

Work and Family - Is there Inherent Conflict?
Radcliffe Talk – October 12, 2000– Ralph E. Gomory

Introduction - Procrustes

I want to start my talk with a reference, slightly abbreviated, from the Encyclopedia Britannica. The reference is to Procrustes.

Procrustes, also called PROCOPTAS, in Greek legend, a robber dwelling somewhere in Attica--in some versions, in the neighborhood of Eleusis. His father was said to be Poseidon. Procrustes had an iron bed (or, according to some accounts, two beds) on which he compelled his victims to lie. Here, if a victim was shorter than the bed, he stretched him by hammering or racking the body to fit. Alternatively, if the victim was longer than the bed, he cut off the legs to make the body fit the bed's length. In either event the victim died. Ultimately Procrustes was slain by his own method at the hands of the young Attic hero [Theseus](#), who as a young man went about slaying robbers and monsters that pervaded the countryside.

The "bed of Procrustes," or "Procrustean bed," has become proverbial for arbitrarily--and perhaps ruthlessly, forcing someone to fit into an unnatural scheme or pattern.

Relevance of Procrustes

How does the bed of Procrustes fit into a talk about work and the about the dignity of work? First dignity, clearly it is not dignified to be painfully stretched or shortened to suit someone's arbitrary demands.

Nevertheless I assert that is what today's rigidly structured workplace is doing for many people in this country who are being forced to painfully redo their lives to fit the unyielding structure of the workplace. And I do not speak today of the disadvantaged, important though their problems are, but rather of the supposedly prosperous middle class. So I am not speaking of a problem limited to households headed by single mothers but of one that extends to almost all families in which both husband and wife work. I am speaking of the stress that the conditions of work today put on families where husband and wife work.

Two Career Families – Why husband and wife work today

Certainly there are many families where husband and wife work, not because of economic necessity, but by choice. Aside from the economic incentive, work can increase self-esteem and independence, add an additional world of social contacts, and provide new experiences, challenge and stimulation.

But, putting aside these non-economic rewards of work, the basic economics of today's world dictate that in most families two, not one, family members must work. In contrast with the past, even the fairly recent past, in today's world, in most families one person does not produce a family wage, a wage that can support a family.

The Economic Reason

This may seem surprising in today's ebullient economy. But these are the economic facts for many Americans. : Jeff Madrick writing in the New York Times points out that the performance of the economy has not yet compensated for the persistent erosion of the income of male workers since the early 1970's. Women have not only chosen to work they have also had to work fill the economic breach.

I think we can all agree that it a great step forward that so many women have the opportunity to work, an opportunity, formerly denied them through both custom and prejudice. But it is also true that if women did not work, most family incomes would not have risen at all in the 1980's and 1990's.

The Resulting Stress

But when both husband and wife work, there is inherent stress. I say inherent because with the structure of today's workplace there is no way to avoid it. This inherent stress is due to the fact that there are in American middle class families three jobs but only two people to do them.

Creating a home and a social world has always been a job, this is especially obvious to anyone who has ever had children, but it applies to others as well. So today y, the husband has his job, the wife has her job, but the home job has not gone away. It is still there. There are in fact three jobs but only two people. This is an overload situation, this is a stress situation.

How do families deal with this inherent stress? There are many approaches. Some families try to offload or reduce the home job, hence the emphasis given to children's day care, and the role of household help. Some try to combine the home job with the work job by working at home. This does in fact saves the time otherwise consumed in commuting to work, but the notion that work and the home job, especially children, can be taken care of simultaneously is illusory. And gender continues to play a role.

In today's world the persistence of gender roles certainly continues to burden women in this situation more than men because women continue to do a larger part of the home job. Our studies indicate that women find the extra time by cutting back on sleep, Our surveys also show that while men are happier at home than at work, women are happiest, not at work, but not at home either, but in between, traveling or shopping on the way home from work is the freest and least stressful moments in their usual overcrowded day.

There certainly has been some change or evolution in gender roles. In some families today the husband/father does far more than the small part of the home job that was his traditionally.

However it is important to realize that the inherent conflict built into two people and three jobs does not go away even if gender roles are equalized. Even in a completely equal division of roles there is too much to do. Three jobs and two people comes down to

1 ½ jobs per person even when the burden is equally divided. Gender equality would be fairer than where we are today but it is a way of redistributing the pain of overwork, it is, not a way of getting rid of it.

Why do we have this conflict – is it inevitable?

This conflict of two people and three jobs may seem inevitable but is it really? I think the answer is no. What makes it a conflict is the rigidity of a workplace that insists on a one size fits all approach to working. That one size is the forty-hour (or often more than forty hour) full time job. It is the rigidity of a workplace that seldom provides meaningful or remunerative part time work, and even fewer part time careers.

Status of part time work

Why do we have this kind of workplace? There is no inherent reason. Today's workplace is an artifact of history.

The workplace we have today was built not for today's world but for yesterday's. A world with an all male workface of men who earned a family wage and whose wives did the home job. That origin is betrayed in the overwhelming prevalence of structures that require full time jobs, in how companies count headcount internally, in the antiquated rules governing benefits, and in the attitudes that classes those who do not conform to this outdated structure as second class workers.

Because of the rigidity of the workplace the economic need for more than one person to work in a family translates into the need for both adults to work full time. Anything less means that one or the other risks the loss of career status. But this outcome, with its built-in overload of three jobs and two people, and its impact on the quality of life, does not have to be.

A number of significant American firms, including Ernst & Young, Johnson & Johnson, Marriott, IBM, John Hancock, and Hewlett-Packard, have led the way in implementing meaningful part-time work. And part time work and part time careers are the keys that release families from the three jobs two-person dilemma.

But our studies of firms also show that even when firms have serious programs intended to make part-time careers possible for people at various stages of their lives, (and most don't do even that) managers may not implement them, or employees may hesitate to use them, fearing, often correctly, significant career penalties.

Joan Williams, of American University, has explained this pattern of career penalties in terms of the concept of the >ideal worker=. The workplace, she points out,

because of its all male history, has developed a rather definite notion of what the ideal worker is like. The ideal worker is someone who can work the prescribed full workweek throughout his entire career, without taking time off for child bearing, child rearing, or family issues of any sort other than short-lived emergencies. The worker is committed to the company, work always comes first. The pervasive, though often subconscious acceptance of this notion of the ideal worker, she argues, often tends to penalize those who deviate from that norm. If you go home early, you are not serious; if you work four days, not five, you are not committed. You may be more productive per hour or per dollar of wage than anyone else but that may not matter.

It is these attitudes and rules inherited from the past that make part time work difficult or bought at a high price. It is this unnecessary rigidity of the workplace that translates the need for more than one job into the need for two full time jobs. And this in turn, since the home job does not go away, turns into three jobs for two people with all the stress, hurry, and loss of quality of life that that often entails.

Can the Workplace be restructured?

Does it have to be this way? Can the workplace be restructured so that people with different needs as they go through their life course, from first employment to retirement or semi-retirement, can find patterns of work that allow them to contribute and still live a full and productive life? Can it be restructured so that there is choice in the way people interact with the workplace?

I think the answer is yes; yes it can be restructured far far more than it is today. Certainly we can find examples of work that is hard to divide. But much of what we see today is more habit and history than it is inherent necessity. Already today there are examples of part time work and part time careers that belie the stereotype of part timers as being either in inconsequential jobs or not serious workers. At least two of the Big 5 accounting firms, including Ernst & Young and Deloitte & Touche have partners who are part time. More significantly these firms have made part time partners out of part time associates.

A number of law firms have also partnered part-time associates. These are associates who were working in the 50-80 percent range. We have examples of part time managers as well as part time professionals. There are many examples. Except in a very few companies these examples are few and far between, but nevertheless they show what can be done.

As one who spent almost thirty years in industry I have not the slightest doubt that on a large-scale part time jobs and part time careers are perfectly possible. The barriers are much more those of thought, habit, and man made law, than those of inherent need or of some inherent structure in the nature of work that demands full time work.

Conclusion

What is the effect of all this? Jerry Jacobs and Kathleen Gerson, show that those who work especially long hours want to work less. And those who work short hours, usually earning too little, want to work more.

Truly that is a description of a Procrustean bed. Those who want to work short are stretched long, and those who want to work long are cut short. Today the American family is being stressed to fit the rigid Procrustean bed of a largely unyielding workplace.

I believe that *all* of us would benefit from a workplace with more flexibility, one that allows people to pursue careers that adjust to the different needs of different people, and to the changing needs that all people have as they live through the different stages of their lives.

Thank You Very Much