The Thirty Hour Day: Law and MBA Student Responses to Work–Family Dilemmas

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Abstract

Utilizing interviews with 37 law students and 42 business students, I examine the expectations and strategies of elite professional students to dilemmas posed by the balance of work and family.

Students support a strong family-oriented gender ideology in which they claim that family is more important than career. However, the respondents plan for careers with greedy institutions with long hours, commutes, and travel, precluding the possibility of such a commitment to family and

children. I argue that an examination of student expectations of the work-family balance reflects the continuing role that gender plays as an organizing societal frame, even more so than social class.

Despite the advances women have made in these elite occupations, then, gender is rewritten into interactional and institutional arrangements in ways that constrain professional occupational choices for both men and women.

Introduction

“Children never fit anywhere, so we aren't worried about it. We're just trying to have kids.

There is no way you try to make kids fit into your plans, you have kids and then the rest of your plans fit into them.” (second-year male law student)

In this analysis, I examine the ways elite law and business school students talk about balancing work and family. Most of the men and women wanted children and supported a family-oriented gender ideology where they claimed that family was more important than career. Many also subscribed to what Hays refers to as “intensive mothering” (1996) – a belief that parents (principally mothers) should spend an enormous amount of time, money, and physical and emotional energy raising their children. However, the reality of these students’ lives after graduating precluded the possibility of such a commitment. They prepared for (and later entered) careers that require intensive full-time professional dedication to “greedy institutions” (Coser 1974) – primarily large corporate law firms, nationally renowned consulting firms, Wall Street investment banks, and Fortune 500 companies. Despite changes in the gender composition of elite professional occupations, I argue that this contradiction, what students think of as workable solutions, and the differences between men and women reflect the continuing role that gender plays as an organizing societal frame.

Hays’ concept of “intensive mothering” is entirely inconsistent with the market-based ideology that reigns in the high-powered investment banking, consulting, and corporate law careers that students aspire to by virtue of attending “Graham University,” which boasts top professional programs in both business and law. Intensive mothering employs the ideology that children are innocent and priceless, that child-rearing is costly and intensive (indeed, itself, “greedy”), and that children are best served by being raised by individual mothers who provide expert-laden care and

constant attention to their children (Hays 1998, 21). Such mothering involves a stay-at-home parent otherwise unoccupied.

However, Hay's analysis emphasizes that maintaining an *ideology* of intensive parenting is more important than actual behavior, because working women are no less committed to intensive mothering than women not in the labor force. Hays reports, "Professional-class and affluent paid-working mothers are the group most likely to say that home and children are more important and rewarding than careers; nearly three-fourths of them respond this way," as compared to a quarter of stay-at-home mothers (1998, 221). Although the sample is small, Hays' finding suggest that there is a direct relationship between intensive mothering and social class, such that "ideologically speaking, at least, home and children actually seem to become more important to a mother the more time she spends away from them" (150). Hays proposes that women, because they are not central to the market, would never argue solely for personal profit and the efficient raising of children in day care centers. But surely fathers, even professionals more central to the marketplace, do not find these arguments socially palatable either.

If social class were the only organizing frame, we might expect women in professional programs to be career-intensive individuals and leave mothering to others. They would adopt what Blair-Loy refers to as a work schema (2003), or Moen and Roehling the "career mystique" – the importance, both cultural and institutional, placed on long hours, continuous employment, and lockstep arrangements for advancement (2005). However, if gender is the primary frame for coordinating decisions and subsequent behavior, then even as options changes institutionally for women – attending top law and MBA programs, becoming professionals at almost equal rates to men, moving into well-paid associate and corporate positions – gender inequality is rewritten into social positions "as they emerge," contributing to continuing inequality (Ridgeway 2007, 2009; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). I show this process during professional socialization as students make decisions that will affect the balance of work and family.

As a number of recent feminist scholars show, gender continues to organize all elements of a society (Risman 1998). Economic institutions such as business schools or law firms now accommodate women's expanding roles – more women become lawyers and investment bankers than ever before in the U.S. – but the opportunities and constraints of everyday life, gendered on so many levels, continue to reproduce male privilege in ways that are all but invisible. How do these “institutional arrangements shape contextual expectations” (Risman 1998, 153) about professional occupations and family? Gender rules influence behavior even when individuals do not adhere to these rules personally. Some of these women, and a few of the men, labeled themselves feminists and consciously sought egalitarian arrangements for balancing work and family. However, such choices are constrained by gender expectations. Looking at professional students' projections is important in that it shows us exactly how these patterns are reproduced.

Professional Parenting

Literature on gender differences in the legal profession indicates that disparities in the employment status, career patterns, salaries, and advancement of men and women lawyers can be explained by continued expectations regarding childbearing and rearing. “Women's lives and careers are much more strongly influenced by work-family dilemmas than are men's” (Hull and Nelson 1998, 685). Female lawyers delay parenting, have smaller families, and take on more child care and housework when they do have children than their male counterparts (Chambers 1989). As a result, women lawyers earn less than men and are less likely to make partner, even after controlling for differences in human capital (Hagan and Kay 1995). Women are more likely to start in government practice or in-house counsel, as well as to leave the law entirely or to move from private practice to non-firm positions with shorter hours (Hull and Nelson 2000; Mattessich and Heilmann 1990; Schrimsher 1998).

Although beginning to change somewhat, reduced-time arrangements have seldom been available to lawyers. When it exists, part-time legal work rarely means less than forty hours a week. In addition, although there is evidence that professionals who engage in them are as committed to

their organizations as others (see Mattessich and Heilmann 1990; Schrimsher 1998), such positions are still branded with the “mommy track” label. This means that women remain stigmatized as less dedicated to their firms, and that men are less likely to take such opportunities when made available. The mommy track, moreover, often precludes partnership.

Balancing work and family are also thorny issues in occupations such as investment banking, consulting, and upper-level management – occupations as high-pressured as law. In consulting, for example, it is not uncommon for associates to travel three to four days every week. Blair-Loy (2003) reports on professional women working in financial services or law firms who operate from either a “work-devotion schema” (fifty-six white women who were committed to their careers, one-third of whom had children) or a “family-devotion schema” (twenty-five women who had left full-time work after having children). Her findings suggest greater opportunity for balancing work and family – rather than choosing one or the other -- than existed in the past. The youngest of her cohorts *was* more likely to delay marriage rather than forgo it all together, and when they do marry to have more egalitarian marriages. They also believed, more so than earlier cohorts, that work and family *were* reconcilable.

Student Orientations to Work and Family

Scholars look at how lawyers and other professionals balance work and family, but few have examined how professionals-in-training think about these ideas before they make the relevant choices. In studies of work and family expectations among college-aged people, researchers find that despite the advances of the women’s movement, the family and career assumptions of women and men differ significantly. Women are “talking career but thinking job:” expecting to gain graduate degrees and work in the professions, but also stating that their careers would be “voluntaristic” – interruptible, secondary to their husbands, and more family-focused than their male peers (Machung 1989). Male respondents, on the other hand, assume an uninterrupted presence in the labor force and a minor role in housework and childcare (Maines and Hardesty

1987). They are “permissive” about their partners working, as long as wives remain supportive of their careers. Both genders are ambivalent about egalitarian relationships (Machung 1989).

More recently, Aronson studied young women who were not yet mothers. The majority are very optimistic about being able to manage the conflicting demands of work and family (in distinct contrast to women surveyed who were *already* mothers). “Idealized visions of combining work and family were prevalent, often with little idea of how these visions would in fact be implemented,” she reports (1999, 59). Do professional students, with a greater investment of time, effort, and money, have a different vision, or does sanguinity prevail there as well?

In one study of *professional* student expectations, Orrange (2002) notes differences in expectations between men and women law and business students (see also Andrews and Bailyn 1993). Men have expectations in one of three categories: as traditional providers, a strong form of egalitarianism, or a weak form of egalitarianism. Women hold a strong or weak egalitarian role, or would prefer to remain single. The author, however, does not indicate the proportional representation of each of these categories, except to mention that the provider role is preferred among the male respondents, while choosing to be single predominates for women. Moreover, he does not indicate why such perceptions develop – are they the result of prior socialization, professional socialization, or other life-course experiences?

All of the women under consideration here believe they will work full-time in well-remunerated, often highly stressful careers. One might predict that such women could not afford the luxury of *not* planning their strategies for balancing work and family ahead of time. I expect they have spent considerable time and energy strategizing about their options. I hypothesize that men spend less time considering such issues, but since they are likely to partner with working women, I anticipate they too have worked out a set of tactics regarding this balance.

Methods

The data consist of two stages of interviews I conducted in the nineties of the entering law and MBA classes of “Graham University,” a prestigious, private Midwestern university. Graham

University is a typical setting for the education of the country's corporate and legal elite. The law and business schools rate among the top fifteen in annual rankings such as *U.S. News and World Report*. Class size, tuition, undergraduate grade point average, starting salaries, and female and minority enrollments¹ are comparable to the best law and business schools in the nation. Graham sends the majority of its graduates into large corporate law firms, investment banks, and consulting firms in Chicago, New York and Los Angeles.

I interviewed thirty-seven law students and forty-two business students, a response rate of seventy-five percent of a random sample of the entering classes. Almost all of the students were interviewed again toward the end of the second year of their programs. The semi-structured interview schedule allowed for a free-flowing, flexible conversation and coverage of unanticipated topics. I also conducted observations for three years at the law school and one at the business school, attending lectures, school-sponsored presentations, and informal gatherings. At the business school, I attended a panel on managing work and family with speakers from four companies nationally known for their emphasis on family-friendly policies. Finally, I mailed follow-up surveys in 2000, approximately five years after graduation.

Two men among the thirty-seven law students were married, one of these with a newborn; and another man was divorced with a young child. The business students were quite different – of forty-two in the sample, twelve were married (thirty-five percent) and two had children, while another two had children while in business school (all parents were men).² None of the students I interviewed were openly gay or lesbian, so I consider the balance of work and family only for heterosexual students.

Findings

Almost all of the students who were not yet parents wanted children, often discussing family and children as a taken-for-granted assumption in their future. None of the students told me that they did not plan to have children. Those who were certain they wanted children, not

surprisingly, were more likely to be older and already engaged or married. However, about twenty percent of the students indicated uncertainty; men were about twice as likely to show reluctance as women were, although this was a difference that is not statistically significant. Of those who indicated a lack of enthusiasm for child rearing, their comments still indicated that they will “probably have children eventually.” The student who was closest to saying “no” was a male law student who told me, “Children --don't know if I want children. I'm pretty devoted to what I like to do intellectually. I don't know if I'd have the time for them; that's an extra challenge.” Another student, in business school this time, said, “I'm not particularly crazy about kids, myself, so.... I'm saying maybe ten years.”

In subtle ways, some of the students showed frustration about the taken-for-granted nature of parenting. Even in discussions with students who argue that children would certainly be a part of their lives, there was frequent equivocation (such as, “I think I want kids”). Such students switched back and forth unconsciously from talking about “when I have children” to “if I have children.” While they assumed, usually quite strongly, that they would have children, and were expected “naturally” to want them, they were not sure how enthusiastic they were about the reality:

My sister just had a child and after seeing that I just don't know how much – whatever I do, I'm not going to have children for a while. I'm going to be twenty-six when I graduate, and I want to be set in what I'm doing....Work and try to get some credibility.

DS: But you do want children?

Oh, yeah! Probably. (female law student)

Student language often emphasized a lack of agency surrounding having children. “I suspect it will happen,” said one male business student. “I have to get married at some point and have a family,” noted a female law student.

Although four-fifths of the students saw family as an extremely likely event, very few had thought much about how they would balance work with their insatiable employers. However, I did not ask directly about work-family dilemmas; rather, the conversations emerged from other

discussions. After talking about the decision to attend professional school, their experiences in the program, and their occupational goals and plans, I asked a series of questions about extra-occupational concerns. For some, this prompted a discussion of being married and having a family. If it did not, I asked, “Do you plan to have spouse and/or children?” (Or, if they had either, “How does school affects those relationships?”)

The lack of consideration students paid to these issues was surprising. In many interviews, particularly those with law students,³ respondents had nothing to say. They had not thought about these topics at all, and had one line or even one word responses to my questions even if they were the ones who brought up children. This group encompassed twenty-four percent of the female students, and almost forty percent of the men. The following segment was typical of those who clearly wanted family, but had not thought about the balance. I asked about long term goals and what was important in life, and he replied:

I want to have a family. I want to spend time with my kids.

DS: Does that have a meaning in terms of the hours you work?

Yes. [silence]

DS: That's related to decisions you're already making?

Yes. [silence]

DS: How many hours a week, does that have a number? You don't want to work 80.

First couple of years, sure, you know. I worked basically 8 or 8:30 until midnight all [before]. I'd like a job where I could eat dinner with my family at least 2 days a week.

That's about the most specific condition I can give right now.

DS: You're engaged? [he had mentioned his fiancée earlier] Married soon?

Not that soon.

DS: Is she a career person as well?

No.

DS: She can stay with the children?

Yes. (business student, first interview)

That he replied to my query about goals with unprompted comments about family suggests that family was important ideologically; but the fact that he had not thought strategically about family is also key to understanding how gender expectations match interactional elements.

This “culture of not preparing” common among students is related to the fact that the career mystique is societally presented without instructions. When we talked about children, students’ common response was that you really cannot (and perhaps, should not) plan for family:

“It’ll happen when it happens.”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we get there.”

“I’m trying not to plan too far ahead because I just know that never works.”

These idioms suggest both that students think there are no mechanisms for preparing, and that the experience will be unproblematic, when it is this very rhetoric that creates difficulties. Students cannot talk to each other (or employers) because there is no common dialogue available to do so. These interactional limitations in our culture for talking about the work/family balance reflect the resilience of gender as an organizing structure.

Intensive Parenting

What exactly did students mean when they talked about the paramount importance of family in their lives, especially when they had given planning one so little thought? Did they desire a variation on what Hays indicates by “intensive mothering” (which, at first blush, appears to be the case)? Did men and women differ in their understanding of what this means or who would fill the intensive role?

A minority of students (two in each school), all men, argued that work would always be primary in their lives, even with the addition of a wife or children. It was clear, however, that such statements were not viewed as appropriate. Instead, students claimed to a varying degree that “family was first” or “family should be more important than work.” “The first and foremost thing in my mind is family and happiness,” a male law student affirmed. Many students said that family was

their first priority without specifying, but some went on to explain: “For me the most important, if I had to prioritize I would put first my family than the work,” said a first-year MBA male. “I’d rather quit than postpone the decision of having my family.”

The implementation of “family first” arguments took two forms. The first was that valuing family was extremely important but did not have to be demonstrated by extended physical presence. These predominantly male responses suggested that professionals can be very involved with family even though committed to working in organizations with long hours. A male law student explained, “Family is of utmost importance. However, people frequently tend to assume that family and that sort of thing is mutually exclusive with working lots of hours, and I know lots of people who have proved the contrary.” Another indicated that balancing work and family would really not be that difficult to do, if one was truly committed to it.

What do you mean how [will I balance work and family]? I mean, there's always a way, there's always time. It's a matter of priorities...even a week you work eighty I think you have the time, and if it's something you enjoy, whether it be with family or golfing or whatever, it's not a hassle, so the time kind of makes itself. I don't see that as a problem.

(male law student)⁴

Children were central to the idea of a successful life, but men expected their wives to alter their plans – in this case similar professional plans -- while their careers remain unchanged:

I grew up in a very good family in a small town, a very good upbringing. The family's very close. We went to church, Boy Scouts, 4 H, a typical wholesome, Midwest upbringing. For me family is very important. That's one issue I have with my girlfriend because she is here in business school and she also, a career is something important for her, even though she says she'd rather stay home with kids!...I want a wife to be home with kids, and I think that's very important. My mother was home with me. (male business student)

The second form of family devotion was that family *is* more important than work, and this is demonstrated by changing one's work habits and making sacrifices in one's career at the advent of children. The amount of sacrifice involved when choosing family over work, however, was quite relative and dependent on the knowledge students already had of the work world. Many students talked about sacrifice in terms of working fewer hours. However, male students often talked about giving up working twelve-hour days or eighty-hour work weeks when they had children (only one woman did so). Choices seldom entailed cutting back to something like a standard workweek. Recall the business student quoted above. Hoping to take a job in sales and trading he remarked, apparently without irony, "I'd like a job where I could eat dinner with my family at least two weekdays a week." These choices were potentially little sacrifices in career success, but are not in line with the greater forfeitures that were supported by many women and a few of the men.

Family devotion also dictated that good childrearing means that a child should be reared by one individual devoted to expert, intensive care of children:

I've seen children who have been raised by a very stable, you could call it more traditional, family. My brother and I came out really well. Then I've seen kids who either parent had to work a lot and they didn't have a lot of guidance when they were young and they were left more to their own ends. I think it makes a difference. (male business student)

I don't think that I will ever put everything aside for my job. Family is of utmost importance to me. I spent a lot of time as a child without my parents, because my father traveled so much and he took my mom with him, but I feel that it's just so important... Kids, for the first 15 formative years, take a precedent over my job. (female business student) ⁵

Family was not just "more" important than work; it was "most" important – "utmost," "foremost," "paramount." The "peak" metaphors illustrate that these choices are ideological rather than practical. Family devotion is an important professional class ideal -- it may or may not mirror what

one had as a child, but the ideal intersects with gender expectations about what is appropriate, even though their chosen careers cannot do this type of parenting justice.

Regardless of definition, students varied little in the amount of efficacy they anticipated. For the most part, students agreed that it was possible (although sometimes difficult) and indeed, desirable, to balance family with work for a greedy institution. Only one student, a male from the law school, suggested that it was in fact *not* possible to achieve such a balance.

I can tell right now it will be very difficult to be an attorney like that....I'm not sure whether you *can* balance it all, your first year, being a young associate, when the firm makes so many time demands, just your effort...it's not just hard for you, but unfair for the wife and the child. I just don't think I would be able to do it. (emphasis in original).

Most students, then, expected to be able to balance work and family, albeit in different ways. For male students, balance involved a gendered division of labor, with family-friendly men hoping to work fewer hours, but not take primary responsibility for childcare. For women, balance was an accomplishment that as women would attempt to achieve, an achievement with which men were not expected to concern themselves. Almost all of these students were hopeful, however, that such a balance could be accomplished, despite the formal and informal emphases in their professional curriculum about heavy work obligations and pressures.

Solutions to Work/Family Balance

Unlike the women interviewed by Gerson (1995), all of these students considered career to be important; indeed, their choice of professional school might indicate that, at least at this stage of their lives, career was considered primary, even to the exclusion of everything else in life. However, their choice of career for a greedy institution was at odds with their almost universally stated commitment to having and rearing children intensively. So the question remains: when they talk did about family, what types of strategies had they developed? I describe a number of these below, although a variety of overlapping strategies were discussed.

(Not) Looking for "Mr. Mom"

None of the women were interested in (or hopeful of) finding a partner with a strong family devotion schema who would stay home and rear children. However, four of the twenty-three were currently partnered with men who would probably share equitably.

DS: From his point of view, would he take time off with children?

Take off time -- like work part time? Would he do that? You know, I'm just not sure. It would depend, 'cause, we have talked about this, and if you're in the right situation you do have the flexibility to, if not be working part time, which is pretty much impossible, it's not impossible, it's not something he'd be willing to do -- he could at least schedule it so that he has afternoons off, where he's working from 6 to 4 or a weekend. It's possible. (law student)

Women who wanted a more egalitarian relationship, however, were not entirely sure if they would be willing to give up parental responsibilities. According to a business student,

Sometimes he teases when I say that I really want to be home with kids, that *he* wants to be home with...which of course he would never do because he really likes to work also...I would never ask him to do that and I would never want to do that, mostly because I want to be home with the kids. Like, "Get out, that's *my* job."

One law student was more adamant about equity, though, remarking that she would take a parental leave, and "would hope that my husband would want to do the same as well, because I think it's a collaborative effort. Both people have to contribute. I wouldn't want to be the only person doing it."

These findings are consistent with those of Blair-Loy: only one woman of the seventy she studied was married to a family-oriented husband. Despite the respect female students placed on making choices that honor family, they were not really interested in dating men who might make those choices. "I wouldn't want a house husband. I think I need to be with someone I can respect," noted a woman from the business school. "Unfortunately I equate respect with ambition and a job. It's kind of like a contradicting thought, but that's something that you have to deal with yourself." In choosing a partner, most women, even self-described feminists, expressed ambivalence about someone who would take on great responsibility at home. They did not consider men without a

fully cemented work schema. Neither the women's movement nor changes in the occupational landscape were resulting clear shifts toward greater egalitarianism.

In a parallel but contradictory fashion, many men wanted traditional arrangements with their wives, though were currently dating career women. They frequently apologized for their self-ascribed "old-fashioned" choices:

I think I would feel more comfortable if she were to concentrate once we had kids on raising them...I really wouldn't have much of a problem meeting a professional woman and perhaps once the kids are past a certain age, if she wanted to go back and have a career. I'd be fine with that, and I know that doesn't really sound totally PC, but that's how I feel.

Maybe we'll have enough money where somebody can raise the kid, but I still don't even think that's good. (business student)

Most men were married to, living with, or dating women that were professionals themselves – eleven MBAs, an accountant, two teachers, an investment banker -- but expected them to give up or postpone their careers for children:

That's one issue I have with my girlfriend because...a career is something important for her...it is a point that we discuss quite a bit because I want a wife to be home with kids, and I think that's very important. My mother was home with me. (business student)

Others were married to stay-at-home-mothers or women with more flexible careers, such as artist or piano instructor. None of them expected to be primary caregivers or even to share equitably in housework or childcare. "If what you're asking is whether or not I'd be willing to make similar sacrifices as my partner, of course not," declared one MBA student.

However, there were a few men who would eventually be coaxed into more equitable arrangements, especially those who were dating Graham classmates. An example was a business student who found that his schedule changed unexpectedly when his wife had an unplanned pregnancy during his first year of business school:

I was fully participating in the feeding and getting up through the night, although I had to

get ready for [summer] work and my wife would be responsible after five. I was very happy to be a part of it all... We worked it around my schedule so those mornings when I didn't have class, and in the fall I had no classes any morning, she'd go to work and then we'd trade off. Never wanted to leave the baby with anyone else. (business student)

The emphasis on “intensive parenting” was important for both partners here, and while he was in school they still had some flexibility to manage a balance between childcare and work/school.

Delayed or Reduced Childbearing

Both women and men mentioned postponing initial childbearing. Students perceived they needed several years to be financially secure and establish themselves in positions of responsibility. They said they would wait until they became a partner in a law or consulting firm, or achieved a specific corporate position before having children. For many students, this seemed ideal, and indicated that they were hopeful that, once they had put an adequate amount of time into their organization, there would be no problem cutting back to have children. A female business student who was planning to work for a large commercial bank and wanted to have at least two children told me, “Once you're a VP then you can start calling the shots and say, I'm taking six months off and having a kid.” Students accept this received wisdom because it coincides with the upbeat image about corporate life promoted during recruiting season. Because it fits more readily with the worldview of balancing an intensive career with family, there is little space to question the truthfulness of such assumptions.

Few men considered postponing children to be a problem. In fact, a business student joked that if he started getting past thirty-five, he would “just marry someone who's twenty-five.” Some women, of course, were concerned about the overlap of the associate track with prime childbearing years. Traditionally aged female law students, at 22 or 23, felt fewer qualms about waiting seven to eight years before having children, but older women understandably expressed more reservations. “I want to have my kids when I'm younger... [if] I want to have my kids before I turn thirty, I don't have a lot of time,” said an MBA student. “That means in two years I'd have to get pregnant.” Their

anxiety meant women reduced the number of children they were planning, to two or even one. At the same time, female students optimistically interpreted information available in the popular culture about fertility options for women over forty. "I don't have any maternal instincts right now," argued one female MBA. "I can be fifty and have my first child."

Child Care Arrangements

"Mommy Track:" Six of the eight female business students and five of the thirteen female law students described a childcare arrangement that incorporated "mommy track" scenarios -- taking longer than the standard maternity leave (anywhere from 6 months to 5 years), curtailing positions, cutting back to part-time, or choosing a less demanding track to begin with. This woman in the MBA program chose to enter hospital management over the more lucrative health care consulting because it made segmentation possible:

I have a very traditional idea of family and having kids. I definitely want to live in the suburbs and have a station wagon [laughs], and not work while my kids are very young...I just feel like the field is so wide open. When I'm ready to go back to work full time, it's not the kind of industry where people say, where have you been for six or seven years? I think as long as I have enough in the field beforehand and can show that I've kept up on trends of hospitals. It's not like you get off some track, and that's one of the things that's really appealing to me...I don't know, maybe in the end if I decide I really want to be CEO of a hospital, I don't know that I could get there, necessarily, but I don't know that I want that either.

Women were quite confident of the possibility of getting back into a law or business career after taking time off. Often they had been exposed to encouraging examples during recruiting season. A business student met a vice-president in her thirties with a one-year-old at the large consumer products company she had agreed to work for:

You can certainly have both. That's something that was really positive to see. I mean, really, really, high up women are just able to balance both I think pretty well. And that was

just so nice to see and it's so respected. It's almost expected: "Okay, when are you [all] having babies?" ... And it was fine to take maternity leave and come back. I mean it was like absolutely fine, do not stop. You know, do not pass go. They didn't give away your job. Students viewed law and business as fields in flux on these issues, and they were optimistic that companies and law firms were getting better at creating atmospheres conducive to balance—a number mentioned the Family and Medical Leave Act (passed while the students were in school) as a good sign.⁶ Even students who were aware of the difficulties faced by part-time professional employees remained positive about future change:

They say when you have children you can forget about ever being partner, there's a big prejudice against mothers... Part time... means is you get paid for twenty hours and you work forty. I do know that they are letting women work part time, which is really great... I think it's going to be better in the next 10 to 15 years. (female law student).

Interviews were replete with "hope talk" – finding firms or corporations with the liberal policies and understanding supervisors. These hopes may not bear up in the end, but they serve as important ideological anchors for decision-making.

"Mompreneurism." An option often presented concurrently with the mommy track was working at home, especially starting one's own business or law firm while the children are growing up (see also Blair Loy 1999). Women considered entrepreneurship because they felt they would "need something more" than merely rearing children while at home. "Being stuck at home with a baby who can't talk back to you, is at this point not really how I perceive my life to evolve," said one business student, who was planning to take off work entirely but perhaps start a business so she could make her own hours. Men with a professional spouse frequently mentioned the likelihood that she might start her own business "on the side" (having this alternative available may have assuaged the remorse felt by asking an MBA or lawyer wife to remain home for a significant number of years).

Their accounts did not make clear the difficulties of entrepreneurship, of course, and it may be that some students were unaware of both the complexity of running a home business and life at home with a small infant. Students made these potential endeavors sound breezy and manageable – something lucrative to do in one's spare time. "[Motherhood] would be a good time to start up an entrepreneurial thing. I feel like I have the flexibility and that I could probably do something out of the home or hook up with some other [Graham] person that wants to do something entrepreneurial. I have this feeling it will all work out. My little fantasy world." Another woman business student mentioned that her fiancé could be a stay-at-home dad while day trading on his home computer.

Day Care: Women who did plan to return to professional work outside the home following maternity leave (38 percent of the women, and 19 percent of men indicated their partners would⁷) discussed a variety of options regarding non-parental care. Generally, the women who wanted to return to work after a short period at home were enthusiastic about day care.

I don't really have this super problem with leaving babies with day care or someone that can watch them. I think the kids turn out fine, no matter who you leave them with as long as they get a lot of love and attention....I really can't see myself staying home with kids, I think they would drive me crazy, because you just cease to have the constant day-to-day challenge and intriguing stimulating conversation that you do.

These women were somewhat ambivalent about taking on intensive mothering, suspecting that staying at home for a long period of time after working in a highly competitive environment would not provide much intellectual inspiration. Many men, on the other hand, were at best lukewarm about day care, even as they were resigned to it as the most likely possibility for career-oriented wives. "We'd have to figure out something to do with the kids. Send them to the only day care center that hasn't been indicted by the state department," joked one law student. Another student was planning to be an involved parent, but was still unhappy with the prospect of day care.

She's obviously going to be the one that's going to have to take off a few days, typically these days you don't take off a lot of work...I'd be more than happy to be the one to go home and take care of the kid, how easy that's going to be for either one of us, is up in the air at this point. Are you going to just drop the kid at some day care center, eeehh! (male business student).

Options presented as better alternatives to day care included living close to extended family that so that grandmothers could watch the children (typically an option of international students), or hiring a nanny.

I'm going to have to make enough money to have full time help so that I can [also] have a night nanny. I need sleep. I guess that will be a big determining factor....But I'm not one of those people that...refuse to have a family because it will interrupt my career. (female law student)

Of course, the catch-22 presented by a nanny – especially a live-in one – was that to afford one (or two!) required both parents to work long hours, thus necessitating the nanny.

Talking to Potential Employers

Student accounts of their maneuvering with future employers about work, family, and quality of life issues were revealing in two ways: first, if a student was willing to press the issue with employers in a relatively tight market, it was an indication of how important work and family were; and second, recruitment interviews were sources of information (albeit sometimes misleading) about the issues students might face when attempting to balance in their chosen workplaces. However, while employers are very eager to portray themselves to students as family-friendly, they do not make students feel very comfortable about *asking* questions related to family. Thus there were few mechanisms to find out accurately what it would be like to balance work and family at a specific company.

Based on corporate recruiting season and the speakers at university panels, one might think that corporate America was a parent nirvana. Large law firms, Fortune 500 companies, and

investment banks glowingly emphasize their family support systems, leave policies, and day care or telecommuting arrangements. “Even in banking now this woman was working two-fifths of the week at home,” reported one student, “And the company bought her a modem and a computer when she was pregnant!” Consulting firms like Boston Consulting Group have:

Contingent plans....If you decide to go and have children, you can then become a part time consultant for BCG and work 4 hours a day for them on one client. They built in the thought that when you will want to have kids you want to spend time with them. People are working out of their homes a lot more often, I think that if you prove yourself in the first couple of years as an extraordinary good consultant, that the firm also will try and be flexible to your wishes as well. (female business student)

At the business school’s panel on balancing work and family I attended, each speaker emphasized that family-friendly policies were sanctioned by the top levels of the their companies.

These corporate impressions of relative ease in balancing work and family contradicted what sociological literature suggests about the availability of part-time work, parental leave policies, and the overall culture of corporate life. Furthermore, students noted that specific questions about spouses and children had to be posed very carefully. I discussed with one business student the “when” and “how” of such interview questions. At the end of recruitment interviews, he said,

You can ask any question you want, and even though you knew maybe it was slightly evaluated, that was the time to ask those types of questions, and you got to do it in tactful manner, just say what's a typical day for you? Have you been working a whole lot of, things like that, so I definitely tried to find that out. [My new employer] was a very family oriented company....more like an 8 to 5 company.

It was essential, especially for men, to skirt around the issue. Generally, students did not ask outright questions about leaves, part-time work, or mommy track options. A woman who asked potential employers about the ratio of female to male employees said she later grasped, “The

appropriate time to ask that is after they've given you an offer... and realized that you aren't very threatening." In fact, almost no one said that they themselves broached topics related to family with a potential employer, for fear of not being taken seriously.

That's like one of the questions that they are not supposed to go near....one of the forbidden questions, only because I guess it might be sexist....usually try to stay on a business / professional level. [DS: So you didn't bring it up either?] No.

Instead, those who were interested researched the companies or law firms and listened carefully, finding the information (e.g., number of female partners, length of maternity leaves, corporate day care centers) they needed in oblique ways.

Furthermore, the validity of the information they were given was unclear. "I don't know if I got straight answers," said one law student who did ask such questions. When talking to people that they knew personally in the industry, students discovered a less rosy picture than public representations. One law student recounted a story about interviewing at a law firm that employed a lawyer whom she already knew well:

I interviewed with her firm, and she was really helping me out...I asked if she was pregnant again, and she said, "Can you tell?" and she seemed worried...and she said yes, it was due in May, and this was late October and she warned me not to discuss her pregnancy with the people I was interviewing with!....She thought it would jeopardize her chances of making partner.

Nevertheless, recruitment played an important role in reinforcing the positive changes that were being made in law, financial, and consulting organizations in corporate America. Paying lip service to these issues shores up the principle that work organizations are concerned, but less institutional change is occurring than appears on paper.

Twenty-first Century Responses

How does the way students discuss work-family dilemmas in school reflect what actually happens later in their lives? A number of the respondents did get married and have children

between the interviews and the follow-up survey. Two-thirds of the women and over seventy percent of the men were now married in 2000 (compared to five and 27%, respectively, in school). Forty percent of the women, and 54% of the men, had children in 2000.

Individuals did make some accommodations – moving to more family-friendly settings with shorter hours, taking up other alternatives when the partner track does not pan out – but did not stray very far from the goals of the “career mystique” cemented in school. Many of the students remained steadfastly in traditional tracks for elite lawyers and MBAs – working toward partner in a large firm or rising to executive level management in Fortune 500 companies. All of the students worked long hours, averaging fifty-six hours in a typical week, although estimates ranged as high as ninety hours. However, work hours varied considerably by parental status. There was a two hour difference, on average, between those with children (52.6) and those without (54.5). This difference, however, was principally explained by the gender of the parent. Men with children and men without showed little difference in work hours: the former worked 55 hours, and the latter 56.5 hours. But women without children worked 49.8 hours while women with children averaged only 42.3 hours.

Some women did make alternative career plans because of family, working twenty hours a week in health care management, for example. The woman who had been happy that firms were “letting women work part time now,” answered my survey while on maternity leave from her large corporate law firm.

It’s a great firm and I believe I have a shot at partnership. However, I just had a baby, and I don’t know if going back full-time (which is necessary to achieve partnership) is going to satisfy my home-work balance. I’ll have to see how I feel once I do return full time. Instead, she might become “special counsel” at the firm or move to an in-house position. A few others also had the hope of changing work situations in the future to accommodate family. And a man working in investment banking, when I asked him what type of work he saw himself doing in five years, wrote simply: “father.”

Conclusion

Among professional students, both men and women desire to have children and expect to make family a fulfilling part of their lives (unlike men of thirty years ago, this is viewed as an important and worthwhile goal). Furthermore, professional women and men are committed to intensive mothering (Hays 1998). Still, both men and women face tremendously competing devotions: choosing both to have family be their highest priority; and training for, finding, and keeping careers in greedy professional institutions. Gender infuses the interactional and institutional aspects of elite professional socialization to impact decisions about work and family.

For a large minority of the students, it is astonishing how little they have thought about the conflicts of work and family, especially considering that their career choices have precluded many options related to balancing these elements of their lives. However, it is not that surprising when we consider how interactional accounts are still framed by gender. First, many students have no frameworks to plan for work and family; instead, they describe *not* being able to prepare for the balance, letting it happen naturally, and hoping that things will “work out.” School presentations, corporate rhetoric discourse, even public messages about fertility, suggest it can be done without too much difficulty. Second, there are no good mechanisms to uncover an organization’s culture in terms of the work/family balance. Although students are exposed to information during school and recruiting, both schools and organizations present how things are on the surface, asking students to trust these messages without looking too deeply. As a result, students have some ideological anchors that they can hang onto – the “hope” talk about balancing, when the time and situation are right -- which do not help them to make practical choices that would actually make the time and situation right.

Why companies present themselves this way is an institutional element that reflects gender somewhat differently. Here, workplaces pay lip service to family friendly policies without fundamentally altering the structure of the workplace. Organizations have made ideological accommodations to professional workers with families that are not really all that beneficial and

change nothing significantly – a public face that supports paternity leave while realizing that that few men will take it; part-time work for women that is neither part time nor taken seriously; and the opportunity to scale once achieving a position of power, responsibility, and salary, because they know few employees actually will decide to scale back.

For those men and women who thought more fully about work/family conflict, the lack of true institutional options reproduces significant differences between the genders on how to strategize about children and career. Even among elite professionals, women arrange for more contingencies and fewer linear career choices than men do. Most women – even those hoping to someday become a legal partner or an executive vice-president -- assume they will have primary parenting responsibilities, while most men expect someone else will play that role. Although there is an ideological relationship between intensive mothering and social class, class is not the only, or even the most central, organizing frame; gender profoundly shapes professional socialization and occupational decision-making even when men and women compete equally effectively for elite positions. This research shows that new strategies for work-family conflict, regardless of occupation, must incorporate broader, far more sweeping changes in order to create arrangements that do not merely reproduce gender inequality expectations.

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¹ The respondents were representative of the populations in most respects. About 30 percent of the law school were minority students, and my sample was 38 percent minority (excluding two foreign students of color). Thirty-five percent of my law student sample was women, as was the class. The percentage of minorities in the business school sample was the same for the class - about ten percent, excluding foreign students of color. However, the class of 1994 at Graham was 29

percent women. Although the sampling frame matched this percentage, of the students who *agreed* to be interviewed, only nineteen percent were women.

² Twenty-eight percent of the business school population at Graham was married in 1993, and six percent had children. Although I was able to interview two men with children, the communication I had with the one mother in my sample indicated greater challenges. I was not able to interview her formally, although she was willing. She missed the first quarter of business school because she gave birth. Now with two children, in February of her first year she was willing to sit for twenty minutes at a time – all she had – until we got the interview done. However, the interviews had to be scheduled carefully, as she did not spare any extra time away from home to be on campus. Course and group meeting, interviews, travel, and children's illness intervened; I got to know her schedule quite intimately before we gave up trying to coordinate a meeting time.

³ Business students had typically thought more about the issues by virtue of their age. Forty percent of the law school sample had come directly from undergraduate programs. Their average age was 25 at matriculation, while for the business students it was 27.

⁴ Equating family with a hobby was not typical.

⁵ Amazingly, some students go far beyond the point child experts say is necessary -- if a child's "formative years" are 0-15, as this woman suggests, intensive mothering does rule out any kind of professional career.

⁶ Three male law students indicated that they would be somewhat willing, if such a thing were possible in the firms where they worked, to participate in a "mommy track" (although they did not usually use that phrase). For instance, a student told me when he and his girlfriend had children, he (or she, or both) would work four-day weeks, "which is a radical step in terms of career, it could put either of us on a so-called mommy track and it could kill our chances for partnership; [or] it could take a lot longer." He might "set up shop at home so I can spend time with kids and work, sort of simultaneously." His choice was contingent on financial considerations and whether they felt ready at that point in their careers to make such a drastic change. "I would be if my firm was

accepting of that... [but] I'm only willing to go so far in terms of damaging my career, in order to spend that extra day with my kids.”

⁷ The remaining students did not know or did not say what type of arrangement they would make.