

# Equally Shared Parenting

Francine M. Deutsch<sup>1</sup>

Department of Psychology, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, Massachusetts

## Abstract

Conventional images of motherhood and fatherhood, social interactions, and gender-based job pressures push couples toward unequal parenting. Equally sharing parents resist those pressures, and construct equality through everyday negotiations and ongoing decisions about family and work. They do not believe that mothers are more responsible for children, or more suited to care for them, than fathers. They avoid gender-based decisions about jobs that reinforce a gender-based division of labor at home. Qualitative research is necessary to unravel the complex interactions between work and family arrangements, and to show how economic, social, and ideological factors constrain family arrangements, but are also transformed in their creation.

## Keywords

division of labor; gender equality; parenting

In some families today, fathers are every bit as involved in the day-to-day care of children as mothers. These fathers have gone far beyond "helping" their wives; they take equal responsibility for parenting. Equal sharers are a diverse group, from blue-collar workers who alternate work shifts to care for their children, to feminist professionals who believe deeply in gender equality, to middle-class American couples who simply discovered that man-

aging two jobs and children worked better with equality than with traditional gendered parenting (Deutsch, 1999).<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, in most families, mothers are still doing a disproportionate share of parenting, even when they are employed full-time (Pleck, 1997). When "partners become parents," no matter how egalitarian they were before, the transition usually marks a shift to a more gender-based division of labor (Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Walzer, 1998). The challenge for researchers is to explicate how some families resist the ubiquitous pressure toward inequality.

Many studies that examine the division of labor at home search for its "causes." Although variations in childhood socialization do not account for variations in the division of labor, research on families with highly participatory fathers does show that comparable careers of husbands and wives, egalitarian ideology, and liberal friends facilitate paternal participation in parenting (e.g., Coltrane, 1996; Risman, 1998). Nonetheless, these factors cannot fully explain equal parenting. First, Calasanti and Bailey (1991) found that inequality persists even in couples with liberal sex role ideology, equal work hours, and equal pay. Second, these factors are as likely to be the consequences of the division of labor as its causes. Equally sharing parents develop more egalitarian ideas about gender, and make choices that result in comparable work hours and salaries. Rather than seeking causes, researchers need to pay attention to how mothers and fathers actively create

equal parenting, if they are to better understand it.

Parenting is created through the accumulation of decisions and acts that make up parents' everyday lives. Couples become equal or unequal in working out the details: who makes children's breakfasts, changes their diapers, kisses their boo-boos, takes off from work when they are sick, and teaches them to ride bikes. Nothing about this process is automatic. Couples' decisions are constrained, but not determined, by powerful internalized images of motherhood and fatherhood, by gender bias in job paths, by social interactions that relentlessly reinforce the message that mothers and fathers are "supposed to" behave differently, and by careers structured in ways that make sense only for men unencumbered by child care. These factors define the context in which fathers and mothers work out family arrangements (Deutsch, 1999). Qualitative research on both unequal and equally sharing parents illuminates how these factors shape decisions that typically lead to unequal parenting, but, more important, how couples sometimes resist those pressures.<sup>3</sup>

## CULTURAL IMAGES OF MOTHERHOOD AND FATHERHOOD

Cultural images of the "good mother" can be daunting. The ideal of the ever-available, endlessly patient, totally nurturing mother is virtually impossible for any woman to achieve and leaves many women feeling guilty (Deutsch, 1999; Walzer, 1998). The "ideology of intensive motherhood" prescribes that mothers have an exclusive responsibility to children. Any other caregivers, including fathers, are second-best substitutes. Children's needs come first (Hays, 1996). This

ideology drives some mothers to abandon their jobs or cut back to part-time work (Deutsch, 1999; Walzer, 1998). Employed mothers act on this ideology by absorbing the conflict between work and family (Hays, 1996).

Powerful cultural myths link this ideology to biological differences between men and women. Parents who develop unequal roles often believe that children naturally have a special bond with mothers (Deutsch, 1999; Walzer, 1998). They also often believe that men cannot nurture infants the way mothers can. These myths become self-fulfilling prophecies because parents who believe in women's superior capacity to nurture and to "bond" with their children arrange their lives so that mothers will be more available to children. In doing so, they promote both the bonds that they believe in and the myth of maternal superiority (Coltrane, 1996; Deutsch, 1999; Lupton & Barclay, 1997).

Ideals for fatherhood are confused today. Responsibility for breadwinning is still expected from fathers, but increasingly we expect good fathers to be involved, nurturing, and available for their children (Lupton & Barclay, 1997). Skirting the issue of equality, the belief that fathers should be involved often coexists with the conviction that mothers are primarily responsible for children. Families that claim to share child care are often characterized by "manager-helper" dynamics, in which mothers are responsible for child care and fathers merely help when asked (Coltrane, 1996; Gerson, 1997).

Social interactions reinforce the dominant cultural images of what mothers and fathers should and should not be doing. Sometimes the social pressure is blatant, as when a co-worker chides a father who resists working long hours to care for his children, or when a

grandparent questions a mother's decision to go back to work. But sometimes the pressure is more subtle. Every time someone asks an expectant woman about her work plans while ignoring her husband's plans, it communicates that parenting is primarily a mother's responsibility. Onlookers also reinforce inequality when they praise fathers for caregiving behaviors that women do routinely without praise. This double standard shouts that men are not really expected to soothe a crying baby, leave work to pick up a sick child at day care, or go to a school conference (Deutsch, 1999).

Couples who share equally from the start resist conventional images of motherhood and fatherhood. Having rejected the belief in biological differences between mothers' and fathers' ability to nurture, they work out shared care of the tiniest infants; sharing infant care, in turn, reinforces their beliefs that both men and women are able to nurture (Coltrane, 1996; Deutsch, 1999). Although unequal men report that breastfeeding interferes with their involvement, equally sharing fathers find other ways to participate while their wives breastfeed, including diapering infants, giving them supplemental bottles, and rocking them back to sleep at night (Deutsch, 1999).

When parents share infant care, it debunks myths about gender differences in the ability to give that care. Studies show little difference in the nurturing behavior of mothers and fathers who are primary caregivers (Geiger, 1996). Moreover, in equally sharing families, children's preferences often shift back and forth between parents, depending on who has taken care of them more recently (Coltrane, 1996; Deutsch, 1999). Just as women do, men develop into nurturers through their relationships with their children, and their children discover that fathers are just

as capable of meeting their needs as mothers. Parents who assume fathers and mothers are equally capable act in ways to make that a reality, and in doing so reinforce their own beliefs (Deutsch, 1999).

But not all parents who become equal sharers are out to challenge conventional maternal and paternal roles. According to the latest government figures available, fathers are the primary caregivers of 11.4% of all preschool children whose mothers are employed (Casper, 1998). Predominantly working class, these families either cannot afford day care or do not want "strangers" raising their children. The fathers in these families provide an extraordinary amount of child care, including highly "maternal" tasks of soothing, feeding, bathing, and putting babies to sleep. Yet they often hold very traditional gender ideologies. The reality is, however, that when fathers are home caring for young children, they become nurturers themselves, however much that contradicts their gender beliefs. Their own words belie their assertions of gender difference. As one told me, "You picture the mother, when the kids skin their knees, that she comes running up and hugs them and kisses the booboo. Well, that's something I do . . . I suppose the reason is she's not here . . . I know that when they need something it's attended to" (Deutsch, 1999, p. 192).

### GENDER BIAS AND JOB PATHS

Because women are expected to put parenting first and men are not, women make compromises in their work lives that men never consider: cutting back on work hours (or taking time off from paid employment), sacrificing career advancement if it interferes with parenting, and taking advantage of

whatever flexibility exists on the job, even if doing so hurts their careers (Deutsch, 1999). When mothers do all the compromising, it starts a spiral in which only men end up with the careers and women end up with the dominant role at home. Consider a common scenario—a mother cutting back to part-time work (Walzer, 1998). The new job offers more “flexibility,” but often is not as good as the job she gave up. Either it provides less money or the work is not as satisfying. Then, the father’s job takes on more importance in the family. An unequal division of labor at home increasingly seems to make sense (Deutsch, 1999). Later it may appear that the parents’ division of labor is the inevitable result of money earned or time demanded by their two jobs. In reality, key decisions parents made about employment when they first had children may have had long-term effects on their earning potential and their place in the labor force (Moss & Brannen, 1987).

Professional and managerial careers demand long working hours, relocation for good job opportunities, and giving priority to jobs over family. Career building at its most intense occurs precisely during childbearing years. When parents embrace the conventional definition of career but reject the “two-father” family, they have few options but to create an asymmetrical division of labor. Given the gender pressures, mothers give up on careers, no matter how educated they are.

Middle-class equally sharing parents ignore gender in decisions about jobs. Mothers insist that their jobs be given equal weight in the family. They make fewer compromises in their work lives than other women; their husbands make more compromises than other men. Joan,<sup>4</sup> an equally sharing mother, agreed to return to work after 2 months of maternity leave to take

advantage of a promotion at the utilities company where she worked. Her husband agreed to care for their new baby at night while she worked. Fifteen years later, they share the care of two children, both juggling child-care responsibilities and jobs with comparable salaries. Barry, an equally sharing father and the marketing director of a chain of health food stores, leaves his job early every day to pick his children up from day care. Steve and Beth each took time off from paid work to share the care of their first child. Couples make these gender-resisting choices sometimes out of explicit egalitarian ideology, sometimes out of women’s commitment to careers, sometimes out of men’s lack of compelling opportunities, and sometimes out of their joint commitment to parenting (Deutsch, 1999).

Equally shared parenting, however, does not mean role reversal. Instead, both parents contest the conventional career by allowing family obligations to intrude on work, while still maintaining a commitment to work. When husbands and wives make symmetrical adjustments, they avoid the spiral in which only the husband ends up with a real career. At the same time, these adjustments mean neither has a conventional male career. Equally sharing parents create family careers by making choices compatible with primary parenting for two (Deutsch, 1999).

Alternating-shift families face different issues. They usually cannot afford to have a parent at home full-time. Unlike the middle-class families whose opposition to day care means that mothers sacrifice their jobs and take the major role at home, working-class parents who feel the same way often decide that the father will share their children’s care. For many of these working-class couples, ironically, the availability of shift work and

the necessity of two employed parents can facilitate equal sharing. But the unpredictable rotating shifts and involuntary overtime of blue-collar work can also make sharing impossible. Like their middle-class counterparts, working-class couples also contest the workplace structures they face, and negotiate for better conditions. They quit jobs that are incompatible with parenting, they negotiate with employers about their hours, and they choose to have two parents employed, rather than rely on moonlighting fathers (Deutsch, 1999).

Many alternating-shift couples still insist that the men are the breadwinners, yet recent longitudinal evidence suggests that couples who share the care of their children begin to think of themselves as co-breadwinners. When couples characterize themselves as co-breadwinners, rather than thinking of the husband as the primary breadwinner, men are more likely to share domestic labor (Perry-Jenkins, Seery, & Crouter, 1992).

## FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Equally sharing parents are transforming gender-based roles into human roles. The most compelling theoretical advance of research on this transformation has been the shift in focus, on the part of some investigators, from constraints to couples. Now it is time for more researchers to take this approach. We can better explain the division of family labor by loosening our focus on how economic, social, and ideological constraints produce family arrangements. Instead, we should investigate how couples actively create their own family arrangements, given those constraints, and how the constraints themselves are transformed in the process. We need

more longitudinal qualitative research on couples' everyday negotiations and choices about family and work. Qualitative studies allow for in-depth analyses of the processes by which families construct the division of parenting responsibilities, and allow for more access to the complicated and dynamic relations between work and family, husband and wife, and causes and consequences than is possible in quantitative work. A good start would be to target new parents who successfully share parenting and unravel the paths by which they avoid the typical trajectory to traditionalism. But other transition points are important as well. Little research has addressed the changes that occur in family roles when a second child is born, or when a mother who has been underemployed returns to full-time paid work. Research could examine how husbands and wives renegotiate new divisions of labor, how children's reactions figure in this process, and how family and friends act to support or undermine a shift to more egalitarian child rearing. Research on the informal negotiations that occur between employers and parents over juggling family responsibilities would also be very useful. We especially need more research that includes families of color, as well as working-class white families.

Equally shared parenting offers a more balanced model of adulthood than traditional parenting. Both men and women nurture and achieve. Fathers often eloquently

express what they have gained. As one man I interviewed put it, "That caregiver side of me just got to blossom . . . that part of me that can just really give, be really nurturing and supportive. I feel really great about it."

### Recommended Reading

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 Steil, J. (1997). *Marital equality: Its relationship to the well-being of husbands and wives*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

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### Notes

1. Address correspondence to Francine M. Deutsch, Department of Psychology, Mount Holyoke College, South Hadley, MA 01075; e-mail: fdeutsch@mtholyoke.edu.

2. This article focuses on parents who share child care from early in their children's lives. It is not unusual, however, for equally sharing parents of older children to have divided parenting more unequally when their children were younger (Deutsch, 1999).

3. In my own study on this topic, I interviewed 150 dual-earner couples and compared equally sharing parents with couples who were either highly or somewhat unequal in their parenting roles (Deutsch, 1999). Other qualitative studies on parenting roles have usually focused either on couples becoming unequal during the transition to parenthood (Walzer, 1998) or on equally sharing couples (Ehrensaft, 1987; Ris-

man, 1998). Like my study, however, Coltrane's (1996) study of sharing couples did compare those who were equal with those who were not.

4. The examples in this article are taken from my study of equally shared parenting. Names and occupations are disguised to protect participants' anonymity. Quotations are verbatim.

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