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RELATIONSHIPS

THE MAN TRAP



Traditional ideas of masculinity persist in the workplace, even though men are now expected to do more of the household chores – and work longer hours. Emily Bobrow investigates the trials of modern manhood

EMILY BOBROW



Nathan, a successful lawyer in Manhattan, hardly seems like a candidate for sympathy. His midtown office is smart, his suit is natty and he earns a decent living negotiating contracts and intellectual-property rights for players in the city's dynamic entertainment industry. Divorced and in his late 40s, he speaks fondly of his teenage children and is delighted with his fiancée, whom he will marry in a few weeks' time. His life is good, he assures me, and he is thriving in his career. So it is only with some hesitation that he admits something he has never discussed before, not even with his closest friends: "In the society that I live in, as a professional in New York City, I think it is easier being a woman than being a man."

This is not to say that being a woman is easy, Nathan hastily adds. He understands why many are frustrated by "the way they are expected to do it all, to have a career and be moms, it's a whole contradictory bundle of things." It's just that few women seem to notice that men, too, are struggling with a similarly burdensome bundle. "As the man, there's this tacit expectation that I'm going to be the earner and the person who kills bugs and fixes things

responsive to feelings and helpful with cooking and the children and those kinds of things.” Unlike his two long-term female partners, who pursued personally rewarding careers that offered enough flexibility to be available to their children, Nathan felt obliged to pursue work that offered a pay cheque large enough to support a family. “For the last 20-plus years I’ve been chained to a desk,” he says. “I’m in a profession that I’m happy to be in, but if I were a 20-year-old and told I could do anything I wanted with my life, I’m not sure I’d be doing this.” Nathan speaks enviously of female friends who decided to leave their professional careers when they became mothers. “They weren’t perceived as failures. If anything, they were told ‘That’s so great, you’re choosing to be a mom, that’s the most important thing in the world.’ That is not an option open to men.”

Nathan is not alone in his misgivings. Between 1977 and 2008 the percentage of American fathers in dual-earner couples who suffered from work-family conflicts jumped from 35% to 60%. The percentage of similarly vexed mothers grew only slightly, from 41% to 47%. Young men who get stuck supporting a family often report high levels of stress and sadness that they aren’t spending more time with their kids.

Because men – and especially white, professional men – occupy a uniquely privileged place in society, Nathan is reluctant to discuss his feelings openly. “I’ve never expressed this to any of the women in my life, and I think it’s best that I don’t,” he says. He is right to be wary. Most conversations about gender inequities characterise men like Nathan as part of the problem. Women around the world may be graduating from college at higher rates than men, but they have yet to achieve similar rates of success in their careers. The uneven burdens of parenthood appear to be to blame. Although men in rich countries spend far more time cooking, cleaning and child-rearing than ever before, their efforts continue to be dwarfed by those of women. In America, for example, mothers devote nearly twice as much time to child care and housework as their male partners. Even couples with grand plans for an egalitarian partnership typically revert to more traditional roles after the birth of a child. A new study of the time-diaries of highly educated dual-earning American couples found that new fathers enjoyed up to three-and-a-half times as much leisure as their female partners, as mothers who worked full time were still stuck with the lion’s share of unpaid labour.

feminists have long argued that men see little need to help out more at home because they already enjoy all the benefits of marriage and fatherhood without having to put in the extra work. “Even though it’s shifting drastically, marriage is still a pretty good deal for men in terms of the actual labour they capture from their wives,” says Scott Coltrane, a sociologist at the University of Oregon. Coltrane has found that after controlling for variables like age and education, married American men earn significantly more than their unmarried or divorced male peers, and their earnings go up with every child they have. Marriage seems to make men more productive at work because it allows them to outsource much of the housekeeping to their wives. Women, however, see no such “marriage premium”, and their earnings tend to go down with every new child. These parenthood effects can be seen across a variety of Western countries; they are greater in gender-conservative countries such as Austria and Germany, and weaker in more progressive countries, such as Sweden. This imbalance at home would seem to explain why the rate of female employment, after rising like gangbusters from the 1960s through the 1980s, slowed through the 1990s and has levelled off since the 2000s.

In order for more mothers to flourish in paid employment, more fathers need to pick up some of the slack at home. But, as Nathan’s frustration makes plain, this is not as simple as it sounds.

Women may not be moving as fast into male-dominated worlds as feminists would like, but they have moved much faster than men have into female-dominated ones. To understand better this asymmetry, we need to look more closely at the relative value we place on masculinity and femininity.

Most people assume that gender is simply a scheme for classifying differences or a template for guiding the behaviour of children. The reality is more pernicious. We typically prize the attributes we associate with men, such as competence, strength, virility and stoicism, and underestimate the qualities we associate with women, like warmth, tenderness and compassion. We usually see masculinity in terms of power and dominance and femininity in terms of softness and subservience. We defer to men and indulge women. In other words, gender is not merely a bunch of traits embodied by individuals, but a subtle stratification system that often advantages men and disadvantages women.

All of this means there are far more incentives for women to act masculine than there are for men to act feminine. Women who behave like their male colleagues may be disliked for being “pushy” or “bitchy”, but these penalties are offset by the fact that they are also likely to enjoy more power and greater financial rewards. When men adopt the jobs and behaviours associated with women, however, they typically experience a loss of status with fewer perks and more social sanctions, especially from other men. “It’s seen as an unknowable crisis if men want to step down,” explains Barbara Risman, head of the department of sociology at the University of Illinois in Chicago. “It’s not

men, because women are seen as less than men.

Once we see masculinity as an elite fraternity that confers special privileges, it becomes clearer why its membership is so strictly policed. Not every man qualifies. The hazing begins early. We teach girls that they can be whatever they want to be, and wipe their tears away when they struggle. But we teach boys that they need to toughen up, shake it off and take things “like a man”. Parents are often charmed when their young girls eschew dolls and dresses to play sport and build things, as if their daughters are already learning how to “lean in” at the playground. But many find it unsettling when their young boys want to trade a football for a tutu.

As these children grow older, boys will often go to punishing lengths to prove their masculinity to each other, whereas girls enjoy a much wider gamut of acceptable behaviour. “If we’re keeping score about who has it worse, girls actually have it much better when it comes to the definition of femininity,” says Lisa Damour, a psychologist who works closely with adolescents. “You can be a tomboy and that’s cool. You can be into make-up and that’s cool. But boys operate in an exceedingly narrow margin for what’s considered masculine.” When boys stray from this script, they typically get bullied or abused. Their status as men is at once so valuable and so precarious that it must be won over and over again.



Anyone who presumes that grown men get to leave these schoolyard taunts behind did not pay enough attention to America’s recent presidential election. Alas, the definition of manliness is hardly less strict for grown-ups. For many men, the workplace is merely the latest proving ground for waging a zero-sum defence of their alpha status. “Many professional workplaces involve a constant negotiation among men to establish a pecking order,” says Joan Williams, a feminist legal scholar and the founding

CALIFORNIA HASTINGS COLLEGE OF THE LAW. “WORKING LONG hours is the way to prove that yours is longest – we’re talking schedules here – then most men are going to feel pressure to do that.”

Among professionals, fathers report being just as frustrated with their working hours as mothers, and are often just as distressed about not spending enough time with their children. But uncertainty over how other men will view them makes them less likely to take advantage of child-friendly policies, and far more resistant to becoming stay-at-home parents themselves. In a recent survey of millennial men, Sarah Thébaud of the University of California, Santa Barbara, and David S. Pedulla of the University of Texas at Austin found that men were more inclined to use flexibility benefits when they believed their male colleagues would do the same. Other studies of paternity-leave policies have found that men take the benefit only when it is clearly meant for men and other fathers are using it too. A study in Norway, for example, found that men were far more likely to take leave if their brothers or male co-workers had taken it already.

Otherwise most men assume that even gender-neutral flexibility policies are meant for women, and that if they take advantage of them, they will incur their colleagues’ disdain. Many are haunted by the views of colleagues like Chase, a father in his late 40s who is a partner at an international law firm in Chicago. “When I see a woman who has children and I know she and her husband are working like crazy, that concerns me for the sake of the kids,” he says. “But when I see stay-at-home dads, I don’t think very highly of them. Call it sexist, call it whatever you want, but I think it’s kind of wimpy to do that. It’s checking out, not being in the game, not fighting for success. Those are the traits I value.”

Basically, when mothers pull back from work for child-care reasons, they may earn less money but they are still seen as good women. When fathers do the same, they are often seen as lesser men. “The masculine mystique has receded less than the fem mystique,” observes Stephanie Coontz, a historian of marriage and the family at Evergreen State College. “Men are still dealing with tremendous pressure to be a man.” And, in the workplace, the pressure has been increasing.

Eric, a corporate litigator at a big law firm in Philadelphia, says the hustle to make partner keeps him at the office around 50 hours a week. “The goal-posts keep moving,” he says with a sigh. With a mortgage, two young children in private school and a wife who decided to stay at home to raise them (her own salary as an attorney barely covered the cost of a nanny), he admits he feels a bit “stuck”. “No one tells you how these things work out in real life. Then you suddenly find yourself on the treadmill and you just gotta keep going.” In an ideal world he would split the parenting and housework evenly with his wife, he says, but his job makes this impossible. He recalls having to miss a recent parent-teacher conference because of a scheduled call with a client. “I didn’t even bother to say I had a conflict because I

MANAGEMENT.

Many jobs have grown more demanding in recent decades. Low earners often juggle just-in-time schedules that change weekly and with little notice. High-earning professionals are expected to put in longer hours than ever before, toiling in offices long into the night. In 1979 16% of salaried American workers punched in at least 50 hours a week. By 2014 that number was 21%.

Research from Youngjoo Cha of Indiana University and Kim Weeden of Cornell has found that since the 1990s the workers who stay shackled to their desks the longest tend to be rewarded with the highest wages and the most promotions. Previously, those who worked long hours tended to be low earners; now, the reverse is true. An average man in a typical full-time job made around \$26 an hour in 2014; those working at least 50 hours a week earned nearly \$33.

Increasingly punishing expectations at work reinforce a more gendered division of labour at home. They encourage women to shift into part-time employment, and men to rely on women to look after the children. Many employers also presume from the outset that mothers will – and should – put their families first, and that sprogs invariably deter women from climbing the corporate ladder. This helps explain why economists have found that in America having one child reduces a woman's earnings by roughly 6%; having two depresses them by 15%. By contrast, fatherhood spurs men to work around 80 more hours a year, on average, which bumps up men's earnings by around 6%; this bonus is largest among highly educated professionals. It hardly seems to matter that between 1965 and 2000 men doubled the time they spent changing nappies and keeping house. Mothers often work fewer hours than they would prefer, and fathers work longer hours than they would like.

Many fathers feel obliged to live up to their bosses' demands in part because breadwinning, and being a good provider more generally, is still often seen as a fundamental feature of fatherhood. Even couples who meet at Harvard Business School can find themselves navigating an awkward and unspoken expectation that the man will earn more. Sean Grover, a therapist in Manhattan who is writing a book about the bumpy transition into parenthood, says that "very traditional ideas begin to resurface" when some career-minded young women start to think about settling down. "When we scratch the surface, they confess they want someone to take care of them, someone who can provide for them. It's something we really wrestle with."

These expectations are shifting rapidly: only 28% of respondents to a 2013 Pew Research survey in America agreed with the statement, "It's generally better for a marriage if the husband earns more than his wife", down from 40% in 1997. But few are completely impervious to centuries of socialisation. Steve, a screenwriter in his early 40s in Brooklyn, says it was "definitely weird" when he earned half what his wife made during their first years of marriage. "We're all modern and progressive and we want

sometimes say, you're supposed to be taking care of us. This tension was subtle, he adds, and they never had real money problems. "But whenever things got to her she'd play a card that it wasn't supposed to be her problem because she's the wife. For a man there's no card like that."



Many men also worry that their appeal to their partners is wrapped up in their professional success. Robert, a 32-year-old digital-media entrepreneur in San Francisco, says he envies friends who are a bit more frugal with their money. "If we were more prudent, then maybe I wouldn't have to work so hard," he says. "But it's hard to communicate that when your fiancée sees you as a great success who's providing for us."

Women rightly complain that they are often shunted onto a mommy track with lower wages, fewer promotions and less prestige, whether they like it or not. But many men are just as frustrated by the elusiveness of a daddy track. Brian, a TV presenter in his late 30s in New Jersey, says that when he wanted to take time off after the birth of his second child, "it was a nightmare just trying to figure out what I was entitled to. It's so rare for anyone to take any kind of paternity leave that no one knew how it worked." He finally discovered he could use some of his sick days. He suspects few men take advantage of this policy "because they think it's somehow frowned upon".

His colleagues are right to be cautious. Research shows that parents who take family leave or request a flexible schedule to tend to young children often face harsh penalties, like lower long-term earnings, fewer promotions and poorer performance reviews. Mothers suffer from this too, but fathers often get an extra hit for defying cultural expectations. Studies show that both men and women tend to see fathers who ask for paternity leave as weak and inadequate. A survey of professional workers in Australia found that men are twice as likely as women to have their

manager telling him that part time is traditionally only something we make work for women.” Research on middle-class workers in America found that fathers who are open about their child-care responsibilities are often bullied and harassed by their colleagues for not being manly enough. More than a third of 1,000 American male respondents in a recent Deloitte survey said taking paternity leave would “jeopardise their position” at work. Given this stigma, it is perhaps unsurprising that nearly three-quarters of the workers who have taken advantage of California’s law to provide paid leave to new parents are women.

Patrick, a broadcast journalist in Atlanta in his early 40s, learned early in his career not to expect his employer to make allowances for his domestic duties. His wife, an obstetrician-gynaecologist, was working a double shift at the hospital, so he had to shoulder much of the child care for their three young children. When he tried to explain to his producer why he wasn’t able to work over the weekend, he received a chilling response: “He said ‘Patrick, everyone has a family. Nobody cares about yours.’” It’s hard to imagine a male manager saying that to a woman.

Some fathers privately admit that their long hours at the office leave them unsure of their role at home. “If I’ve been travelling or I’ve been on trial and working 7am to midnight every night six days a week, my wife says it’s actually more stressful when I’m back because she has her routine,” says Eric. “Sometimes you feel like a visitor in your own house.”

Most women think that men cling to traditional male roles because it benefits them. Certainly ascending a professional ladder offers more money, power and status than chugging along on a mommy track. But these perks come at a price. In a recent 15-year survey of married American men and women between the ages of 18 and 32, Christin Munsch of the University of Connecticut found that men typically reported being in the best health during the years they split the burdens of breadwinning with their partners. As these men assumed more financial responsibility relative to their wives, their health and wellbeing declined. Often they suffered from the worst health and the most anxiety when their wives were out of the labour force entirely.

More egalitarian marriages seem to work better. A recent study of data gathered in 2006 found that couples with a more equitable approach to housework were happier with their marriages and reported having more and better sex than those who divided things along more traditional lines. Fathers who take on more caregiving responsibilities not only tend to be more content and feel closer to their partners and children, but also appear to live longer. A study of over 72,000 Swedish men who had a child between 1988 and 1989 found that fathers who took between 30 and 60 days of paternity leave had a 24% lower risk of dying by 2008 than those who took no leave. The Swedish authors speculate that fathers who were more involved at home were less inclined to engage in risky behaviour to prove their manliness.

more balanced relationships. Yet they are not, by and large, getting them. Outmoded notions of how people should behave, combined with the pressure to spend long hours in the office, seem to be getting in the way. This will be no surprise to the many mothers who have long complained about the difficulty of “having it all”. But the pressures faced by fathers are a less familiar topic. Indeed, most men are wary of discussing these things publicly. This is partly because they know their gripes are often eclipsed by those of women. But they also keep mum because complaining about the burdens of manhood breaches an unspoken code of manliness. “It’s such a taboo subject, like talking about affirmative action,” says Jesse, a writer in his late 40s with two sons. “In my bubble of cosmopolitan Minneapolis, the focus is on female development. We don’t talk about men.”

But such talk is necessary if couples hope to defy cultural and economic expectations to forge more equal partnerships. “Women are asking for solidarity and empathy from men, and they deserve it,” says Patrick in Atlanta. “But I wish there was a little more solidarity and empathy for men.”

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EMILY BOBROW

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AMERICANSTUDENT - MAY 23RD 2017

Having delved provisionally into the study of American Masculinities, I found this article to be very insightful. I'm bemused at how this is being viewed as an indictment of feminism or a claim that women it have it easier now than men as I think the author makes clear she aligns with a number of traditionally held feminist views. Many of the critics below here are undoubtedly familiar with the concept of "hegemonic masculinity" and its associated contributions to the marginalization of others based on race, gender, etc. The author's intent, by my read, is to further explore ways in which this hegemonic view of masculinity also has a negative effect on some of its supposed beneficiaries - middle and upper class white males - and to support an effort to deconstruct it. To state the obvious, not every member of a dominant group is complicit with its own hegemony. Bobrow, for her efforts, does well to bring some insight to those who might feel they have only something lose in the dissolution of traditional masculinity by offering the benefits of a healthier view on gender. I would hope the readers bemoaning her over her allegedly ignoring race and other issues realize that any truly inclusive paradigm would also include heterosexual white males. The intersection of race and masculinity, or class and masculinity for that matter, would likely be beyond the scope of this article, but to view its omission as ignorance of it does little more than deprive the reader of some well-thought analysis of work and family dynamics in light of changing views on gender.

SARAH SHELL TEAGUE - MAY 22ND 2017

Emily Bobrow necessarily tiptoes through the thistles, as it were, describing the plight of modern men, still the highest wage earners. Several will probably point out that stay-at-home mothers are a relatively recent phenomenon; for centuries women have worked alongside their husbands, children or not, and were paid in sweet potatoes, fresh butter, eggs, the fruit of their labor. And stay-at-home mothers have had their own challenges with social status. How many readers would prefer to sit by a stay-at-home mother at an important business dinner? I was a stay-at-home mother of three sons who are now 31, 29, and 28. Nobody's eyes brightened up with interest at my life when I answered the question, "What do you do?" I also earned a PhD in English and work now as the associate editor for a couple of local tourism/quality of life quarterlies in a rural area of the southern United States. I am paid \$500 an issue. The key is to own the choice made. If you have to work those 60-hour weeks to earn partner and provide the best for your family, accept it's the hand you were dealt and be grateful for the opportunity. If you choose to take paternity leave and receive subtle (or not) negative pressure at work, bear in mind the added time with and input into your childrens' lives and be grateful for the opportunity. If the bulk of domestic cares falls to you and the situation isn't remediable, affirm that your contribution is important. You don't have to be at the top of the wage-earning heap or have a certain chromosomal composition to have a rich life. Having it all—all the time—for males or females is an illusion that should be shelved next to alchemy and the fountain of youth.
www.sarahshellteague.net

HOOPER REES - MAY 22ND 2017

Personally I think this is an excellent article and clearly illustrates the challenges that face men in a postmodern world. The high percentage of male suicides suggests that there is a void between how men feel and how they express themselves. It is well known that men live behind a 'mask'. We know that greater diversity and equality has significant economic value, which is why companies are committed to change. I wonder how long it will take companies to understand the cost of ignoring men? I run a coaching programme specifically designed for men, with the expressed aim of helping organisations meet the challenges as illustrated. This has huge benefits for employee welfare but most significantly for enhancing corporate culture, including greater inclusive leadership, which means it is in all our interests to support men.

CRASHIEPOO - MAY 21ST 2017

The commentators here are incredibly insensitive. The gist of everyone's criticism seems to be "How dare he voice his own issues, ours are way worse!"

western man is suffering as much as everyone else. Suffering has a currency, clearly. Did the author consider that masculinity serves white hetero males more than it serves anyone else, in fact they are the group with the most power in the world? That this power has been built on and through centuries of racism and sexism? That men then have to approximate the ideal that gives them this power is not pitiful or worthy of pity. What is most important is that ideal is most harmful for those who cannot approximate this ideal at all. Queer, non-male gendered folks are some of those groups. But also men in the rest of the world who have been colonized by the white western man and can never be considered truly equal. Men whose gender roles were formed by the colonizer himself and who now more than ever is isolated in a culture that doesn't allow connection in any other way. Thus a more thoughtful discussion would be to show how masculinity is an unperformable ideal that keeps men in power and harms everyone else who cannot approximate it as they can. There are real problems going on in the world - this article has ignored problems of colonialism, slavery, racism, sexism etc and all the systems of power that keep hetero white men the most powerful group and their ideal of masculinity the benchmark for all other groups in the public spheres. Instead, it superficially asks us to feel sorry for powerful men, equating their suffering with the rest of our suffering, minimizing any discussion of power or context (why the ideal exists in the first place). It is a shame that the economist would publish such an ill researched and biased piece.

FRANKLY - MAY 19TH 2017

a problem with the limited paths perceived by men - especially for emotional connection - is their behaviour can then become over-compensating and excessive. today in WalMart I observed a young sister and brother - perhaps 7 and 9yo - the girl pushing a trolley in the aisle, the brother deliberately pushing/blocking/slowing the trolley - I imagine that as a boy he felt he lacked emotional language so resorted to physical force - the smaller girl, living with it, just let him continue to push/bully her - after all, he was her respected big brother - setting an example for how she might expect males to behave - when she grows up.

HEATHER - MAY 18TH 2017

Whaaahhhh! Being a man is so hard! There isn't a guidebook to how to do it right! Whaaaaahhhhhh!

CLEMKE - MAY 17TH 2017

I find the tone and focus of articles like this very off putting. I believe that traditional gender norms make life less happy for both members of the couple, for the obvious reason that both members feel compelled to do things rather than making their own choices. However, I think the suggestions from this article that it is easier to be a woman in a mans world than a man in a woman's world are quite dubious. This article is completely focused on upper middle class professionals (which in and of itself is a group of people who have too many articles written about them compared to their population size) who ultimately have tons of choices in their lives. They are not struggling to feed their children or keep a roof over their heads, and if they want to lead a different life they need to look inward becuasd they (men or women) have all the reasources needed to do so. I will note I found it a particular oversight to suggest women don't face large scale shaming for staying in the workforce after having children. I have seen this large and small, from men and women, in my "white collar" professional job. Particularly the quote in the article where a manager tells a man something like "everyone has a family it's not our problem" and the author suggests no one would say this to a woman! I have personally heard very similar things said to women and have heard about countless things like this being said to professional women, on top of them being constantly as questioned by their peers and coworkers about their parenting (implying that they can't be good parents when working so much). I completely believe that the rampant uptick in hours worked in many professional careers is absurd and harms everyone (man or woman, with children or no) because none of us are built to work endlessly. Many studies have shown this doesn't even produce better outcomes! Ultimately, the author misses the point. We should be talking about what sort of society we want to create for men, women, families, and all members of the community rather than this "who has it worse" between men and women. Who has it worse? Anyone not in the capital class. And these upper middle class white collar professionals (of either gender) certainly don't have it anywhere near the worse in this country, so I'm a little tired of hearing about their self inflicted woes and lack of introspection.