Expansionist Theory Expanded: Integrating Sociological and Psychological Perspectives on Gender, Work, and Family Change

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The shift from a social order organized around separate spheres for women and men to one in which American women comprise half the paid labor force is clearly one of the major revolutions of our time. In a span of several decades, this revolution has reshaped the demographic landscape and upended once taken-for-granted arguments that caretaking mothers and breadwinning fathers provide the optimal environment for promoting psychological well-being. Amid this rapidly developing—but far from finished—gender revolution, Barnett and Hyde's Expansionist Theory was among the first to argue that, contrary to prevailing views, mothers, fathers, and children *benefit* when women and men engage in multiple tasks as parents, workers, and partners (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). If this argument seems less controversial today, that is only because it was so prescient when first formulated.

Though the expansionist perspective is closer to conventional wisdom today, it would be a mistake to conclude that the theories it challenged no longer hold sway. In important respects, the counterargument—that mothers and their families are harmed by the expansion of women's commitments to include paid work along with unpaid caretaking—continues to inform social theory and policy. Gender shifts remain a source of heated debate, and many dimensions of the gender revolution appear stalled. It is thus both timely and important to assess the early contributions of the expansionist perspective, take stock of its relevance at this historical juncture, and consider its theoretical potential going forward.

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Contributions and Unresolved Issues

In 2001, when Barnett and Hyde proposed their theory, prevailing approaches tended to focus on the difficulties women and their households encountered when they tried to combine parenting with paid work. Even when women's gains were acknowledged, journalistic accounts typically depicted harried working mothers barely able to cope with the stresses of juggling jobs, housework, and childcare. Academic research bolstered this view by providing compelling analyses of the costs incurred when mothers had to add a first shift of paid work onto a second shift of domestic duties (Hochschild & Machung, 1989). While these arguments were not inaccurate, they provided only a partial truth that overlooked the considerable benefits that strong employment ties offered women and their families. The expansionist perspective thus offered an important corrective. It countered the bleak picture of stressed mothers and neglected children, recognized the psychological and social benefits of women's move away from a life defined by domesticity, and questioned gender stereotypes based on an assumption of dichotomous differences between women and men (Epstein, 1988). In contrast to classical theories (Parsons & Bales, 1954; Becker, 1981), which argued in favor of gender specialization, and feminist critiques, which emphasized women's "dual burden," Barnett and Hyde pointed to the advantages of blending work and care—for creating more egalitarian gender relationships as well as promoting women's self-esteem and psychological well-being.

The expansionist argument provided a rebuttal to the "bad news" take on social change and offered a powerful counter-narrative that still resonates today. Now that 40% of the US households with children depend on a breadwinning mother, the issues Barnett and Hyde addressed are more pertinent than ever (Wang, Parker, & Taylor, 2013). Yet the rise of women breadwinners makes it even more important to tackle the issues left unresolved. What, for example, are the links between women's expanding commitments and the structure of gender inequality? How do women and men manage the expansion of their public and private responsibilities in the context of growing institutional conflicts between home and work? Perhaps most important, is the concept of roles too rooted in a functionalist paradigm to account for the changing dynamics of gender relationships? For example, the 2010 style guide for *Gender & Society*, a top-ranked journal focused on the study of gender, asks authors to refrain from using the term "gender role" because it signals "an individualist approach" that presumes static roles rather than a dynamic process in which gender is created within interactions and institutional structures (Britton, 2010). For all these reasons, this is a good moment to rethink—and expand—the expansionist argument.

Adding a Sociological Perspective

Taking off from the original insight that pursuing a life path that encompasses both working and caring is psychologically enriching, today's theoretical challenge is to delineate the conditions under which these often conflicting spheres can be reconciled. What social arrangements make it possible to integrate paid work with unpaid caretaking or, alternatively, create obstacles and conflicts that put integration out of reach? In Barnett and Hyde's framework, this means focusing attention on the "conditions that moderate effects" (Barnett & Hyde, 2001, p. 4). From my perspective as a sociologist, this means paying attention to the varying social contexts and unequal social resources that shape people's ability to fashion satisfying strategies for blending work and care. How and why do work and family institutions intersect to create conflicts and contradictions in the lives of workers and parents? How do women and men respond to these socially structured dilemmas as they build their lives over time? What are the social factors and forces that shape the development of varying work–family trajectories? These questions prompt us to investigate both the *social conditions* that either help or hinder beneficial psychological outcomes and the *action strategies* that shape the contours of change.

My research has tackled these questions through a series of studies examining the life paths and work–family strategies of several generations of women and men, including those who pioneered the gender revolution in the 1970s and 1980s, those who came of age in the 1990s and 2000s and grew up in changing families, and those who are now grappling with the growing time demands, economic uncertainties, and relationship fluidity of the new economy. These studies have confirmed the core argument of expansionist theory that women, men, and children have largely benefitted from the growth of employed mothers and more involved fathers. Using the term "gender flexibility" rather than "multiple roles" to convey the fluid, changing nature of people's work and family commitments, I have found that families with flexible arrangements for meeting work and care responsibilities are better equipped to weather the challenges of unpredictable change in parents' job prospects, marital commitments, and financial fortunes. However, my findings also point to a set of institutional obstacles and social inequalities that make an equal blending of work and care very difficult to attain. Some examples from this research illustrate both the attractions of gender flexibility and the obstacles to achieving it.

The Gap Between Ideals and Options

In my study of a group I call "the children of the gender revolution," I interviewed young adults aged 18–32 about their experiences growing up in an era of changing family structures and gender relationships (Gerson, 2011). These interviews explored views on their parents' choices as well as their own aspirations and plans. These young adults reached conclusions that support the expansionist view. Among

those who grew up in a dual-earning home where parents shared breadwinning and caretaking, more than three-fourths believed their parents had chosen the best option. Having two work-committed parents not only provided increased economic resources but also promoted marriages that seemed more egalitarian and satisfying. In contrast, among those reared in homes where caretaking mothers had negligible ties to paid work and breadwinning while fathers remained distant from caretaking, only about a half concluded this was the best arrangement. When domesticity undermined a mother's satisfaction or threatened the family's economic security, children wished their mothers had pursued stronger ties to paid work. Equally telling, those who grew up in a single-parent home fared much better when their custodial parent, usually a mother, was able to meet the dual responsibilities of breadwinning and caretaking.

Given these findings, it is no surprise that most of these young adults hoped to combine marriage, work, and parenting in their own lives. Whether reared in a traditional, dual-earning, or single-parent household, the overwhelming majority of women and men wanted a committed bond where both paid work and family caretaking are shared. Three-fourths of those who grew up in a dual-earner home wanted to share breadwinning and caretaking with a partner. So did more than two-thirds of those from more traditional homes, and close to nine-tenths of those with single parents. Equally important, four-fifths of women hoped to create an egalitarian relationship, and so did two-thirds of the men. Women and men are converging in their view that it is desirable to share work and care.

Despite their preferences, however, most expressed skepticism about the ability to create an egalitarian partnership. Having watched their parents and other adults cope with long working hours, family-unfriendly workplaces, and pressures to be a perfect parent, they doubted they would have the resources to overcome these obstacles. Instead, they were preparing to settle for second-best options. These fallback strategies fall substantially short of most people's ideals, but they take a different form for women and men. Almost three-fourths of women—regardless of their class, race, or ethnic background—were reluctant to surrender their autonomy in a traditional marriage; attentive to the financial and emotional vulnerabilities facing single mothers, they were determined to seek self-reliance through paid work, whether or not they were in a committed relationship.

Young men, in contrast, were concerned about their capacity to succeed—or at least survive—economically. Facing time-demanding workplaces, they were more inclined to fall back on a modified traditionalism that recognizes a mother's right (and need) to work but puts a man's career first. Since the requirements of work collide with the needs of children, these men reasoned, they had little choice but to rely on someone else to be the primary caretaker, even if their partner held a paid job. Ultimately, men's perceived need to protect their economic prospects and identities as earners collides with women's growing desire for equality and financial self-sufficiency.

The gender divide between women's search for self-reliance and men's hope to succeed in an increasingly insecure marketplace is real. It contributes to the persistence of family arrangements that leave most women as primary caretakers even

when they work, and most men as secondary caretakers even if they are involved fathers. However, the persistence of these gender boundaries does not reflect the dominant ideals of most contemporary women or men. They stem instead from the intractable structural and cultural barriers to equality.

The Rise of Diverse Family Strategies

What happens when early ideals and plans must give way to actual choices? To find out how women and men are fashioning strategies of work and care in the new century, I have been interviewing adults aged 35–46, when pressures to build a family life and establish an occupational base are most intense (Gerson, 2015). These adults are working at a variety of jobs (from low-wage service work to hi-tech and professional occupations) and living in an array of family situations, including singles and married and cohabiting couples (both straight and gay). Like their younger counterparts, the majority prefers to combine and share paid work and parenting; yet their strategies typically fall short of this goal, albeit in different ways.

About half the interviewees were engaged in strategies that emphasize each partner's specialization in either breadwinning or caretaking. About a third practiced a form of "contemporary traditionalism," where fathers take responsibility for providing a family's financial base and mothers for unpaid domestic care; but even in these cases, most mothers worked part-time or hoped to return to work as soon as they were able. Another 15% also divided work and care, but did so by reversing traditional gender assignments. These "reversed" (heterosexual) couples depended on a woman's steady paycheck, leaving husbands to care for the children while seeking work they deem acceptable. All of these couples, whether they apportioned tasks in a gender-traditional or gender-transgressive way, were prompted—indeed, forced—to divide responsibility for work and care. The high demands of work and parenting, along with economic insecurities that left primary earners putting in excessive hours and primary caretakers depending on a partner's paycheck, prompted these couples to segment their lives and their relationships despite a preference for a more balanced arrangement.

The rest of my respondents, however, had neither opted nor been pushed to divide work and care with a partner. Instead, they had either avoided childbearing altogether, were left to support and rear a child on their own, or managed to share equally with a partner. Singles living on their own without a partner, including some who are single mothers, comprise about a third of this group. (One-quarter of today's adults may never marry and one-third of households with children are headed by a single parent, usually a mother according to Wang and Parker (2014)). Faced with very different challenges than their married peers, these single respondents were coping with either too few or too many responsibilities. In the wake of job setbacks and relationship difficulties, most single men were wary of commitment and worried that their lack of financial stability left them "unmarriageable" (Wilson, 1987; Edin & Kefelas, 2005). Single women, in contrast, were generally confi-

dent about their ability to support themselves, but they were torn between forgoing motherhood altogether or taking on the task of supporting and rearing a child without the help of a committed partner. These singles face different tradeoffs. Childless singles are not in a position of juggling work and parenthood, but this does not mean they would necessarily prefer to take on more. At the other end of the spectrum, single mothers (and in some cases, single fathers) have little choice but to take on multiple responsibilities, but the circumstances in which they do so pose daunting challenges.

Finally, about 20% of respondents were taking conscious steps to share work and care equally, often against the odds. These "egalitarians" have come closer than any other group to blending work and family. They are thus in the best position to demonstrate the benefits predicted by Barnett and Hyde, and in important respects, they do. Yet, these couples also find themselves engaged in an ongoing balancing act, torn between time-demanding jobs and intensive parenting norms. Faced with this clash, some decided to forgo parenthood to preserve a measure of personal autonomy while maintaining an equal relationship with two taxing jobs. Others chose to have children, sacrificing sleep and personal time to carve out enough time for childcare while also striving to maintain a toehold at work.

Some egalitarian couples, albeit a minority, exemplify the benefits forecast by the expansionist framework. Tellingly, they enjoyed a set of institutional and social supports that made it possible to attain the balance others found illusive. These supports include access to secure, flexible work (for both partners) and a stable network of paid and unpaid caretakers. Such supports at home and on the job allowed mothers and fathers to share work and care, without taxing their personal well-being or the well-being of their relationships. The challenge for all of these egalitarian couples is to sustain their efforts despite the obstacles and difficulties they encounter.

As a whole, all of these patterns show how today's uncertain occupational and family terrain compel women and men to pursue a diverse, often shifting set of work–family strategies. The erosion of predictable work paths in both professional and lower-wage jobs has undermined families' financial security (Kalleberg 2011), while the expansion of options in intimate relationships has created alternatives to permanent marriage (Cohen, 2014; Livingston, 2014). The diverse strategies pursued by my respondents reflect the different contingencies they faced. However, everyone confronted an intractable dilemma of some kind, and everyone needs the options and resources that will help them resolve their specific work–family dilemmas in the way they deem best.

Expanding the Theoretical and Policy Agenda

Developments of the last decade have confirmed the core argument of expansionist theory. Surveys routinely show dwindling support for gender-divided arrangements, with an historic low of 31.7% agreeing in 2012 with the statement that families are better off "when the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes

care of the home" (Cotter, Hermsen, & Vanneman, 2011). Indeed, when people are offered a scenario in which a mother with a preschool child is satisfied with her job, satisfied with her childcare arrangement, and the family depends on her income, 75.5% say a married mother should stay at a full-time job and 92% say a single mother should stay at a full-time job (Jacobs & Gerson, 2014). Since new generations are especially likely to support more balanced, equitable work–family integrations, we can expect this trend to continue.

However, the same social shifts that have increased support for more flexible notions of gender and more balanced divisions of paid work and family care have also raised new theoretical questions and policy challenges. As family forms and gender relationships diversify, we need to unpack the meaning of "doing it all." Different types of households create different types of dilemmas and conflicts. Dual-earners, for example, meet their families work and caretaking needs in varied ways. They may all have two employed parents, but their household division of labor can take a neo-traditional, reversed, or egalitarian form. Singles, too, are a varied group, with single parents—primarily women—responsible for both care and economic support and childless singles with no such responsibilities. To complicate matters further, people may move from one category to another as their relationship and job statuses change.

Amid this new family and gender complexity, theoretical analyses need to distinguish between "doing it all" and "having it all." Though often used interchangeably, these phrases have quite different meanings. "Doing it all" is a behavioral measure, while "having it all" implies a psychological state. Feeling satisfied depends, in turn, on possessing enough social supports so that the benefits outweigh the drawbacks. Combining paid work and unpaid caretaking is a growing necessity, but there is no guarantee that people will deem it beneficial. The pressing theoretical task is thus to specify the social contexts and conditions that make it possible—or difficult—to blend work and care in satisfying, uplifting ways.

Addressing these theoretical questions raises important policy questions as well. Even the most beneficial social changes are bound to create new challenges, and the gender revolution is no exception. The decline of separate spheres holds manifold benefits for women, men, and children, but it has also led to new institutional conflicts between family and work and new personal dilemmas about to integrate public and private pursuits. Indeed, even as the need to combine paid work and unpaid dependent care rises, the norms and structures of work and parenting continue to grow more stringent and demanding. "Ideal worker" norms, which presume an employee will put his or her job before all else, are stronger than ever (Williams, 2000; Moen & Roehling, 2004), and caretaking norms continue to expect parents to provide intensive care with little public support (Gornick & Myers, 2009; Hays, 1996; Heymann & Beem, 2005).

As the gender revolution continues to unfold, we face an unprecedented opportunity to create the social supports—such as flexibility and economic security in job and career paths, paid parental leave, affordable high-quality childcare, and equal opportunities for women and parents of all stripes. Enacting these policies will not only insure that the benefits of blending work and caretaking outweigh the

costs; it will also meet the economic and emotional needs of twenty-first-century families. If, however, we fail to restructure our institutions of work and care, then time-demanding workplaces and privatized caretaking structures will continue to exact costs, pose difficult tradeoffs, and threaten to undermine the benefits that integrating work and caretaking provides. I am confident that Barnett and Hyde would agree.

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