work and love are the twin hallmarks of a healthy person (Erikson, 1963). In the context of the new economy, a healthy society depends on creating institutions that allow women and men to integrate and balance work and care.

What form can and should these institutions take? What policies would ease the hardships that contradictory change has produced? And what are the political possibilities in the US context? A policy approach that stresses both equality and care offers the most effective and just response to the work-care conflicts wrought by the new economy. Achieving these goals means creating policies that provide equal opportunities for women at work, for men in caregiving, and for families to weather unpredictable changes in their economic fortunes and

household composition. Though no society has fully attained these outcomes, the Scandinavian model comes closest by providing all citizens with a minimum economic floor, universal childcare (along with healthcare and education), and “use it or lose it” paid parental leave policies that encourage men’s caregiving and lessen the penalties for taking time out from work. As a package, such policies provide greater economic security, lessen work-care conflicts, and constrain inequality within and between families. They also begin to redress the imbalance that places a higher social and economic value on market work than on caregiving in its many forms.

The possibilities for creating such a work-care policy package—and the steps needed to achieve it—depend on political context, and the American political context poses daunting obstacles. Americans tend to possess a well-known distrust of broad-based government policies that many perceive as “interfering” unduly in the realm of private life, and the rise of family diversity has generated a strong backlash from those who wish to restore an earlier work-family order. Ironically, the rise of work-care conflicts also drains the time and energy of workers and parents who need new social supports, leaving them ill positioned to actively fight for policies that might ease their plight (Putnam, 2000).

Despite these roadblocks, however, we have seen a marked increase in support for gender flexibility and work-family integration, especially among younger generations (Pedulla and Thebaud, 2015). The growing support for paid family leave, nationally subsidized health insurance, and a higher minimum wage suggests that most Americans are ready to entertain transformative social policies. If the moment has arrived to overcome past political stalemates, then the first step in this process is to distinguish between the social changes that are unavoidable and the options available to shape social arrangements through collective choices. Economic uncertainty and relationship fragility, along with diversity and fluidity in family

forms, are integral aspects of inexorable economic and demographic shifts and thus not likely to reverse. These forces will continue, whether or not some pockets of American society wish it were not so. Yet the decline of secure jobs and stable traditional marriages does not determine the shape of the future. That depends on how—and if—social actors develop policies to address the new tensions these changes create between work and care.

As demographic and economic shifts integral to the new economy continue to transform the lives of successive generations, the conflicts between work and care will only become more apparent. Change is inescapable, and going back is not an option. Going forward, the choice is between new forms of inequality and insecurity or the creation of new supports for equalizing and integrating responsibility for work and care. The good news is that, alongside new insecurities and inequalities, the revolutionary shifts now taking place have created an unprecedented opportunity to achieve greater gender equality within families and to reverse the growing economic inequality between families. In a society as diverse and divided as the United States, the political challenge is to find common ground to forge a new social contract that realigns our work and caregiving structures so that workers and parents may pursue the work-care strategy they prefer without fear of falling down or falling apart.

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Endnotes

¹ I use the term “institutional” to refer both to both structural arrangements, such as the family wage that made it possible for an employed father to support a household on his income, and to cultural norms, such as the ideal of the “good provider” father and the “stay-at-home” mother.

² In today’s environment, women are almost as likely as men to hold a paid job and consequently face job insecurity. Job insecurity is on the rise at all class levels, but is especially high among wage workers in the service sector, where women are especially likely to find employment.

³ Rates of divorce and single parenthood are higher among the less affluent, but these rates have risen among all classes and economic levels. Cherlin (2014) provides an in-depth analysis of changes in the economic prospects of working-class families that make stable marriage difficult to obtain or sustain.

⁴ Recent research has confirmed my findings that aspirations for more egalitarian relationships and a more equal personal balance between work and family life are rising, especially among younger generations of women and men (Gerson, 2011; Pedulla and Thebaud, 2015).

⁵ The sample includes forty women, forty men, and one male-to-female transsexual, for a total of eighty-one respondents. The interviews gathered in-depth information about everyone’s past and current relationships, but none of the interviewees are in a relationship with another respondent. All of the names are pseudonyms.

⁶ A recent cover of *Time Magazine*, for example, showcased a young woman lounging on the floor with a cell phone in her hand and a headline above her that proclaimed, “The Me, Me, Me Generation” (Stein, 2013).

⁷ My rationale for combining singles who are childless with those who are rearing children is to highlight the options and dilemmas contemporary adults face if and when they cannot look to a partner (whether or not that partner is a legal spouse) to share the responsibilities of breadwinning or caretaking. By doing so, I do not mean to imply that being married—or in a committed relationship—is “better.” To the contrary, many adults, as my interviews show, face good reasons to remain single and perceive notable advantages in light of their other options. In this sense, I disagree with those who argue that marriage is an inherently preferable state. (See, for example, Waite and Gallagher, 2000.)

⁸ Jerry Jacobs and I considered the simultaneous rise of both time-demanding jobs and underemployment in *The Time Divide* (2004).

⁹ According to the Wang, Parker, and Taylor (2013), “breadwinner moms,” including mothers who are the sole or the primary source of their family’s income, now make up 40 percent of all households with children under age 18 (compared to 11 percent in 1960). Among this group, 37 percent are married mothers who earn more than their husbands, and 63 percent are single mothers.

¹⁰ In an important sense, “traditional” is a misnomer for the homemaker-breadwinner pattern, which emerged in the 19th century, reached its peak in the mid-20th century, and is now in steep decline. Yet the term has become so ubiquitous that it is difficult to avoid. Based on my findings in *The Unfinished Revolution*, I refer to a “neo-traditional” pattern that continues to stress

women's responsibility for care and men's for earning an income, even if the woman holds a paid job (Gerson, 2011).

¹¹ This is a clear example of "the motherhood penalty" that has been well documented in experimental and other quantitative studies (Correll et al., 2007; Budig and England, 2001).

¹² Recent studies show that fathers are likely to experience as much or more work-family conflict as mothers. A survey conducted by the Families and Work Institute reports, for example, that 60 percent of fathers in dual-earner couples report experiencing work-family conflict, compared to 47 percent of men (Aumann et al., 2011). This discrepancy is likely due to the pressure on fathers to work longer hours.

¹³ This percentage corresponds to the Wang, Parker, and Taylor's estimate that about 15 percent of households with children under eighteen contain a married couple in which the wife earns more.

¹⁴ Recent research continues to provide evidence that sustained stay-at-home motherhood holds longer-term perils. Frech and Damaske (2012) find, for example, that continuously employed mothers report better health at forty than mothers who were full-time homemakers and even for those who worked part-time or intermittently.