Whither the “New Father”? Male Managers and Early Child Care in Australia and Sweden

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Recently, a number of men in the public eye, by putting their children ahead of their careers, have highlighted debates about the “New Father.” Their decisions have generated questions about whether such selfless devotion will persuade other men to follow suit. Drawing on interview data from male executives, this paper points to how Australian and Swedish fathers, whose histories of work and family policy are very different, interpret and manage their own and other men’s child care responsibilities. The comparative groups show marked differences in participation in primary parenting. The study also indicates that even those senior managers who take on primary responsibility for their children are unlikely to pave the way for subordinates to do the same.

INTRODUCTION

When Tony Blair announced he would take paternity leave from Britain’s top job he spurred a renewed focus on responsible fatherhood. His announcement was met by national celebration. With their “happy accident” promising political advantage as well as a bundle of joy, the Blairs had every reason to smile. By April 2000, however, British businessmen, and most male commentators, were saying that the PM should not take his promised leave. Cherie Blair, and most female commentators, argued that he should. British management predicted the PM’s example would give workers ideas that business could ill afford, while British women charged Blair to set a worthy example at a time when New Labour was introducing parental leave. Blair’s dilemma begs a number of questions. Was it sensible to predict his decision would prove so momentous? How many men are waiting on a signal from the top in order to become their family’s primary carer? Even among those who do want that responsibility, how many couples can afford for father to take the leave, particularly in those countries where it is unpaid, as in the UK and Australia? Are men more likely to take paternity leave when it is remunerated?
In Australia, National Party leader Tim Fischer, Microsoft executive Daniel Petre, ACTU secretary Bill Kelty and cricket pace bowler Paul Reiffel are among those men whose decisions to put their families ahead of their careers have generated metres of media column space. Yet such men are a select minority. Few fathers, and even fewer mothers, have the parliamentary pension, the company board seat, the share entitlements or the product endorsements to ensure that “quality plus quantity time” with their children is a realistic and gender-equal “choice.” In a study of the emotional lives of successful male managers Pahl (1995) found that they rated family life as more important to them than work, yet they rarely followed through in developing intimacy with wives and children, nor did they engage in the domestic and child-care labour necessary to such intimacy. Other research shows that the expectation that fathers will do more child care exceeds their actual involvement (McBride and Darragh 1995, 491) and that not all men who attempt to share in family work are treated with approval (Russell 1997). To what extent, therefore, might we expect a few privileged role models to counter the financial, opportunity and ideological barriers facing the average working parent? More importantly, perhaps, do the few men who may become such role models “change the structure of work so that younger men are not forced to repeat the same patterns” (Wajcman 1999, 137)? Do these “New Men” (Connell 2000, 20) actively encourage their male subordinates and colleagues to take time out for family cares?

This paper addresses such questions via a focus on paternal leave. I draw on my studies of men and women who are closest in status to the high-profile Tony Blair, Daniel Petre and others—executives and managers in professions and corporations—to ask how the more advantaged of men are responding to the idea that young children need fathers as primary carers. In particular, I ask whether managers who take periods of primary responsibility for children encourage their subordinates to do the same.

The data come from interviews conducted as part of a larger study of senior managers in Sweden and Australia between 1990 and 1995, set against a comparative policy background. The study involved 24 corporate, union and public sector organisations in Australia and 22 in Sweden. The interview sample was 20 women and 15 men in Australia and 18 women and 15 men in Sweden. A number of peak organisations in Australia and Sweden helped generate and organise the sample. The research examined the gender dimensions of organisations and of the managerial job. This paper draws on material from the male sample in both countries.

LITERATURE AND POLICY BACKGROUND

Internationally, men’s participation in domestic life and in particular their contribution to child care has become a high profile social issue (Parke and Brott 1999). Cross-national studies show that expectations about fathers’ in-
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Volvement in child rearing have increased significantly in the past 30 years (Dempsey 1997). Some suggest that this development is related in part to research showing a positive impact on children when fathers are more involved (Levine and Pittinsky 1997). Equally important has been the “politicization and theorization of gender relations” (White 1994, 120), coupled with “the entry of larger numbers of women into the workforce, their continuing participation in paid employment after having children and a decrease in the size of families,” all of which encourage men to seek more involvement in parenting (Lupton and Barclay 1997, 1). Then, too, as divorce rates increase more men are forced to take sole responsibility for children for periods of time, if only on their access weekends (Grbich 1987).

Scandinavia is often held up as an exemplar of gender equality strategies, with child-care arrangements, the world’s highest percentage of female politicians, and work and family policies gaining the most attention (Haavio-Manila and Kaupinnen 1990; Bacchi 1996). Certainly, women activists and feminists in other countries have long regarded Sweden’s parental leave scheme with envy (Erneling 1988; Haas 1992; Jenson and Mahon 1993). Paid maternity leave was introduced in Sweden in 1937 and in 1974 was altered to give parents a six month shared entitlement to parental leave at 90 percent of their usual salary. By 1989 the amount of allowable paid “long leave” had increased to 12 months, with a further six months at a reduced rate of pay (Näsman 1989; Statistics Sweden 1990). In 1995 a new law set aside one month of the leave specifically for fathers; if the father did not use the month the couple lost the right to take it (Froman 1994; Statistics Sweden 1995). In addition to the “long leave” the parental insurance scheme has four other components: (a) the right to choose a reduced working day (to six hours) until a child is eight years old in which money set aside for the long parental leave can be used to offset loss of income; (b) temporary care payment (nearly full pay) of 60 days per year per child until the child is 12 years old (for when children are ill) plus two paid contact days per year per child (for school events, etc.); (c) ten paid days for father leave immediately following the birth of a child; and (d) a right to paid pregnancy leave from the sixtieth day before the expected birth of a child (Näsman 1989; Haas 1992).

Swedish feminists are divided as to whether successive governments have done enough to ensure men and women share equally in parenting and work lives. Hirdman (1987) argues that women have won out on the domestic front. Eduards (1991) and Widerberg (1991) by contrast suggest that women have gained more help from child-care agencies than from the fathers of their children. The take-up figures for “long” parental leave bear out the criticisms by Eduards and Widerberg. In 1974, when parental leave began, fathers took on average 30 days. By 1989 this average had risen no higher than 49 of the 450 available days (Haas 1992, 58–60) and by 1998 it had dropped again to one month (Statistics Sweden 1998). Although the overall amount of leave taken by fathers had dropped as a part of the total, the percentage of fathers
who were prepared to take some leave had increased dramatically. In 1974 only 3 percent of fathers took leave, by 1989 25 percent of fathers were taking some long leave time (Näsman 1989) and that participation figure has remained fairly constant since. With regard to the short leave arrangements (child sick leave and contact days) fathers have been more eager, with 49 percent of the total time for short leave being taken by men (Erneling 1988, 15). Feminist research suggests that men are more likely to take the short leave days because it has no negative impact on their careers (Örnerborg 1989; Haas 1992). On the basis of such provisions Sweden was rated highest on gender equality, in a 1988 study of 99 countries representing 92 percent of the world’s population (Haavio-Manila and Kaupinnen 1990).

Yet it appears that the parental leave legislation is not the only factor influencing baby care by Swedish fathers. Näsman (1989) refers to a 1964 study which shows that, prior to the introduction of parental leave, 20 percent of children under four were being cared for by fathers while the mother was working (SOU 1965). Lack of suitable child care places was given as the main reason for this, and most of it was fitted in around the father’s full-time job. Moreover, statistics show that, in the period after a child is born, Swedish men reduce their work hours and spend more time at home (Erneling 1988). There is, therefore, evidence that Swedish men have a tradition of caring for children that predates the parental leave legislation.

There is little evidence of Australia having such a tradition. Instead, women have been the primary carers, whether as mothers, grandmothers or neighbours (Commonwealth Dept of Family and Community Services 1999, 4). Moreover, once men become fathers they tend to spend less time at home doing household chores and more time in their paid jobs (Bittman 1991). This tradition of fathers’ non-involvement has meant that those wanting to encourage paternity leave have often attempted to sell it as a benefit to men and to children. During the 1990s, commentators increasingly expressed concern that the gender structuring of work led to stunted relationships between men and their families (Cox 1993; Russell 1999). In tune with such concerns, Amanda Sinclair (1998) cites one of Australia’s most popular authors, Tim Winton (1994, 64), who claims that a type of heroic stoicism greatly damaged men of his father’s generation. While answering the call to be workers, soldiers, managers and mates, such men missed out on loving relationships with their children. Donaldson (1991) makes a similar point about the self-sacrifice of working-class men, which he embeds in a structural analysis of the complex interrelationships between class situation, paid work, the family household, masculinity and male heterosexuality. Most importantly, he shows how these relationships are re-woven over the life course of his male subjects. Sinclair (1998) draws on psychoanalytic theory to develop an account of the masculinisation of leadership threaded through her study of male and female managers. She argues that the commandment to put aside the rest of one’s life for one’s career depends upon a stereotype of “heroic masculinity” being val-
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used above all else in organisations. People whose bodies and behaviours best fit this stereotype, invariably men, are destined to profit in their careers. However, they also experience the loss of close relationships with children and extended family (La Rossa 1988; Pahl 1995).

Some Australian writers suggest that changing expectations of men are encouraging the current generation of fathers to build closer relationships with their children (Russell 1999; Connell 2000). A 1998 study of 1000 Australian fathers corroborates the view that men feel their relationships with their children are closer than those they had with their fathers (Commonwealth Dept of Family and Community Services 1999). However, that research also contradicts any belief that men are contributing more to child work. Although approximately 50 percent of fathers report “extremely close, warm and affectionate relationships” with both sons and daughters, 68 percent said they did not spend enough time with their youngsters. Statistics corroborate what the majority of fathers say, revealing no noticeable increase in men’s caring labour since 1983 (Commonwealth Dept of Family and Community Services 1999, viii). Other Australian research indicates that only in 1–2 percent of families do fathers share equally in physical care for young children, and in only 5–10 percent of families are they highly involved in day-to-day care (Russell 1997). So although Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show that families in the “equal share” category almost doubled (to 31700) between 1981 and 1988, such families remain a tiny minority (Commonwealth Dept of Family and Community Services 1999, 4).

At the beginning of the 1990s Australian EEO and AA programs began to signal that workers with family responsibilities must be considered in industrial relations policy and decisions. In addition the Australian government ratified ILO Convention 156, “Workers with Family Responsibilities,” in 1990, followed soon after by the peak union body, the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), winning its parental leave test case. The decision granted 12 months unpaid parental leave, the right to part-time work for parents during the child’s first two years, and one week of paternity leave for a father at the time of his child’s birth (Glezer 1990, 24). Such developments encourage McDonald (1997, 1998) to suggest that Australia’s relatively higher fertility rate can be attributed to family-friendly workplace policies. The question, however, is to whom in the family those policies prove most friendly. As studies cited above show there is little sign that men are taking an equitable role in child-care. The provision of unpaid parental leave, for example, has proved ineffectual in persuading fathers to participate. A comprehensive study shows no rise in men taking paternity leave between 1993 and 1995 and that twice as many men took bereavement leave as took parental leave (Kilmartin 1996).

Countering any trend towards gender equality in family responsibilities have been new developments in industrial relations. Such developments are reportedly creating more difficulties than they solve, despite their promise
to increase flexibility for families, workers and employers (Pocock 1998). As a number of studies have shown, new industrial and workplace agreements are more likely to trade off family leave for higher pay rates, while flexible working arrangements are invariably designed to suit employers more than employees (Ostenfeld and Strachan 1999). Barrera and Horstman (1998, 8) drew on the wide-ranging AWIRS survey (Morehead et. al. 1995) to show that satisfaction with the balance between work and family duties has diminished. The shift to home-based telework has been touted as a way of enabling men and women to share more equally in childwork, but Adie and Castleman (1998) found that removing work/family arrangements to the home exacerbated rather than solved the gender inequality of family responsibilities. Consequently, most studies show that the traditional or disengaged father still predominates in Australia (Bittman 1991; Russell 1997), as he does in most randomly sampled studies elsewhere in the OECD countries (e.g., Jain, Belsky and Crnic 1996; Sanchez and Thomson 1997). This gap between what today’s fathers are expected to do and their behaviour often results in increased marital disharmony, feelings of ambivalence, parental stress and work/family conflict (McHale and Crouter 1992).

For a number of writers the crucial issue is the disadvantage fathers suffer from disengagement with their children (Levine 1998). Men are losing the war to remodel the masculinity of fatherhood, it is claimed, but they are also suffering the angst of a generation of men who have lost control of their destiny (Bly 1990). A combination of economic, industrial and feminist pressures, it is suggested, has left men with an identity vacuum and in a state of cultural shock. Susan Faludi’s recent book *Stiffed* (1999) adds to a shopful of manuals, books and studies on the agonies and problems of manhood today. Although prompted by justified concerns about male suicide, violence and unemployment, such studies tend to inflate and universalise the problems of men and to construe the crisis of masculinity as a social problem of unprecedented moment (Hearn 1992). Importantly, they generally ignore the fact that most problems of family responsibilities stem from a still-resistant workplace in which a strict division between work and family is normalised (Eveline 1994a).

Uncovering the ways in which work is gendered has been a key feminist project. In relation to work and family concerns it has ranged from the naming of work as “paid” and “unpaid” to defining “family responsibilities” as a crucial component that must be costed into working lives (Cockburn 1991). At least one male commentator, however, argues that feminists have captured the defining of work/family issues in a way which is unfair to men. James Levine (1998) charges Hochschild and Machung (1989) with failing to sufficiently credit what men do by way of family responsibilities. Levine rectifies that by applying the traditional criteria for assessing men’s contribution, that is, participation in paid work, to argue that women carry no double burden and that men are carrying their share of responsible fatherhood. More
careful criteria for measuring the gendering of family work draws different conclusions on equal parenting. Pleck (1997) in the US, for example, sets out quantitative and qualitative criteria of paternal involvement, and Russell (1999) in Australia broadens those criteria to include employment, day-to-day care, socialisation and health care, household work and maintaining family relationships.

The ways in which diverse observers explain the relatively low involvement of today's fathers differs therefore according to their theoretical perspectives and strategic imperatives. Should we see Australian men as disadvantaged by their relatively minor participation in family work (Winton 1994)? Or should we view them as clinging to certain financial and lifestyle advantages, as many feminists tend to do (Cockburn 1991; Eveline 1994b)? In the mid-1970s research in Europe and the United States showed a direct correlation between fatherhood and career success for men; larger families went hand in hand with men's higher status (Eskola and Haavio-Manila 1975). For a man, therefore, there were career incentives to becoming a parent, especially if he could leave the children to his partner, whether she was working full-time or not. Does this still apply almost three decades later? There is some evidence that it does. Mulholland (1996, 143) suggests that men use work “to evade deeper involvement with problems associated with family life” because their career benefits give them ambivalent feelings about whether and how to have closer relationships with their offspring. Below, I investigate such questions in a qualitative study. The paper compares Swedish men, whose responses to parental leave are coloured by nearly three decades of state support, with Australian fathers, whose social context is informed by a much shorter period of supposedly family-friendly work policies. Differences in the amount of leave these fathers take are discussed, along with their perceptions of the relationship between career advancement and fathering responsibilities.

THE INTERVIEWS: TRADITION, CHANGE AND RESISTANCE

A key pattern that emerged from my comparative study was the gender difference between men and women in terms of their numbers of children. My small sample indicates that the correlation between fatherhood and career success for men that Eskola and Haavio-Manila found in 1975 may still be found. All the men in the study, in both Australia and Sweden, turned out to be fathers although they had been selected for their parity with women rather than for their parental status. There is also evidence the parenting equals success equation works best for men, particularly in Australia. In line with studies of larger samples my comparative research showed only 52 percent of my Australian group of female executives were mothers. In Sweden, by contrast, a much larger percentage of the women had children (87 percent).

There were other notable differences between the Australian and my
Table 1: Gender and parenthood among management sample in Australia and Sweden

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Executives with children</th>
<th>Australia (%)</th>
<th>Sweden (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>87</td>
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<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
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</tbody>
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Source: Eveline 1994b

Table 2: Proportions of parents assuming primary responsibility for children by gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary parenting</th>
<th>Australia (%)</th>
<th>Sweden (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Eveline 1994b

Swedish executives. In the Australian context the gender gap was starkly illuminated on every measure, while in Sweden it was comparatively small and uneven. All of the Australian senior managers who were mothers had been, or were, primary carers for their children, yet only 13 percent (2 of 15) of the Australian fathers had taken on that role. By contrast 12 of the 15 Swedish men (75 percent) had spent a month or more acting as primary carer for their offspring, compared to 100 percent of the Swedish women who were mothers.

The idea that Swedish society was one in which men were expected to care for children before the introduction of the parental leave scheme was also supported by my data. Of the Swedish men who were 50 or older, 71 percent (5 of 7) had taken a month or more of holidays or unpaid leave to care for their young children while their wives concentrated on work or study. These were the men who had young children before parental leave was introduced, and three of them subsequently took parental leave for short periods for their additional children. In addition, seven of the eight younger men had also taken periods of a month or more for child care, although less than half of these (3) had taken official parental leave. All of the Swedish men, whether they had utilised parental insurance, or whether they had cared for a child under another kind of paid or unpaid leave, were certain that their period of primary parenting had not adversely affected their careers. Their comments were in line with Swedish studies which show that a period of primary parenting
has no adverse effect on Swedish men’s careers (Näsman 1989). However, of the 12 men who had taken more than a month as the family’s main child worker nine of them never repeated the experience, making the one-off primary caring experience the most consistently recurring pattern. Four had not subsequently had further children, and for one of these men the experience itself had helped him determine that he would have no more progeny. Among the eight who had further children the most consistent pattern (5 of 8) was to leave subsequent child-care needs to the mothers of their children. Four of this group said that taking leave themselves at that time would have been detrimental to their careers.

In contrast to the Swedes, only one of the Australian male executives (7 percent), across all age groups, had taken holiday or unpaid leave in order to take primary responsibility for a child, although two others took full parenting responsibility for part of each day. The latter two stated that their careers showed no ill effects; when it came to a choice between parenting and work, they said, they always put work first. The assistant director who had taken holiday and extended leave to be primary parent, after the break-up of the marriage and becoming sole carer for the children, also suffered no adverse career effects from that period of three months. However, he did believe that the ongoing pressures of being sole parent to his four young children, since it affected his ability to socialise after work and made it more difficult for him to keep on top of what happened around his organisation.

Despite these incidents of fathers’ care the following story, from the managing director of a retail corporation, typifies the responses of the Australian men:

For kids growing up if they see their father doing well and his company doing well and people say, “gosh, isn’t it doing well,” you know it gives them some sort of standard to which they can aspire. That’s your share of the family responsibilities, to get out there and be a success. You feel that’s a fair exchange. (Tony, Australia, 1992)

Tony also felt his wife, who he said had never wished to “work,” also found it a fair exchange. His story was typical of the heroics that defined his public masculinity. Like Tony, most of the Australian men indicated that they had an arrangement, either implicit or negotiated, in which their role was to be successful. Almost all saw their main contributions to family life as financial; several depicted themselves as models and examples for their children. For most, the everyday care of children was very much the responsibility of their wives. The typical Swedish male executive, by contrast, was keen to show how much he had involved himself in his children’s care. Swedish men often used the term “investment” to signify that they received something back from their commitment to child care, either through the “closeness” they had developed to the child or because they had “learned a lot” from the experience. These men depicted their involvement in child work as having added a new
dimension to their lives. However, as noted above, most decided not to do it again. The general manager of a computing manufacturer, cited below, was typical of the Swedish men who did not repeat the experience when the couple had further children. He stated that he would never regret taking six months of parental leave after his eldest daughter was born, when his wife went back to teaching. At the time he had not long finished his studies and was working in his first “career” job. He learnt a great deal from the experience of parental leave, he said, and gained even more in emotional terms. Having invested that time he knew he had a very different relationship to his eldest daughter than he did to the other two, for whom he did not take that responsibility:

I'm very, very close to the eldest one. I'm not that close to the youngest. But the eldest, she is totally, totally open about everything to me. I get her inner thoughts. She comes to me when she's upset; she comes to me when she's angry. Before she comes to my wife she comes and tells me. The others go to the mother. She comes to me. (Mats, Sweden, 1991)

For Mats, like many of the other Swedish fathers who took leave for baby care, his eldest daughter’s sense of him as an intimate was a sign that his period as full-time parent had been a great success. The heroic dimensions of his masculinity, therefore, encompassed his worth as a parent. He relished the sense of achievement and control he gained from that experience and spoke at length of the “pleasure” his baby caring time had given him. Mats’ pleasure that his investment had paid off so handsomely, however, did not lead him to repeat the experience. When his second daughter was born he was at a crucial point in his career and could not take time off and with his third child his wife “punished” him by claiming the time for herself.

One of the three Swedish fathers who did repeat the experience, Bent, had become a convert to responsible fatherhood. He said that taking a period as “house daddy” for his new-born son had not only turned him into an enthusiastic advocate for the introduction of parental leave, it had also decided him to do it twice again, in a later marriage. It also meant that when his first marriage broke up Bent insisted that, as he had been primary carer for his son, he should have custody. He subsequently won his claim, even though it caused bitterness between his ex-wife and himself. Bent took the attitude that he had invested a great deal of effort and time in his son, and he was not about to let his heroic contribution go unrewarded. The stories told by both Mats and Bent show the polarities between “motherhood” and “fatherhood” being reproduced, despite the father taking on the feminised role for a period. In their research on Norwegian families Brandth and Kvande (1991, 13) indicate a “battle for the child” in which the father–child relationship is projected as primary in a confrontation with the mother over control. Men who deploy such strategies, argue Brandth and Kvande (1991, 12–140), deem the ideology of sexual equality outmoded and replace it with one which privileges the
father–child relationship and a return to the tradition of father–right.

By contrast with Mats and Bent, most of the Swedish men who took leave for baby care were more in tune with a discourse of sexual equality. This is not to say that Mats and Bent showed no concern for sexual egalitarianism. Rather, when they focused on their time of primary parenting, the ideology of sexual equality became secondary to a projection of themselves as superior to, and more powerful than, women in generating intimate relationships with their children. Whereas for Mats and Bent their selfless investment was in the child, most of the other Swedish “baby daddies” valued more the investment they had in their relationships with their wives or partners.

The account by Mats of taking some parental leave for the first child, but not when subsequent children were born, was repeated by four other Swedish men. Three of them told stories almost identical (with regard to it being a one-off activity). They had “enjoyed” the parenting time, two of them taking it as holiday pay and unpaid leave before the parental insurance scheme was introduced. Each said that by the time subsequent children were born they would have missed important career opportunities if they had taken time out. The choice they made to pursue careers, they said, gave bigger financial and social benefits to the family. The fourth man, Sten, a senior government official, took one month of parental leave for his first child, but his wife kept the time to herself for the second baby because she wanted an extended break from work. He had, however, taken a month of holiday pay to be at home together with his partner while the second child was very young. Sten was not too concerned whether he or his wife took parental leave in terms of a relationship to the child. Underlying his decision to take time out was a wish to ensure marital harmony in a context in which gender equality was being given priority.

For most of these fathers, taking time off for child care was a small price to pay for showing they believed in domestic equality. Moreover, they retained control of when they did or did not sacrifice time out of their careers. For some, the domestic carer role was at odds with the heroic identity they gained from their place in the corporate world. Not all them, therefore, were positive about the experience of primary parenting. For a senior official in a major union, Nils, taking paternity leave had convinced him to have no more children, since he and his wife had agreed to share equally in child care. Like Sten, Nils’ first consideration in taking leave was keeping the relationship with his wife (who was also a senior unionist) a happy one. A good relationship to his child, therefore, was an important but subsidiary consideration. Nils had taken three months to care for his daughter, starting when she was three months old. The loneliness, loss of identity and utter exhaustion he experienced during that time were why he said, “I don’t have any more babies.”

An important rationale for the Swedish men who had forgone the taking of parental leave for one or more of their children was a concern about their careers: they contended that their careers had greater potential for family
advancement than did those of their wives. The work arrangements that give men’s careers greater potential are represented as normative, reinforcing the understanding that little can be done to change them. Nils, for example, was puzzled as to why he found baby care so exhausting, although he spoke of the constant vigilance and calls on his time. He said: “It was very hard, to prepare the meals, to clean, as well as be a baby daddy.” However, “the worst thing was the way I lose myself,” he said. Nils felt that in being a primary child carer he had lost something important about his identity as a man. He knew no other men in his area who were taking long parental leave. Worse still, the “other mothers” and “old ladies” in Nils’ locale treated his time out with great interest and effusive encouragement. Being singled out in that way as different made him feel even more isolated, disconnected and differentiated from his “work” and work colleagues. The threat to his masculine identity that Nils found so unsettling was being isolated from his fraternal community, cut off from what he viewed as “my work.” Despite his difficulties, Nils believed that the sacrifice he made was worthwhile as a character-building exercise. In the end the experience made him a “better person.” It also added to his heroic status. Nils is now on the Role of the Male Ministerial Committee in Sweden and he spends time helping convince other men of the benefits of taking parental leave. Yet Nils’ investment also paid off in family terms. The experience was also worth it, he said, for the strength it gave to his relationships with wife and daughter.

A few in the male sample, two of them Swedish and three of them Australians over 50, expressed regret and a sense of impotence about lost or stunted relationships with their children. Most of the Australian men, however, were happy to leave their progeny to their wives, even on those rare occasions when they sensed the wife was paying a high price for being almost totally responsible for family cares. The following story is typical:

My wife hasn’t worked for 18 years. She could work now actually because the kids are pretty much grown up, but she chooses not to. She was a nurse and a good one. I’m not one to criticise but she probably has given a bit too much of herself to those kids. That makes it a bit hard for her now, when they’re about to take off on her. It’s made it a bit hard on us all at times. Like the time she decided not to come along [shift cities] when I moved here. She insisted on staying behind for six months while the kids finished the school year. That was a terrible time. There’s nothing worse, coming home from work at six or seven, cooking yourself something to eat, that takes an hour and a half, ten minutes to eat it, do the dishes then there’s nothing to do. And weekends—cleaning, washing, ironing. By the time you get home all you want to do is put your feet up, read the paper, have something to eat, watch a bit of TV, bop around for a few hours and go to bed. (Howard, Australia, 1993)

Although most Australian and Swedish men had dependent children
there was a marked difference between the two groups in terms of their spouse’s employment. The majority of Swedish men had a wife in part-time employment while having a home-based wife was most common among the Australians. Nine of the Australian men had wives who did not work outside the home and 14 of them had dependent children. Among the Australian wives in employment two worked full-time and three worked part-time. Only two of the Swedish men had a home-based wife although 12 had dependent children; 11 of the Swedes had spouses in part-time employment, two had partners who worked full-time.

In response to the question of whether their spouses’ careers had suffered as a result of their own career trajectories, the same number of Swedes and Australians (9) denied any such effect. Among the Swedes the reason most given was that the spouse had still pursued her career to the extent that she wished; among the Australians it was most often said that the wife had “freely chosen” a home-based life. The six executives who stated, in each country, that the career chances, or at least earning capacity, of their spouses had been diminished were mostly those with spouses in part-time employment. A couple of men in each country expressed some regret about this, but most tended to take it for granted that they were the ones who would, when it came to the crunch, continue on their career paths unhindered by domestic responsibilities. Haavind and Andenaes (1992, 12) explain such complacency by suggesting that even the enlightened father tends to treat family labour as a “gift” that is his to offer and withdraw as he pleases.

The wives of these senior managers were not interviewed, but one female executive in my Australian sample said she sometimes fantasised about what would happen if she walked away from motherhood and left the children to her husband. This is exactly what happened to one of the Australian men, the assistant director of a large State government department, whom I call George. I finish with the story of George because it illustrates many of the issues we face in understanding how men in senior management respond to work and family issues.

George did well after he entered the State public service. He completed his MBA, married Jane, who was in the final year of her medical degree, and over the next seven years they built a family of four children. During that time George went from working a 45 hour week to a 70-plus hour week. He was just one step from the top of his department, travelling frequently interstate and overseas and still working long hours. Jane meantime dropped out of her medical studies and suffered an emotional breakdown, which put increasing pressure on George. Then, just when he was poised to move on to a CEO position, Jane said she was getting a divorce. She flew off to Europe, leaving George with the children.

When I interviewed George, 18 months after Jane left, he was still suffering shock and grief. The changes in his life meant that he was having, in his words, “a terrible time of it.” Once George became a sole parent, the first
thing that changed were his working hours: he now left work between 4 and 5 p.m. rather than between 8 and 9 p.m. But one of the most difficult things for George was trying to give his work the concentration it needed. He now had to worry about transporting a kid to T-ball one day, piano lessons the next, the orthodontist another time, as well as what to do about their school problems, their fights and squabbles and their emotional and physical development. Task-wise, his CEO had been understanding, spreading some of George’s workload around amongst his colleagues, and cutting down on most of the tasks that involved travelling. His boss had also recruited the only senior woman in the department, who herself had been through a marriage break-up a couple of years earlier, to act as an adviser to George about his family problems.

Despite this support, George felt his male colleagues treated him as an outsider, as having now “lost the plot.” He could not leave the children and travel the way he used to do, and he had no time to attend the suppers and drinks that used to use up the little leisure time he had before. He felt lonely and marginalised, both at work and in the domestic sphere, with no-one to discuss his worries about the type of kids his daughter was now bringing home from school, or the way his oldest son had become withdrawn and uncommunicative. George had recently found a new partner, a younger woman who worked as a junior in his department, who had moved in and now did most of the cooking and household organising. Yet George still carried most of the burden for nurturing and organising the children. Despite retaining his senior job, George saw no possibility of advancement on the horizon. His circumstances had moved him from heroic workaholic to domestic martyr.

A particularly revealing aspect of George’s experience of primary parenting was that it had done little to help him see any value in men taking paternity leave. Before his experience George had paid little attention to issues of workers with family responsibilities. Once he became a primary parent, however, he had supported the push in his department for work-based childcare, and now used it for his youngest child. He also believed it was appropriate for employers to offer a woman maternity leave; he did not think the time out would affect her career too much once she returned to work, and the organisation benefited by retaining a well-trained employee. On the other hand, he felt that if one of the men in his department requested three to six months off for parental leave he would view that employee as not being fully committed to his job, unless the man had been left without a wife or unless the wife was suddenly very ill.

For George, as for most of the men in my Australian sample, family work is fundamentally the responsibility of women. Is this because, as managers, they have to juggle organisational budgets so they tend to view family nurture as a cost that individual families should bear? The answer to that must be “no” in the case of George, since he conceded that organisations should carry the cost of providing women with parental leave. Among men who have
also served considerable time as a primary parent. George is not alone in his stance. Of the 12 Swedish men who said they had taken a primary parenting role, seven were of the opinion that, in these days of greater competition and rising costs, men who were serious about their careers could not afford to take time out for child care. The three men who had never taken leave agreed with them. Although two of the Swedish fathers, Bent and Nils, actively campaigned for more fathers to take up their entitlement, and Sweden’s parental insurance had been in place for at least two decades, there was still considerable resistance to men claiming equality with women as the primary carers of children. Such findings are from a relatively small sample. They intimate, however, that when high-profile men “choose” their families ahead of careers they are not likely to become models for other men unless organisations also make radical changes to work habits, leave remuneration and criteria for assessing top performance.

CONCLUSION

Policymakers have made some headway in encouraging organisational decision makers to accept that women workers need support with their family responsibilities. However, those policies are rarely designed to remove the double burden from women, much less to persuade men to treat child nurture as central to their lives. Even in examples where flexible and supportive conditions have been provided, as in the case of Sweden’s parental leave scheme, they prove insufficient to overcome the twin expectations that heroic dedication to the job is the normal province of men and that hands-on parenting is primarily women’s business. The architecture of organisations is founded on hierarchies of status, privilege and power that are intimately related to the formation of what Connell (1995) calls “hegemonic masculinity” and Sinclair (1998) defines as “heroic.” To make any inroads into reshaping that architecture, we have to deal with the ways in which work and masculinities are intimately entwined, shaped and reconstituted by policies, work practices and reward systems. In the absence of high-quality, publicly funded child care and comprehensive changes to workplaces parents will be forced to continue negotiating their work and family responsibilities on an individual basis, with subsequent disadvantages for them and their communities.

NOTES

1 I gratefully acknowledge funding from several sources for this project. Three trips to Sweden were assisted by four grants, one from the WA Women’s Fellowship Fund, 1989, one each from Australian Federation of University Women in Victoria and Western Australia, 1991–92, and one from the Re-

2 I used a semi-structured interview schedule, with interviews lasting between one and two hours. Interviews were taped and most of the material transcribed. Two of the Swedish interviews were conducted in Swedish with the assistance of an English translator, the rest were conducted in English.

3 In Australia these were: the Department of Employment and Training, WA; Council for Equal Opportunity in Employment, Melbourne; the ACTU, Melbourne; the Trades and Labour Council in Victoria and in Western Australia; the Affirmative Action Agency, Sydney. In Sweden the Swedish Institute arranged most of the interview sample, with assistance from the Swedish Employers Federation (SAF), the peak union body (LO) and the Centre for Working Life in Stockholm. My thanks to all these supporters as well as to the anonymous interviewees who generously gave of their time, memories and views.

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