

Breadwinning Mothers and Stay-at-Home Fathers: Diverse Explanations, Multiple Pathways,  
and the Slow Drip of Social Change

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## Breadwinning Mothers and Stay-at-Home Fathers: Diverse Explanations, Multiple Pathways, and the Slow Drip of Social Change

Stories of ‘role reversed’ marriages and ‘alpha earning’ wives have recently been published in popular press (e.g., Hymowitz 2012; Morgan 2011). Studies of stay-at-home fathers (Doucet 2004; Kramer and Kramer 2011; Rochlen, McKelly and Whittaker 2010) and breadwinning mothers (e.g., Drago, Black and Wooden 2005; Winslow-Bowe 2006) also comprise two insightful yet separate lines of scholarly inquiry. Limited research explores the first-hand experiences of ‘role reversal’ from the perspectives of both stay-at-home fathers and breadwinning wives or, couples who are hereafter referred to as reverse traditional couples (RTCs) (see Author et al, 2011; Chesley 2011 for exceptions). Consequently, existing research does not capture the full range of choices, events and pathways leading couples to work and family unconventionality. Further research is essential to fully grasp gendered social change in the unique and ‘linked lives’ of these couples (Elder 1998). While their numbers may statistically be few, RTCs are theoretically critical to theorizing gender across the public and private spheres.

Working from gender construction theories (Deutsch 2007; Gerson and Peiss 1985; Risman 2009), this study extends existing research in three ways. First, breadwinning mothers and stay-at-home fathers’ work and life decisions do not always represent role reversal. RTCs, at times, adopt gender non-traditional roles early in their relationships. Second, the four categories of explanations and three pathways found in our analysis complexly illustrate the diverse ways couples arrive at these unconventional arrangements. Finally, couples’ accounts evidence the ‘slow drip’ of gendered social change (Sullivan 2004). We define RTCs as married, heterosexual couples in which wives earn all or the vast majority of the family’s income and husbands perform primary childcare duties. Twelve percent of women in the U.S. earn more than 60

percent of the family's income (Raley, Mattingly and Bianchi 2006). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, today 3.7 percent of married couples with children under 15 report only the wife as an earner (Mary Bowler, pers. com). As of 2009, 159,000 family groups with children under 15 reported a father not working for pay and performing 'childcare and household duties' (U.S. Census Bureau 2010); 1.125 million children are estimated to live in stay-at-home fathering families (Kramer and Kramer 2011).

### **Gender Construction Perspectives**

Gender construction perspectives explore "gender as not a rigid or reified analytic category imposed on human experience, but a fluid one whose meaning emerges in specific social contexts as it is created and recreated through human interaction" (Gerson and Peiss 1985, 317). The claim that we 'do gender' in everyday interactions is well established and related to multi-level approaches to studying gender (Deutsch 2007; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Recently, gender scholars have been called to consider how we *undo* gender through language and social interactions (Deutsch 2007; Author et al., 2011; Risman 2009). The concept of 'gender relations' highlights the existence of multiple masculinities and femininities (Connell 1995). Gendered social change is subtle and, at times, can only be seen in small acts and words on the borders of lived experience. To explore the 'slow drip' metaphor of social change, following Risman (2009), this study undertakes a "detailed analysis of daily interactive processes of change as described by the actors themselves." (209) We problematize the label 'reverse traditional' in our final analysis and propose the term Caring and Earning Flexible Couples.

### **Literature Review**

The background for this study comes at the confluence of two streams of research: (a) married women's breadwinning persistence and (b) stay-at-home fathers' reasons for caregiving. First, primarily large-scale quantitative studies find that married women's breadwinning persistence is associated with education, demographic characteristics (Winkler, McBride and Andrews 2005), human capital measures, and individual and marital life course timing (Drago et al. 2005; Winslow-Bowe 2006). Dual-earner wives' orientations to breadwinning vary and their experiences are argued to be qualitatively different from men's earning (Potuchek 1997). Atkinson and Boles (1984) studied 'wives as senior partners' and found that higher earning wives worked in male-dominated occupations, had husbands with flexible occupations, and tended not to have children. Yet many female executives today choose to have both children and careers (Halpern and Cheung 2010). Still we know little about how and why couples negotiate *not* dual-career, but reverse traditional divisions of labor.

Second, studies of stay-at-home fathers (SAHFs) report that these men are often married to higher earning wives with keen career interests, have strong views on the importance of home care and/or reservations about childcare facilities and costs (Doucet 2004). Rochlen et al. (2010) add that SAHFs may see full-time parenting as an opportunity for family time or as a personal preference. Distinctions too have been made between *caregiving* by choice and *unable-to-work* at-home fathering families (Kramer and Kramer 2011). In the past decade, SAHFs increasingly report full-time caregiving as a conscious choice rather than forced option. In the most comprehensive study to date, three paths to primary caregiving were found for men (Doucet 2004). First, SAHFs described having achieved career success and, as a result, moved into full-time caregiving roles. Second, over a third of the men in Doucet's study explained being SAHFs as a means of transitioning between jobs or careers. Finally, 30 of the 70 SAHFs participating in

this study took on part-time work or moved their worksites into the home while simultaneously caregiving. While the literature on stay-at-home fathers' experiences is growing, limited qualitative data exists grounded in the perspectives of *both* stay-at-home fathers and their wives. One exception is the work of Chesley (2011) that draws on interviews with 21 couples, 13 of which are comprised of current SAHFs and the remainder being former primary caregivers. Chesley finds that men's caregiving roles mainly were attributed to work-related reasons and, similar to Author et al. (2011), argue that their decisions both serve to 'do' and 'undo' traditional assumptions of gender relations. Work issues and the related economics of these decisions are no doubt critical. Yet we speculate that there are multiple stories. A larger sample of couples and more comprehensive analysis is required to fully understand the origins and implications of these arrangements. The following question guides this study, "*How do both stay-at-home fathers and breadwinning mothers explain the origins and pathways that lead to their current non-traditional work and family arrangements?*"

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Forty-four married, heterosexual middle-to-upper-middle class couples participated in separate in-depth interviews (N=88) lasting between 60 to 180 minutes. A convenience sample was recruited through: (1) at-home fathering websites, (2) researchers' professional and personal networks, and (3) participant referrals. Recruitment materials targeted couples in which the father was considered the primary child care provider and married to a full-time employed wife (i.e., not self-defined dual-earning couples). Eighty percent of the men (n = 79) did not earn any income through paid work; 20% worked part-time. On average couples had been in their current arrangement for 3.5 years (range = 6 months to 15 years). While nine of the fathers had become

primary caregivers one year or less prior to being interviewed, 20 percent of couples (n = 9) reported being in their current arrangement for over 6 years. Thus, this sample reflects a wide range of time in arrangement. Couples lived on the East Coast (n = 14), Midwest (n = 15), Pacific Northwest (n = 10), and Western States (n = 5). Participants were Caucasian (68 percent), Spanish/Hispanic/Latino (2 percent), Japanese (2 percent), Chinese (2 percent), African American (1 percent), and not reported (25 percent)<sup>1</sup>. Most interviews took place face-to-face (N=79) versus on the phone (N=9). Wives' occupations included: HR manger, teacher, graphic designer, copywriter, social media director, geologist, family independence manager, city planner, executive assistant, dentist, actuary, and nurse. Men's work experiences ranged from professional, arts to skilled labor, including: pharmaceutical representative, line cook, RV Tech, comptroller, engineer, musician, journalist, financial analyst, retail, advertising sales, accountant, chef, marketing director, consultant, office engineer, city government employee, and leasing agent. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed by a paid service and checked for accuracy.

### Analysis

Investigations of everyday or lay explanations of our social world have a rich history as an object of social research (i.e., Mills 1959) and gender accountability (Risman 2009). We do not discount the importance of external factors or structural influences or refute that our data consist of retrospective accounts. Yet we aim to analyze how RTCs interpret their own lives' choices and events. All three authors read and began to identify varieties of explanations (Strauss and Corbin 1990). Each series of individual coding was followed by a meeting to review coding, discuss insights and develop category descriptions. Saturation occurred as we noticed no new significant variations surfaced within and between categories. We did not limit the number of explanations coded in any one participant transcript; agreement between couples was not

required. We recognize that our analytic choices shape our possibilities for subsequent statistical analyses. Running t-tests, for example, is not an option given our coding assumptions and small sample size within subcategories. Yet the extensive categorical scheme reported in our findings can be used to develop survey instruments and examine statistical relationships not presently investigated (see Rochlen, et al., 2010 for related critique). Finally, we organized the 22 coded explanations into four higher-order categories: (a) personal, (b) paid work, (c) economic, and (c) caregiving.

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During this initial coding, we noticed variations across the larger accounts on three characteristics: (a) the timing of husband's move into full-time childcare, (b) talk about the extent of the change or stability in marital work and family roles, and (c) the nature of the work-family arrangement preceding the husband's move into full-time childcare (i.e., dual-earner/career, traditional male-breadwinner/at-home mother; primary female breadwinner/dual-earner). Three routes or pathways emerged: (a) early negotiation, (b) arrangement reconsideration, and (c) traditional inversion. Two of the authors again reviewed participants' accounts and jointly categorized couples into one of these three decision pathways and explored explanation frequency data by pathway to further explicate diverse routes to work and life unconventionality.

## Results

Four categories of explanations resulted from our analysis: (a) paid work, (b) caregiving, (c) economic, (d) personal. Paid work explanations were most often coded across the 88 participants' accounts (36 percent,  $n = 197$ ) followed by caregiving (24 percent,  $n = 130$ ), economic (22 percent,  $n = 120$ ) and personal (18 percent,  $n = 100$ ). Participants' accounts were coded with an average of six different explanations (Range = 1 to 11). Below we first describe

each category and the subcategories coded in at least 20 percent of participants' accounts (see Table 1). Second, three decision pathways (i.e., early negotiation, arrangement reconsideration, and traditional inversion) are presented through exemplar and associated explanations.

### Paid Work Explanations

Seven paid work explanations were coded: (a) work flexibility, (b) husband quitting work, (c) husbands' work dissatisfaction, (d) husbands' job loss, (e) husbands' work retooling (f) wives' work enjoyment, (g) wives' career development. These explanations focus on employment conditions, events, attitudes, and/or emotions. As a percentage of their total number of explanations, men (38 percent,  $n = 99$ ) slightly more often than women (34 percent,  $n = 98$ ) talked about paid work shaping their decisions<sup>2</sup>.

### Work Flexibility

First, work flexibility was explained as contributing to their unconventional division of work and family labors. The nature of the flexibility differed between men and women's accounts; but, overall 39 percent ( $n = 34$ ) of participants mentioned work flexibility. First, father's flexibility primarily was described as the freedom provided by non-traditional careers ( $n = 17$ ). Flexibility allowed some men to remain minimally attached or phase out of employment. Enrico, a professional musician at home full-time with his son, still plays music at night and on weekends; he explained, "It wasn't that much of a stretch for me to give up pretty much what I was doing in the day, or most of my days, and only be able to pursue my music at night." Few flexibility explanations ( $n = 3$ ) talked of policies such as paternity leave or leaves of absence allowing them to be full-time caregivers. Women's flexibility was described as enabling their

continued paid work participation through schedule flexibility or telecommuting (n = 17). Cara, a graphic designer for a non-profit said that while her and her husband had relatively comparable earnings when their first child was born, “it just seemed like it was easier for me to be a little bit more flexible because I [could] work from home sometimes, where with Joe’s work he couldn’t.” Ellen, a lawyer explained that she goes into work at 7:30 in the morning and returns home at 4:00 allowing for long evenings with her daughter.

### **Husband Quitting Work**

Talk of a conscious choice for a father to leave the paid workforce was included in 32 percent of participants’ accounts (n = 18 for men; n = 10 for women). Andrew, a former sports journalist and father of one daughter, was frustrated with the travel his job required. Andrew explained, “I was in Phoenix and she was at home . . . by herself. It was miserable. I just couldn’t stomach the thought of going forward, even when that trip was over.” He gave his resignation effective when his daughter was a month and one-half old. Quitting at times was explained to result from work dissatisfaction (see below) as well as proactive life planning. In addition, three participants framed a husband’s choice to quit through the language of ‘retirement.’ Three participants talked about a husband quitting a job to relocate for a wives’ work opportunity.

### **Husbands’ Work Dissatisfaction**

Thirty-two percent of accounts were coded for talk of husbands’ general work dissatisfaction (n = 28). More husbands partly attributed their caregiving as resulting from work dissatisfaction (n=17) than wives’ (n = 11). Max, a former commodities trader and at-home father of three children, bluntly said, “I was so sick and tired of the corporate world and the

people and I'd just had it." Albert, an at-home father of three young children recalled being out of work during the late 1990s before becoming a father and feeling pressure to find a new job. He accepted a less than ideal offer from a large consulting firm; he wasn't there for long before his wife became pregnant. Albert explained, "I kind of disliked my job more as time was going by, and she liked her job, [so] I thought, 'You know what? Why don't I say home and do the dad thing and get out of this thing that I don't like?'" Albert added, "So that's how it started. And, I guess, we knew there was probably even more kids in the future."

### **Husbands' Job Loss**

In addition to talk about men's voluntarily exit, 26 percent (n = 11 for men; n = 12 for women) of participants mentioned husbands being forced out of work due to downsizing, firing, or lack of work. While some men attempted to find work after a layoff, others quickly traded the job search for full-time caregiving. Thus, although being laid off was not framed as a choice, the decision to remain out of work often was constructed as agency. Curt, a former pharmaceutical sales representative at home for three years with his son and daughter and married to Linda, a social media account director, explained that he got laid off shortly after his daughter was born. Curt, frustrated with the job search said, "I guess at some point it was just decided [that] I would stay home. It was something that I was totally up for." James, a home inspector when the market crashed in 2008 said that, "it was a struggle to make enough each week to support the business." James goes on to say that his wife, then at home with the kids and working part-time, had the chance to work more hours. Still they spent six months of trying to balance work hours before deciding he would stay home full-time.

### **Husbands' Career Retooling**

Decisions for men to become stay-at-home fathers also were partly explained by almost a quarter of participants as a route to career retooling (24 percent, n = 21). Women (n = 12) slightly more often than men (n = 9) talked about fathers' career retooling. Kenny worked for a large investment bank for nine years and said, "I had always been interested in teaching and then we decided as a couple that we wanted somebody at home with our newborn." He added that he decided to "go back to get my teaching certification during this process." Julia, a business project director said that her husband, who was "always good with kids," quit his job to take care of their two young children when their nanny quit. Julia continued, "we basically decided that he would quit his six figure job, because my six figures was more, right? And he would stay home with the kids, but then begin his training to go into a new career."

### **Wives' Work Enjoyment**

For 34 percent (n = 30) of participants, wives' work enjoyment was explained as one reason for the nature of their work and family arrangement. Women (n = 21) more often than men (n = 9) attributed the origins of their non-traditional work and family arrangement to women's enjoyment of work. Shortly after the birth of their son, Andrea was excited to be offered a full-time job to be a college instructor. Her husband Ted, a former RV Technician commented, "I actually encouraged her to go out and start looking. She loves to teach." Similarly, Molly revealed that she was happy to go back to work after staying at home for six years with her special needs child; she stated, "It was really tough for me that separation of being at home after being in the job." Ginny recently moved into a new job testing graphics programs for a software company, a move that significantly increased her work enjoyment. She remarked, "I think before I had a job that I loved, it probably would have been a different story."

### **Wives' Career Development**

Women's career development was also talked about as a part of RTC's decisions by 24 percent of participants (n = 12 for women; n = 9 for men). Career development explanations came couched in talk of: 'she was climbing the ladder,' 'getting promotions,' early career prioritization, and education. Brian, who once worked with computers for a law firm, said "one of the big reasons we made the switch" was because his wife Liz, a corporate trainer, "had potential for advancement and for maintaining a stream of advancement in her career, where I didn't have that where I was." Jana's continued success in the financial industry was one reason her husband left his job in marketing to be a stay-at-home father. Jana said, "I mean I've been in this career since I started out of college. I've progressed . . . I've risen to the level of partner." Other times, women's career development was explained in relation to investments in education or career training. Before moving on, however, we note that women's career success was not always framed positively. Ellen, a lawyer and mother of one daughter, clarified that while she enjoys her job, she also feels trapped in her success and never wanted "to be this big like attorney career person." Julia explained that when she unexpectedly got laid off, "It was a little bit frustrating for me because I was the one responsible for getting a new job . . . I had the higher earning potential" and they had already committed to her husband being at home.

#### Caregiving Explanations

Our second category of explanations brings together four caregiving-related issues: (a) 'one person at home,' (b) discomfort with daycare (c) women's full-time caregiving hesitance, (d) men's caregiving openness. Caregiving explanations focused on childcare values and individual preferences for performing caregiving. Women (n = 69; 53 percent) slightly more often than men (n = 61; 47 percent) talked of caregiving.

### **‘One Person at Home’**

The most prevalent childcare-related issue mentioned was the desire to have ‘one person at home’ (44 percent) (n = 16 for men; n = 23 for women). Different from ‘disapproval of daycare’ (see below), this explanation consists of talk about parents’ wanting to enjoy parenting and be present in their children’s lives rather than an aversion to daycare. Wanting ‘one person at home’ was elaborated upon in many ways, including: desires to see children grow, preferences for parental care, wants to “raise our own kids,” wishes to replicate their own childhood experiences (see ‘socialization’ below), and special needs caregiving. Steve, a former service industry worker who has been at home with his two boys for five years frankly stated, “It was always one of us who was going to be at home . . . I’m having kids because I enjoy being around them.” Karin, a mother of two young boys and an assistant city commissioner, stated that they wanted one of them to be home because, “those are just, you know, really fun important years and we wanted to be around for that.”

### **Discomfort with Daycare**

Over a third (34 percent, n = 16 for men; n = 14 for women) of participants talked about uneasiness with non-family daycare as shaping their decisions. Discomfort with daycare was expressed with phrases such as: “I refuse to have daycare,” “we wanted to avoid it,” and “it didn’t feel comfortable to us.” Kamy said that “sending a newborn to daycare was very anxiety-inducing.” Gabrielle expressed, “the idea of some third party being with our kid more than either of us just is totally foreign.” Participants’ discomfort also resulted from what they described as low-quality childcare options. With the birth of their second child, Janice, a mother of two toddlers and public relations professional said they “looked around” for infant childcare but

“there just didn’t seem to be any good quality infant options.” A trip to see childcare options was the final straw in Cameron’s decision to stay-at-home: “I was looking at everything and like, “My kid’s not coming here.”

### **Men’s Caregiving Openness**

For 23 percent of participants, men’s willingness or interest in taking on full-time caregiving duties influenced their non-traditional division of labor. Men (n = 15) more often than women (n = 5) mentioned their caregiving openness as factoring into their decisions. Men expressed “I wanted it to happen,” or “I always wanted to stay at home.” Karin explained “we thought about it and I mean, he was like, ‘yeah, this is something I’m willing to do.’” Other men’s openness to caregiving stemmed from knowing early on in their relationships (see ‘relational groundwork’ below) that they wanted to put family over career. John expressed that their decision was not financial, but rather “I knew my family was going to be more important than my career.” When Marissa initially “put on the breaks” about having children, she recalls her husband saying, “oh, I’ll stay home with the kids. That’s what I’ve always wanted.”

### **Women’s Full-time Caregiving Hesitance**

In addition to men’s willingness to be primary caregivers, 32 percent (n = 21 for women; n = 7 for men) of participants also mentioned that their decisions were partly driven by women’s hesitance or reluctance to take on full-time caregiving duties. At times, women directly stated, “I don’t want to stay at home;” other times, participants expressed: “I always had reservation about staying at home” or “I think I’m better off at work.” Darla, for example, reasoned that “I just couldn’t be the stay at home parent. I’m a better parent because I’m working.” Similarly, Jana

explained, “I couldn’t do it. I wouldn’t want to do it. I could do it, but I wouldn’t want to do it. I am very at home here (at work).” Curt, our stay-at-home father of two children who also plays music at night, said “she loves what she does . . . and I think she’s expressed that she wouldn’t just stay at home.”

It also must be noted that 3 percent of participants mentioned that mothers’ did desire to be at home full time with their children rather than working. It’s “not in the cards,” Stacy explained, for her to stay home; she clarified that her working was necessitated by their cost of living and their earnings differential. Brad described his wife, Lynette, and said, “I think she’d be a lot happier if the roles were reversed.”

#### Economic Explanations

Three explanations framed around economic issues emerged in at least 20 percent of participants’ accounts: (a) ‘she makes more,’ (b) daycare costs, and (c) non-salary income. Women (n = 59; 21 percent) and men (n = 61; 24 percent) relatively equally mentioned economic explanations.

#### **‘She Makes More.’**

The most frequently provided economic explanation was ‘she makes more;’ meaning, that, at the time of the decision, the wife out earned her husband. Fifty-four percent of participants (n = 26 for men; n = 21 for women) said that a wife’s higher earnings contributed to the emergence of their arrangement. The explanation ‘she makes more’ was described in different ways such as a consistent pattern of wives’ higher earning, recent promotion, husbands’ layoff or reduction in earnings. Alex, an arts performer who is also at home with his

young son put it this way: “I don’t know that we discussed it so much. I mean, it just was, you know . . . ‘Well, if you can make \$150,000.00,’ you know, but the reality is I can’t.” He added with a smile, “I might be able to, but not being a clown.” Max eventually left his career in the military, went into the reserves, and stayed at home with their son because of his wife’s higher earnings. He explained: “then she got to a point where, as she really started doing well . . . and we had a decision to make.”

### **Childcare Costs**

The economics of childcare were explained by 27 percent (n = 14 for men; n = 10 for women) of participants as factoring into their work and family decision making. The high cost of infant care was mentioned as well as the increase in costs when two or more children need childcare. Occasionally, these costs were measured in relation to husbands’ salaries. Dillon, a former property manager, put it plainly, “It didn’t make financial sense. Most of my salary would be going to childcare and I didn’t like my job, anyway.” Jim and Gwen used childcare with their first daughter, but when a second child came along Gwen knew daycare costs for two children would be “astronomical.”

### **Non-Salary Income**

Non-salary income was mentioned by 23 percent (n = 9 for men; n = 11 for women) of participants as influencing their work-family decisions. Non-salary sources of income were described as supplemental monies not coming from a regular paycheck but permitting a husband to leave (or remain out of) paid employment. Non-salary sources of income included: unemployment, disability insurance, retirement, severance, inheritance, family financial gifts,

trust income, and savings. Rick, for example, who his job in real-estate last year, said that he would rather spend time with his son than get a job which would pay less than unemployment. Sam, a stay-at-home father of two teenage girls explained that an unexpected inheritance from the tragic loss of his parents in an accident “changed our financial situation somewhat dramatically.” This non-salary income allowed him to quit his career and his wife to return to work and begin a second career.

### Personal Explanations

Finally, individual or relational reasons mentioned as contributing to the origins of unconventional work and family arrangement were coded as personal explanations. Wives (22 percent, n = 62) more often than men (15 percent, n = 38) provided these explanations. Three personal explanations surfaced: (a) socialization, (b) relational groundwork, (c) personality.

#### **Socialization**

Forty-eight percent (n = 42) of participants talked about past events or issues related to their families of origin as contributing to their work and family decision making. While husbands and wives’ accounts were peppered with the phase ‘when I was growing up’ with relatively equal frequency, the substance of their experiences differed. Wives most often talked about seeing their mothers participate in paid labor and/or being in economic jeopardy because of divorce and, as a result, this experience shaped their breadwinning orientation. Gabriella, a self-employed environmental consultant and mother of two young boys, recalled her mother’s divorce. She remembered her mother telling her, “Don’t let yourself end up in [the] position that I’m in where you’ve depended on your husband for 25 years and now you have nothing.” For

fathers, socialization explanations primarily consisted of: (a) memories of absent fathers resulting in a desire to be active fathers and (b) talk of at-home mothers shaping desires to have 'one person at home' (see 'caregiving explanations' above). John, an at-home father of two children, explained, "I was the last of seven children between the marriage of my mom and my dad [and, because of] their careers and their own selfishness, they neglected me."

### **Relational Groundwork**

Thirty-two percent of participants (n=28) attributed the origins of their unconventional work and family lives to groundwork laid early on in relationships. Wives (n=18) somewhat more often than husbands (n=10) used 'relational groundwork' explanations. Jackie, an HR director and mother of two children stated "we started talking about it on our first date." Bob, a stay-at-home father of one toddler son began his story by saying, "I think we had almost talked about it before she was even pregnant." He continues "Like way back, even before we got married . . . Just like conversation on the future." Denise, a mother of two and online retail merchandiser, joked that "even at our wedding" their best man quipped that her husband Marc "always wanted someone to support him." She elaborated: "So this went way back . . . the prophecy came true. So yeah, he's never had a problem with it." Jana noted that they "touched upon" the subject of who would stay home early on in their relationship; she said, "I'm sure even then we would have concluded that I ought to work."

### **Personality**

Almost a quarter of participants included in their accounts talk of personality shaping decision making (22 percent, n = 19). Personality attributions consisted of talk about one spouse

being naturally predisposed to be “better” or “more suited” to perform caring and earning duties. Personality explanations often included phrases such as: “I’m not your typical woman” or “He’s not your typical man.” Women (n = 14) more often than men (n = 5) mentioned personality in their decision making accounts. Denise explained, “I’ve always had more the stereotypical man of the house traits and he’s had more of the female traits . . . we’ve settled into our comfort zones I guess.” Her husband Marc agreed and said, “I think in our relationship I’m the caregiver or the emotional caretaker.” Cara, a mother of one young daughter and non-profit graphic designer/marketer stated, “I think a lot of times Joe can take on the more sensitive role and I’ll take on the more aggressive role.” Jillian, the mother of one and marketing manager said “I think some men have such an ego that they could never have a wife who is the breadwinner. They’re too busy beating their chests . . . but he’s not that way.”

### Three Decision Pathways

Three decision making pathways emerged from the second phase of our analysis: (a) early negotiation, (b) arrangement reconsideration, and (c) traditional inversion. The percentages reported below represent the proportion of husbands and wives within each decision pathway mentioning a particular explanation (see Table 2). To tap into the rich qualitative data, each pathway is illustrated with one couple’s account along with associated explanations.

#### **Early Negotiation Pathway**

Marissa, uncertain about motherhood, had been delaying conversations with her husband Stanley about having children until she completed her doctoral degree. Stanley, eager to start a family as he approached his mid-thirties, had already made it clear to Marissa that having

children for him was non-negotiable and he would be willing to take on primary childcare duties (relational groundwork). Early on in their discussions Stanley told Marissa, “I’ll stay home with the kids. That’s what I’ve always wanted” (men’s caregiving orientation). Marissa enjoyed her work as a therapist (wives’ work enjoyment) and Stanley dropped out of law school to pursue a degree in teaching. Although now she’s “thrilled” they had children, Marissa still talks about him as naturally having more “patience” and “emotional flexibility” than her as a parent (personality). While Marissa was pregnant with their first daughter, Stanley decided that his teacher’s summer vacation would not be enough time off; coincidentally, he just received a small inheritance (non-salary income). They decided to use the extra money to invest in a longer leave of absence for Stanley. At that time, their salaries were comparable. Stanley remembers asking his principle for a leave of absence (work flexibility). She wryly responded “Well, it’s been wonderful having you.” Stanley believed she “knew exactly what was going to happen, which was that was going to be the end of my traditional teaching career.” His three-month leave of absence turned into another leave and eventually resignation (husband quit job).

Fifty percent of couples’ accounts (n = 22) represented what we call the early negotiation decision pathway. For these RTCs, the ‘seeds’ or foundations of their current arrangement were described as being fashioned (a) early in their relationship, even at times prior to marriage, and/or (b) at the beginning of parenthood. About half of the participants coded in the early negotiation pathway also were coded for ‘she makes more’ as a part of their decision making accounts. This route to being a RTC represents relative stability across marital earning and/or caregiving roles. The origins of early negotiation pathways were often described with caregiving and personal explanations such as discomfort with daycare (n=20; 67 percent), men’s caregiving openness (n=14; 70 percent), wanting one person at home (n=21; 48 percent), and early

socialization experiences (n=27; 61 percent). More than half of the couples categorized in the early negotiation pathway had been in their arrangement over six years.

### **Arrangement Reconsideration Pathway**

Marco and Candy met on the job. He was in operations; she was in sales. Candy started off her account by saying, “there’s not a rhyme or reason in there. There certainly [was] no plan for it to be that way.” Both of their careers required extensive travel and it became “very chaotic” with three young children. They both recalled the stress of two careers and three young children. They had been “soul searching” over a year. Because they were not comfortable with non-family care (discomfort with daycare), Marco and Candy discussed the option of having one person at home to alleviate the stress (‘makes life easier;’ see Table 1). They had not yet decided who would stay home when she got word of downsizing at their company. In the last few years, Candy had moved ahead of Marco in terms of earnings and responsibility at the company (‘she makes more’). So when the opportunity presented itself for Marco to “volunteer” for the layoff (husband quit job), both agreed to this solution. Marco explained, “I went to my boss and I said ‘I know what’s going on. And I’ll be okay if you take me out, take care of me.’” Candy remembers that “in the beginning . . . Marco wasn’t ready to cope and so we still had the kids in daycare.” It took a few months and Candy reminding Marco that “Having the kids in daycare and you at home just doesn’t make sense.” Marco, at home for 7 years now, said he had to “ease into” his role but now expresses a sense of pride in his stay-at-home father identity.

This second path, we termed arrangement reconsideration, is best described as a shift in work and family organization after a period of time as working parents and often was triggered external event, a relational ‘decision point’ and/or some combination. Thirty-six percent of

couples represented the arrangement reconsideration pathway. For these initially dual-career or dual-earner couples, a change of direction in their division of labor was described. Almost every arrangement reconsideration account included the “makes life easier” explanations. That is, these couples wanted to alleviate some type of work-family conflict. At some point as parents, husbands’ exited, reduced participation in, or decided to remain out of the paid labor force after a layoff. These couples often provided paid work explanations (41 percent), including: husbands’ work dissatisfaction (n = 15), husbands’ job loss (n = 12) and wives work enjoyment (n = 17). Talk about ‘men’s caregiving openness’ as a part of their decision making was not often a part of arrangement reconsideration accounts (n = 5) yet men spoke of adapting. Wives’ full-time caregiving hesitance was an explanation often included in the arrangement reconsideration pathway (38 percent, n = 14). While three of the arrangement reconsideration couples reported being in their arrangement over six years, the majority of these couples, at the time of the interview, had been a RTC less than five years.

### **Traditional Inversion Pathway**

“Okay, that switch happened for us in June of 2007,” Kelly stated at the beginning of her interview. James, her husband, was in business with his father-in-law inspecting homes when the economy took a turn for the worst. Before the economy got tough, Kelly had been primarily at home with her two young boys while working one day a week as a freelance editor. She continued, “that was when we started to really feel the pinch where he was getting paid by the number of inspections that he did and his paychecks just kept getting smaller.” James noted that for about six months, they went back and forth trying to balance his dwindling paycheck with the number of hours Kelly needed to work. She explained, “James and I had always said that we

wanted one of us to be able to be at home with our kids ('one parent at home'). She continued, "We didn't wanna be a family that someone else was raising our children" (discomfort with daycare). Initially, they thought his work situation would be temporary; but eventually, Kelly asked her employer if she could work more hours (wives work availability; see Table 1). He explained, "we finally came to the realization that if she went to work 30 to 35 hours a week, we'd actually be making more than trying to fight for me to make a little bit, and her to make a little bit." It was the first time that Kelly had worked full time and that James had been at home with their boys. Almost two years after the "switch," and he explained, "but we decided to try it, see how it would work, and that's where we're at." James openly states, and Kelly agrees, "we work better if she is at home and I'm at work, just because it works better between her and I, not necessarily for the kids, but between her and I."

Kelly and James' account represents our final path to becoming a RTC we call traditional inversion. Four couples initially organized their work and family lives as male-breadwinner-female caregivers; but then, for various reasons 'reversed' caring and earning roles. Traditional inversion pathways took the form of a wife leaving dedicated, full-time caregiving to become the primary earner and a husband exiting, reducing participation, or remaining out of the paid labor force. Traditional inversion couples also mentioned husband's work dissatisfaction (n=4), 'one person at home' (n = 6) and non-salary income (n = 5). One of these couples had shifted their work and family arrangement less than a year before their interviews while the remaining three RTCs had been in their current arrangement for between two and three years.

Comment [RR2]: is this right?

### **Discussion, Limitations and Future Directions**

This study supports and extends existing research on breadwinning mother and stay-at-home father couples with three key contributions. First, breadwinning mothers and stay-at-home fathers' work and life decisions do not always represent role reversal. RTCs, at times, adopt gender unconventional roles early in their relationships. Second, the four categories of explanations and three pathways found in our analysis complexly illustrate the diverse ways couples arrive at these unconventional arrangements. Finally, couples' accounts evidence the 'slow drip' of gendered social change (Sullivan 2004).

#### It's Not Always Gender Role *Reversal*

Breadwinning mothers and stay-at-home fathers' decisions are often framed in the media and research through the language of switching or reversing. Chesley (2011), for example, in studying stay-at-home father couples states that she wanted to "better understand whether changes to a couples' work/family allocation can produce changes at the individual or interactional levels that have the potential to influence gender inequality." (646) This reversal language (and causal assumption) implies movement from fixed or pre-determined starting point for gender role construction. And, certainly some of our couples' accounts do portray a change in divisions of labor, if not a reversal. Descriptions of arrangement reconsideration, at times, and certainly traditional inversion pathways are framed through the language of reversal. A number of individual explanations also signaled a switch or an involuntary (even if successful) adaptation of previously existing divisions of labor. Yet, at times, a change in division of labor did not occur; our findings problematize the ubiquity of reversal.

For almost one half of participating couples, their stories primarily are not those of role *reversal* but of early relational negotiations. These deliberate, often longer-term atypical work

and family arrangements proactively established atypical gendered identities and/or marriages; they did not reactively adapt to external conditions or require a change in the allocation of labor. Limited 'role reversal' per se ever occurs in these relationships. Discussion of early negotiation decision pathways and 'relational groundwork' explanations are virtually absent in the academic literature. This finding extends existing research on the increasing prevalence of choice in men's caregiving (Chesley 2011; Kramer and Kramer 2011) while illustrating how these choices may be foundational to some relationships. Indeed, our own label of 'reverse traditional couples' now seems even more amiss. Drawing on the idea of 'gender flexibility' (Gerson, 2010), we propose the term Caring and Earning Flexible Couples.

Gerson explains that instead of "fixed, rigid behavioral strategies and mental categories demarcating separate spheres for women and men, gender flexibility involves more equal sharing and more fluid boundaries for organizing and apportioning emotional, social, and economic care." (10, emphasis added). Gender flexibility means being willing to recognize and value partners' unique strengths and career or caregiving interests as well as supporting the development of these pursuits regardless of larger gender scripts. The early negotiation pathway exhibits gender flexibility in the formation of their relationships; arrangement reconsideration and traditional inversion pathways evidence gender flexibility in a more reactive yet critical manner. Both grounded qualitative approach and sample contributed to our ability to identify these variations across couples in the nature and extent of gender change. Future research needs to explore the negotiation of childcare and household tasks in a more detailed way across various decision pathways and across sexuality, class and race (e.g., Pyke 1996). Would an investigation of early negotiation pathway couples' division of household labor, for example, challenge the

long-standing claim that “the more a husband relies on his wife for economic support, the less housework he does” (Brines 1994, 652)?

#### Economics . . . And So Much More

Our findings also support past research on the critical role of paid-work and economics in the lives of RTCs (e.g., Chesley 2011; Rochlen et al. 2010; Winslow-Bowe 2006). Just over half of participants mentioned that wives higher earnings were a critical decision making factors, as well paid work was central to many accounts. Economics matter. Jobs matter. Women’s increased economic power made possible for many of the men in this study to take on full-time caregiving. At the same time, 48 percent of participants *did not attribute* their decisions to wives’ higher earnings. Caregiving and personal explanations together represent 42 percent of the total reasons coded across accounts. Thus, our findings also support and extend past research in the relational, emotional and personal rationales for RTCs choices (e.g., Doucet, 2004; Rochlen et al., 2010); explanations that often run counter to prevailing gendered assumptions. For example, men’s willingness to caregive and women’s hesitancy to take on full-time at-home parenting roles were critical to some couples account. In addition, men were, at times, talked about as the “natural” caregivers or women as “not having the personality” to be at home; we see quasi-biological language to justify sex atypical roles. Further, preferences for family care did not necessarily equate to “mother care” in the lives of many of our couples. These sorts of counter-stereotypical explanations signal in small movements away from gendered referents to individual preferences for divisions of labor (see also Risman and Johnson-Sumerford 1998); and this evidence for the ‘slow drip’ of social change is only strengthened by the fact that these couples indeed were performing key non-traditional work and family roles.

Thus, we must expand our thinking with respect to prevailing economic and/or work-related explanations for this phenomenon (Chesley 2011; Hymowitz 2012). Too narrowly describing these couples' decisions based on economics and work, serves to unintentionally obfuscate the multifaceted nature of these decisions and various roles that agency plays for both men and women. Not all women 'opt out' only because of a natural desire to be at home full time (Stone, 2007); not all men 'opt out' because of economic or job loss. We must acknowledge multiple stories. Future research needs to build on the complex qualitative portrait this study provides as the basis for more complex scale development tapping into the diversity of how couples differently arrive at these decisions (e.g., Rochlen et al. 2010). Future research also needs to explore the possibilities of other pathways, challenges, and benefits to alternative ways of organizing our work and family lives.

#### The Slow Drip of Social Change

Finally, in addition to revolutionary forms of social change, the 'slow drip' metaphor is a powerful feminist argument for the force of daily work and family actions and interactions (Sullivan 2004). One paradox of gender and social change is that "to erase boundaries, one must first recognize them, thus confirming them" (Lorber 2005, 139). We see Sullivan's daily social change and Lorber's paradox vividly in our findings when we juxtapose the language of women's hesitancy to be home with talk of men's willingness to do so. The language of 'hesitancy' speaks to a contradictory consciousness; an awareness (i.e., "I should want to be primary caregiver") as well as voice and resistance to prevailing constructions of femininity and intensive mothering (i.e., "Yet I can openly express my reluctance to take on this role"). Women expressing in everyday interactions reluctance to perform gendered work both reifies and resist

gendered boundaries. Similarly, framing men's caregiving in these data as willingness and choice is also paradoxical. The language of choice indicates perhaps a shift, an opening up of definitions of masculinity while also perpetuating masculine power (i.e., having the power to choose as different from women's need to hesitate or resist). To illustrate: none of the men in our study explained that a lack of spousal support or intensive parenting pressures pushed them to exit the workforce. Stay-at-home mothers, however, often explain that absent fathers, a lack of support for household duties, and intensive mothering as pushing them out of the workforce (Stone 2007). That is, choice, gender and work-family life are complexly related (Williams, 2000). New choices also bring new constraints. Thus, future research needs to get underneath the language of choice in relation to men's full-time caregiving. What other ways is power exerted, transformed, or equalized in CEFCs? What could we learn from a study of CEFCs economic decision making or childcare gatekeeping?

In conclusion, we have attempted in this study to give a glimpse into the full range of explanations and routes these couples took to gender unconventional work and family lives. Sullivan doesn't discount, nor do we neglect, the power of institutional and societal structures to impede and create social change. Yet the personal is political; we hope that by grounding our analysis in these couples' accounts, we can contribute to the politics of gender and change.

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> The grounded theory process we followed included eight initial exploratory interviews with couples (see Author et al., 2011) which did not include the collection of race/ethnicity data. As such, the 25 percent (N=22) of participants 'not reporting' is comprised of 8 couples (N=16) who were not asked for this information in exploratory interviews as well as 3 couples (N=6) who chose not to report this information during our main data collection process. Interviews across all phases of the project asked participants to tell us the story of how they arrived at their current work-family arrangement and were included in the present analysis.

<sup>2</sup> Husbands and wives frequencies by each explanation are calculated as a percent of their total number of explanations: 257 explanations for husbands and 287 explanations for wives.

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