



Norwegian work-sharing couples project 30 years later

Revisiting an experimental research project for gender equality in the family

Margunn Bjørnholt

*Department of Sociology and Human Geography,
University of Oslo, Oslo, Norway*

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to outline the background as well as methodological and epistemological aspects to, and the effects of, a follow-up study 30 years later of the work-sharing couples project, which is a Norwegian, experimental research project in the early 1970s. The aim of the project is to promote gender equality and a better work/life balance in families. In this paper the variation in work-sharing and post work-sharing trajectories over the life-course is explored, mainly focusing on the impact of the work-sharing arrangement on the couples' relations, their work/life balance and the well-being of participants, the core objectives of the original project.

Design/methodology/approach – The original project has a small scale, interventionist design based on couples working part-time and sharing childcare and housework; effects on family life and gender equality are documented by questionnaires and time diaries. In the follow-up study, retrospective life-course couple interviews with the original participants are used.

Findings – Revisiting the original project produced new insights into, the subversive and radical use of sex-role theory in early Norwegian family sociology as an instrument of changing gender relations. In the follow-up study, the high level of participation and the long duration of the arrangement would seem to qualify for a heightened level of expectation as to the effects of the experiment on the participants' lives. A high proportion of the couples are still married, and the work-sharing arrangement has been regarded by the majority of participants to have had a positive impact on their marital relation, work/life balance and well-being.

Practical implications – Insights gained from revisiting this project may prove fruitful when confronting contemporary dilemmas of work/life balance, as well as demographic and environmental challenges.

Originality/value – The original project is unique internationally owing to its theoretically subversive, interventionist design and reformatory ambition. The longitudinal follow-up of the experiment is also unique in family research, and of great value for researchers into gender equality and the family.

Keywords Norway, Gender, Family roles, Equal opportunities, Dual-career couples

Paper type Research paper



The author is indebted to Erik Grønseth, who was highly enthusiastic about the follow-up study, which would not have been possible without his help and cooperation. In addition to providing what could still be found of his original material, he personally tracked down and made initial contact with the first half of the sample before he died in autumn 2005. The author would also like to thank Linda Haas for her enthusiastic support of the follow-up study and for providing valuable comments on the draft article and Lise Kjølørød and Arne Mastekaasa, who, commenting on an earlier draft, suggested a stronger focus on the background and methodological aspects of the follow-up study, which lay the ground for the paper's present shape and focus. Kari Stefansen and Tone Schou Wetlesen have commented on several versions of the paper.

The reconciliation of family and work has been a major focus for several decades within family research. The issue is highly gendered in that it is often assumed that the woman in dual-earner families bears the responsibility for working out viable solutions. Today, declining birth rates in most European countries adds to the awareness of the need for new and untraditional solutions to combining paid work and the family. Since the early 1990s, there has been renewed consideration of men's contributions to unpaid work at home (Hochschild, 1997; Moen, 2003; Williams, 2000; Haas and Hwang, 2000).

Men's participation in childcare and housework is more and more often pointed out as a key to gender equality and work/family/balance/integration/reconciliation/articulation (Fraser, 1994; Ellingsæter and Leira, 2004). However, any movement in this direction has so far been slow. In the Nordic countries, mothers of young children participate more in paid work, and in Norway and some of the other Nordic countries fathers participate more in childcare than in other countries, mainly due to a special period of paternity leave assigned to men. However, the general picture of breadwinning and care adaptations remains remarkably stable. State feminist reforms have eased women's lives, but the demands and expectations made of workers to be basically unencumbered by care perpetuate a male provider norm. Fathers of small children still work the longest hours, while mothers largely work part-time and shoulder the main responsibility for care and unpaid work at home (Vaage, 2002; Kitterød, 2005; Pettersen, 2004; Kjelstad, 2006). Women have reduced the time they spend on housework, while men's time spent on housework has slightly increased, but not by nearly as much as the women's reduction (Vaage, 2002). The inequality in domestic work which persists has drawn renewed interest, and Gornick (2000, p. 128) states that

... there is considerable agreement that unpaid work is the next frontier; thus, policy development aimed at altering gender inequalities in unpaid work may constitute the next wave of "woman-friendly" welfare state development.

The dual-earner/dual-carer model (Crompton, 1999; Deutsch, 1999; Gornick and Meyers, 2003) and the universalization of care (Fraser, 1994) are seen as the best attempts to attain gender equality, and Gornick and Meyers (95-99) describe in some detail a dual-earner/dual-carer model as a *thought experiment*. This article revisits a dual-earner/dual-carer experiment which was carried out as an action research project in the 1970s. The aim of the article is to explore the background of the work-sharing experiment and its contemporary reception, as well as discuss the rationale for and methodological aspects of a follow-up study thirty years later. The follow-up study aimed at exploring as many as of the questions above as possible through a broad, life-course approach, in an attempt to reveal the couple's shared life story as well as the individual stories of husbands and wives. In this article, the duration of the arrangement will be presented as an important finding as well as a starting point for further analysis; the paper further explores the impact of the work-sharing arrangement on the couples' relations, their work/life balance and the well-being of participants.

The work-sharing couples project

The work-sharing couples project was carried out at the University of Oslo by Erik Grønseth, the late sociologist, at the request of the Norwegian Family Council and its leader Ola Rokones. The aim of the project was to promote gender equality and a better

quality of life for families by redistributing the couples' paid and unpaid work. This was based on both spouses having part-time jobs. The study drew a great deal of publicity from the Norwegian and international media and family scholars (Haas, 2006). Thirty years later, the couples were revisited for a follow-up study.

The theoretical background of the work-sharing project can be traced back to the critical and radical research into sex roles and social structure that Norwegian family researchers began in the 1950s. The researchers emphasized that sex roles were socially constructed, and the critical use and interpretation of sex role theory is said to have been a Norwegian specialty (Leira, 2000, p. 126) and was a contrast to its more conservative American counterpart. The work of Norwegian family researchers influenced the work of a new generation of American family researchers, and Linda Haas used Harriet Holter's book *Sex Roles and Social Structure* (Holter, 1970) as a framework for her doctoral thesis (Holter, 1977). She was also influenced by Grønseth and visited him. In the 1950s, Grønseth (1956) criticized the Parsonian concept of the nuclear-family system for being based on complementary gender roles which were functional for society as well as for the family. Grønseth (1970) pointed out the "dysfunctionality of the husband-provider role" as a source of male domination and female subordination in intimate relationships, as well as the inequality between the sexes in society at large (Grønseth, 1970, 1966/1972), and argued that a wife's personal and economic independence from her husband, as well as men's participation in the daily life of their families, and the mutual sharing of life-worlds by husband and wife, were crucial to marital felicity. Here he was drawing on the work of the Norwegian pioneer Bonnevie (1932) who argued that the gainful employment of married women was necessary for the survival and development of the couple's relation and that women's increased responsibility for breadwinning would have to be met by men taking part more in the unpaid work in the household. Grønseth was also heavily influenced by Wilhelm Reich, who saw oppression in personal and sexual relations as part of the oppression within capitalism.

An action research project

The original work-sharing project was designed to be an action research project; the aim was to promote change in the care and breadwinning arrangements of the families participating. After a period of the families practising the new arrangements, effects were examined along several dimensions within the family, including extra-familial activities such as participating in voluntary organizations or in the local community. The focus on family life reflects the emphasis placed by Grønseth and Rokones on families as important and vital parts of people's lives, which linked personal well-being, gender equality and citizenship.

A total of 16 couples were recruited in the period 1971-1975 for the experiment. They had to meet the following criteria to qualify for participation: a cohabitating, heterosexual couple with at least one child below school age (seven) and both gainfully employed in part-time jobs for 16-28 h/week. The spouses could work at the same or at different workplaces and could combine their working hours in any way they saw fit (Grønseth, 1975a, p. 209).

The work-sharing couples were mainly middle class and academics at different levels. Approximately a quarter of the participants held lower, clerical positions that could be characterized as working-class jobs. The middle-class profile of the sample was criticized at the time. Today, however, middle-class samples are often chosen when studying work/family issues because the problem of combining two careers and the

family is particularly prominent in middle-class, career-oriented couples. Women with higher education work full-time to a much greater extent than women with less education, and ideologies of gender equality and ideas about equal sharing are more explicit in middle-class couples. Skilbrei (2003) found that working-class women often opposed gender equality, advocating a more traditional family model. Nevertheless, the value of paid as contrasted to unpaid work and the issue of gender equality are not only of relevance to middle-class men and women who share an ideal of gender equality. When retiring, divorcing (or splitting up in the case of unmarried cohabiters), traditionally oriented women who have “chosen” to specialize in care and household work for their families will also face the financial costs of the gendered sharing of paid and unpaid work.

The aims, methods and results of the original project

Expectations as to the effects on the families were high. Relations were expected to change as the wife became more independent and felt more equal to her husband economically, occupationally and in family matters. This would lead to more equal power relations between the spouses, one assumed. The husband’s well-being was expected to increase as he would gain more surplus energy for his wife and children. The husband’s greater participation in household work was expected to have an effect on the wife’s scope of action, both as a wife and worker. This, it was predicted, would have an effect on the next generation. Children who grew up in these more equal families were expected to develop more flexible gender identities. Furthermore, the work-sharing arrangement was expected to reduce the social isolation of modern nuclear families, as the work-sharing scheme would leave more time for extra-familial activities. Even environmental benefits would evolve from the reduction of unnecessary consumption in work-sharing families.

A combined approach was chosen. Each spouse was given a 29-page questionnaire covering a range of topics, such as one’s childhood and situation prior to the experiment, one’s motivation for and experiences of the work-sharing pattern, as well as the current sharing of housework and care. In addition, one third of the couples were interviewed.

The work-sharing arrangement was deemed to be a success, leading to an “unusual extent of equality between the sexes” (Grønseth, 1975b, p. 219). Almost all the participants thought the work-sharing arrangement had led to improved emotional relations with their spouse: some stated that their sex life had improved. Most of them also reported having attained more equal power relations. The families experienced less stress, and a majority reported better relations with the children.

There was, however, a gendered pattern in the sharing of household tasks, and childcare and cooking were more equally shared than other household work (Grue, 1978), a finding that corresponds to recent research (Vaage, 2002; Brandth and Kvande, 2003).

Recent research also seems to confirm the basic hypotheses of the work-sharing couples project: that a reduction in the hours of work of fathers and an increase in the earning power of mothers are important elements for a more equal sharing of household work. On the basis of a large representative study of Norwegian parents, Pettersen (2004) drew a similar conclusion.

Follow-up study

Why conduct a follow-up study 30 years later? A longitudinal follow-up study was not part of the original project design, and the idea came after the author of this paper had

met one of the participants during another research project and contacted Erik Grønseth. He happened to have the names of half of the participants, and the Norwegian Ministry of Children and Family Affairs funded a pilot study (Bjørnholt, 2005). Later, the remaining couples were identified and interviews were completed by 2006. A total of 15 of the original 16 couples were traced. Of the 15 couples, 14 consented to be interviewed. In the last case, the husband was dead and the wife did not want to participate. Twelve couples were still married and interviewed together: the divorced couples were interviewed separately, but in one case only the wife was interviewed, as the ex-husband was unavailable.

The original project offers a unique opportunity for longitudinal family research.

In addition to its historical value and unique character, the project appeared fresh and appealing. Even though it had been carried out thirty years ago, it dealt with some of the most important questions in family research and policy discussions today, which has been the main reason to conduct a follow-up study.

Ethically, participants should have given their consent to be contacted for a follow-up study at the time of the original project. Due to the current rules and procedures for confidentiality in research, it is less likely that researchers in the future will have the same good fortune and opportunities to conduct a longitudinal follow-up study unplanned from the outset.

Erik Grønseth himself was quite aware of the ethical aspects of contacting the participants for a follow-up study, and he took responsibility for tracing, as well as establishing contact and introducing me as the person responsible for the follow-up study to the first half of the participants. Regretfully, Grønseth died in the autumn of 2005, so I contacted the remaining couples. The Ministry of Children and Family Affairs expressed some reluctance to fund the study, and doubted whether the couples would be willing to participate.

The participants not only consented to being interviewed, but quite a few expressed enthusiasm about the public authorities' being interested in their experiences, which they felt were still highly relevant to contemporary work/family discourse. One of the work-sharing men had only a couple of years earlier tried (unsuccessfully) to get the Gender Equality Commissioner interested in the project. Others did not have the work-sharing experience quite so fresh in their minds and some doubted whether they would be able to contribute much. As it turned out, everyone seemed to remember it well. The high response rate in the follow-up study reflects almost completely the original research universe. Their willingness to participate after such a long time demonstrates the importance the informants accorded the work-sharing experiment.

What can we learn?

Revisiting the project three decades later poses methodological as well as analytical and theoretical challenges, while offering opportunities for learning on more levels.

Revisiting the original project in its historical context adds a time dimension to our present understanding of work, family and gender equality. It also provides an opportunity to step back for a fresh view of the thirty years of primarily state feminist welfare development that has resulted in the current structure of opportunities and thinking, but also to the inevitable closure of windows of opportunity as well as of mind that will result from the implementation of policies.

The work-sharing project aimed at different solutions than the ones that were chosen, thus providing the opportunity for *contrafactual reflection* on our present and recent history of work/family policies. A revisit provides an opportunity to explore the

myopia, social constructedness and historical embeddedness of the present and to question current discourses of work-family and gender equality in research and policymaking.

The crucial issues addressed in the project were far ahead of their time, such as the link between working time and time to care, and the emphasis on involving fathers, topics that have increasingly become the subject of debates, research and policymaking since the early 1990s.

Men's working arrangements have also recently become an important focus of research and policy discussions in Europe, including the EU projects, "Work Changes Gender" (Puchert *et al.*, 2005) and the project "Fostering Caring Masculinities" (Langvasbråten and Teigen, 2006).

Working time preferences and practices are another topic on the current research agenda. Kitterød (2007) draws attention to the fact that many parents express a preference for shorter working hours, but that they do not necessarily reduce their working time, even though they feel they both want to and have the opportunity to (Kitterød, 2007). Though a large proportion of the population was positive to the work-sharing model in the 1970s (Glefjell, 1984), apart from the few experimental couples, work-sharing was not taken up by others. This makes the experiences of the work-sharing couples, who did in fact reduce their working hours, sociologically unique.

However, due to the time that has passed and social change, the project and its results will not be directly applicable to the present unless they are presented and interpreted in their historical contexts and reinterpreted in relation to the present to establish their relevance today. In a pre-state feminist era, parental leave was short and care facilities were far scarcer than today, working part-time was less common – even for women – and part-time workers lacked many of the rights they have in Norway today. Furthermore, the mentality and what people took for granted differed from today. At that time, the male breadwinner model was still accorded hegemonic status even though women were increasingly taking on paid work. Today, the dual-earner model has gained ideological hegemony while in practice women still shoulder the main responsibility for domestic work and child-care and, due to a persisting gender pay gap, women largely remain junior partners in breadwinning (NOU, 2008).

The follow-up study gives access to the original participants' life stories over a considerable part of their lifespan. During the project, the participants were in an early phase of family life, as well as in their careers. The original project was only able to capture short-term effects, since it was by and large terminated by 1975. Revisiting the participants after 30 years allows outcomes to be checked, even though it would be wrong to attribute the situation and status of the participants today solely to the work-sharing arrangement.

The revisit documents how the participants' lives turned out and provides stories reflecting the meaning they attribute in their lives to the work-sharing experience: as couples, individuals, parents and providers.

Design and method of follow-up study

The follow-up study was based on life-course interviews with couples. Choosing to use couple interviews was mainly made for pragmatic reasons, as time and funding were scarce. However, this seemed to be a good starting point, since their lives as couples were an important part of the interview.

Interviewing couples has advantages and limitations: for example, couples may keep to an official narrative, which has been agreed upon beforehand – of their life

together to avoid past and current topics that might trigger conflict. However, recent research has concluded that conflicts will be more openly stated when both partners are present than when they are interviewed separately (Syltevik, 2000; Valentine, 1999). Doucet (2006), based on a study including both individual and couple interviews, also concluded that couple interviews provided the most interesting data. The couple interview provides an insight into the pair's joint contributions to their lives as couples (Martinsson, 1997). When presenting themselves and their shared story as a couple, inter-couple dynamics can be triggered. During the interviews of the work-sharing couples, moments occurred when one spouse took over the questioning, thus allowing the interviewer to take a back seat and listen to the highly relevant discussions between the two. Their turn-taking and communication with each other nuanced the picture of them as a couple. In addition, there were more mundane considerations, such as efficiency in terms of time and money – interviewing couples allowed data to be collected about the couple and the individuals in one interview.

The follow-up study was designed to provide retrospective data by way of life-course couple interviews, while the original study used a questionnaire, supplemented by couple interviews from only a part of the sample.

Retrospective narratives grant one access to the informant's own life story as told to and interpreted by the narrator. According to the epistemological and methodological shift from subjects to narratives in life-course theory and research, the data will comprise the *stories*, rather than the pure *experiences*. This approach needs to be sensitive to “the social process of telling stories”, as well as to “the social role that stories play” and “the wider political and social frameworks within which stories are told and heard” (Plummer, 1995, pp. 15-18). Stories cannot be taken as direct representations of the experiences they convey. The informants may tend to defend the choices they once made and may exaggerate the positive or undercommunicate any negative aspects. Telling stories in an interview setting has the advantage of opening up reflective space. I found that the participants eagerly explored and discussed their own experiences, the meanings and implications, rather than dishing up a rehearsed success story. This observation has also been made by other researchers (Danielsen, 2006, p. 68; Martinsson, 1997, p. 206). As the interviews unfolded, the participants seemed to feel quite free and some negative aspects of the work-sharing arrangement also emerged, such as financial matters.

Interview data on life-courses contain a combination of at least three types of qualitatively different data. First, on the couple level, there are empirical facts, like present marital status and the number of children. Other empirical data will stem from the individual level, such as occupational status and health. Second, the interview data will contain retrospective narratives on both couple and individual levels revealing the way in which the work-sharing experiment was experienced. Further, there is data of a reflexive character – the participants' reflections as couples and individuals on the meaning of the work-sharing arrangement in all aspects of the life-course. In addition, observational data may emerge in the interview situation.

Combining descriptive and evaluative elements is usual in most qualitative interviews, but combining the retrospective and couple design, and including both the couple level and the individual level in one interview, pose methodological and analytical challenges.

The conscious use of the different kinds of data collected in the couple interview may, however, bring about considerable analytical gains as the data can be used for several purposes. The simplest use is to extract and analyze separate elements from

the whole sample, which will be presented in this article. In addition the couple interviews will contain several, qualitatively different sets of data that can be combined to obtain a certain level of methodological triangulation.

Results from the follow-up study

The follow-up study has generated rich material and findings about couple, individual and intergenerational levels which may be analyzed from different angles and with different focuses. In other papers I explore the work-sharing men, their motivation and agency in initiating the work-sharing arrangement (Bjørnholt, forthcoming a), effects on careers (Bjørnholt, forthcoming b) and intergenerational transmission (Bjørnholt, 2009c). In this paper I concentrate on the couple level.

The duration of work-sharing arrangement

For the project initiators, the work-sharing arrangement was (to a certain extent) imagined as a permanent way of life. A brief, informal telephone follow-up in 1980 (unpublished notes) concluded that slightly over half of the couples had returned to more traditional arrangements involving the woman working part-time, studying or staying home as a housewife. The follow-up study 30 years later helped one gain a fuller picture of the couples' further work-family arrangements, if and why they had stopped work-sharing, their post work-sharing adaptations, and the way in which the duration of the work-sharing arrangement is related to the perceived impact on family life, career and health.

The work-sharing experiment was unique in a Norwegian and international context: there is thus not much research to draw upon for comparison with the exception of some studies of "role sharing couples" (Haas, 1977; Russell, 1979). Russell's study included families who shared care-giving in the second half of the 1970s, but in this project, the time parents spent on care, and not their time spent on paid employment, was the selection criterion. In some of the families fathers worked part-time, but the study also included families in which the father was the main caregiver due to his being unemployed; for several reasons the project is not directly comparable to the work-sharing project. But Russell's study is still of particular interest due to its research design, which in contrast to most other qualitative research into families also included a follow-up study. As there is a lack of other more directly comparable studies, the results from Russell's follow-up study may indicate what to expect from a follow-up study of the work-sharing couples.

According to Russell (1982, p. 162): "The 2-year-follow-up brought a sobering reality back to the project". In the follow-up study he found that a large majority (approximately 75 per cent) had reverted to a traditional family pattern, with the husband as the main breadwinner. He also found that the number of families who had maintained the untraditional lifestyle was "too small for any meaningful conclusions to be drawn" (p. 163). That most participants had reverted to a traditional lifestyle surprised the researchers, due to the strong commitment to the shared care-giving arrangements that the couples had initially expressed.

The brief follow-up of the work-sharing couples five years later, in 1980, also revealed that slightly over half had reverted to a more traditional pattern. Based on the scarce research available, expectations should thus not be high as to the duration of the work-sharing arrangement. The duration of the arrangement has been chosen as a starting point for the analysis of the follow-up study.

The majority of the work-sharing couples maintained their untraditional arrangement for much longer: some continually, while others practised work-sharing with other arrangements in between, such as returning to work-sharing when they had a second or third child. Table I shows how the various time ranges were distributed between the couples.

The median duration of the work-sharing arrangement was seven years, ranging between one-and-a-half and 30 years, with seven years as the most frequent duration. Two-thirds continued work-sharing for longer than six years and a large majority – 12 out of 14 – continued with it for three years or more. For the majority of the participants, the work-sharing arrangement was a temporary adaptation, and one or both of the parents returned to full-time work either when the men (mostly) were offered career opportunities, when the couple was given a place at kindergarten, when children started going to school or due to a combination of these factors. Nevertheless, as a temporary adaptation, the duration of the arrangement was remarkably long, and two thirds of the work-sharers kept at it for six years or more.

The long duration of the work-sharing arrangement is an unexpected, important and interesting result, which would seem to justify a heightened level of expectation as to the effects of the work-sharing experiment on the participants' lives as couples, individuals, and parents.

The follow-up study 30 years later modifies the more traditional pattern observed in 1980 and illustrates the strength of a longitudinal design covering a longer time-span. Work patterns varied over the life-course, especially for the women. Some, like many women of their generation, took breaks from work to study. While most of the men had finished studying before starting work-sharing, the women tended to acquire their final level of education later, often after the work-sharing period. The return to a housewife adaptation, observed in some couples in 1980, was not permanent in any of the families and there was a tendency to strengthen the pattern of equal sharing over time as the women all returned to paid work. There was, however, a tendency for women to continue working part-time and for men to work full time, but there were also men who stayed in part-time adaptations – some of whom had wives who returned to working full-time. Three examples illustrate the variation in the duration and different trajectories of work-sharing.

Work-sharing trajectories and post work-sharing arrangements

Short-term work-sharers

Of the work-sharing couples, Vera and Frank practised work-sharing for the shortest period. Frank is a lawyer and worked for the state administration; his wife, Vera, is a special needs teacher and worked at the time for the child and youth psychiatric service. They gained their first experience of systematically sharing domestic work while living in a shared house with another couple, and Frank played an active role in retaining the equal sharing of housework when he and his wife formed a nuclear family and had children. They had three children in three years, the last one adopted,

1.5 years	2-4 years	6-7.5 years	11.5-14 years	30 years
One couple	Four couples	Five couples	Three couples	One couple

Table I.
Total duration of work-sharing arrangement

Note: $n = 14$

and started work-sharing partly because at that time no parental leave was granted for adopted children.

During the work-sharing arrangement, they both had 50 per cent jobs, working and staying home with the children every other day. He had no difficulty finding a part-time job; after having worked part-time for one and a half years he was offered a managerial position and started working full-time again.

Vera, on the other hand, found it increasingly difficult to combine work and care. She urged her husband to take the full-time position he had been offered because she was finding it hard to combine work and children, mostly due to a lack of adaptation for her working part-time from her employer. She felt obliged to quit work and became a full-time housewife for two years.

I think we were quite successful at home, but it was very poorly arranged at work, even though I was working in a profession to do with children and care. This is still the impression stuck in my mind, how poorly arranged it was [. . .] I was also pressured to resign. [. . .] There was no adaptation from my employer so you could spend some time with your children. This is what I found the hardest, not relations at home and what was between us (Vera).

When the couple reflect upon why they did not keep to the arrangement for longer, it becomes clear that neither the managerial position which Frank was offered, nor the workplace obstacles that Vera experienced is the whole explanation. They state that in their eyes the arrangement was very good for a limited time, but that they had never planned to make it permanent.

After two years as a housewife, Vera found a new job, and was offered day-care as a part of her job package. She started working full-time and has had full-time positions ever since; both Vera and Frank have been rather successful professionally, and both have had managerial positions. After her period as a housewife, it took some time and effort for Vera to restore a more egalitarian pattern of sharing housework. Today the couple think they share the everyday domestic chores to an unusually high degree, even though a gendered pattern persists in that she bears more responsibility for some of the typical female tasks such as making sure the home looks nice and occasional tasks such as washing the curtains: his areas are more traditionally masculine tasks such as seeing to the car. Today, they also have a cleaner. They felt they shared childcare equally, but there was a gendered pattern in that he did more outdoor activities with the kids. Today, their adult children are very independent and are not in very regular contact despite their relationship being good. Even though they think they are equally close to their children, she thinks that she could more easily sense if something was amiss with them.

Frank and Vera are representative of the work-sharing couples in several ways; they both have higher education and, like many of the other couples in the project, they had initiated work-sharing independently of the project. Frank, like many of the work-sharing men, had been active in initiating work-sharing (see Bjørnholt, forthcoming a), and like the majority of the work-sharing men, Frank was rather successful professionally (see Bjørnholt, forthcoming b). However, that both of them returned to full-time work was not seen in most of the other couples, as there was a tendency for women to have less straightforward careers, taking breaks to study and working part-time longer than the men.

Long-term work-sharers

Ann and Robert maintained the work-sharing arrangement for 12 years. They had studied together and are both civil engineers. When they had children, Ann was

prepared to stay at home, but Robert found that she was discontent as a stay-at-home mother with the second child; he also expected her to use her education. To join the work-sharing arrangement, Robert had quit his former job at a consultancy and found a job at her workplace at a state agency so he could work part-time. Though some eyebrows were raised when he – a man – wanted to work part-time, he did not encounter any real obstacles. The couple split the weeks between them, working two or three days each. Robert wanted a third child, and Ann found that their equally sharing childcare and domestic work was an important factor in her decision to have a third child.

After nine years of work-sharing 50-50, they increased their work proportions from 50 to 60 per cent, and a couple of years later to 80 per cent. Ann's impression was that by choosing to work part-time, she had more or less renounced the chance of having a career, but in fact she was offered a managerial position during her period of part-time work; she rose swiftly through the ranks and has had several top managerial positions since. After one year in a part-time managerial position, she returned to working full-time, while he continued in an 80 per cent job share for another six years, even though he was actually working full-time, paid on an hourly basis. Robert is a senior researcher and his feelings about not having carved out a "traditional" career are ambiguous. As his wife's career took off, he came to accept that there would not be room for two careers in the same family at the same state agency. He has enjoyed his work very much and has not taken any serious steps to find a managerial position himself; however, he is somewhat ambiguous about his wife's better career as well as her much higher income.

They have maintained an egalitarian pattern of sharing domestic work, and both agree that he is better at and does most of the housework – except for washing clothes, which is still her domain. He also maintains their external relations, inviting guests and sending Christmas cards, which women usually do in most families.

During the work-sharing period, they shared care-giving quite equally. According to Ann, "It was quite special for a period; they did not bother if they said mother or father, as long as it was one of us". But when the children reached adolescence this changed; Ann became their closest confidant, while Robert became very involved in his work, as well as other activities. The children are now in their thirties. Even though she has a very demanding position as a top manager and travels a great deal, she is still the one who "drops everything to meet the children at a café if there is something". Reflecting on this, Ann says: "You are very busy, maybe your children feel they should not bother you". She also points to a difference in the attention she and Robert give the children: "I am perhaps [. . .] more interested in what the children are doing". Robert agrees that he became less available and less involved in the children as they grew older. But both husband and wife have good relations with the kids: if the son needs a cake recipe, he calls his father, not his mother.

Ann and Robert are representative in terms of education of the majority of the work-sharing couples: they had also started work-sharing independently of the project, and it was Robert's initiative to promote a more egalitarian pattern. Like more than half of the work-sharing couples, they had three children. The work-sharing couples' overall fertility rate of 2.33 was average for women born in the 1940s and 1950s, but in this couple, the importance of the father bearing responsibility for his share of the housework *vis-à-vis* the decision to have another child was made explicit. All the men had the number of children they wanted to, but four of the women would have had a third or a fourth child.

This couple's current level of the sharing of domestic work and their reversed career pattern are, however, special as many of the work-sharing couples admitted to having reverted to a somewhat more traditional gendered pattern. In this couple the tendency for the mother's involvement to outlast that of the father was most explicit, but this was a tendency throughout the work-sharing group, i.e. that the work-sharing mothers reported being closest to the adult children as well as the grandchildren today.

Permanent work-sharers

The third couple to exemplify the project, Ola and Kari, stayed in the work-sharing arrangement longer than all the other couples for most of their professional lives. They had both been trained in the same occupation, a female-dominated caring profession, and over their long work-sharing career they sometimes shared the same job and at other times had different part-time jobs for different employers. At one of the jobs which they shared, they wanted to share the work 50-50, but were not allowed to do so: the employer wanted them to share it 70-30, with Ola working the lion's share. They stayed in this position for five years, and Kari regrets the effect her lower share has had on her pension. Over their life-course, Ola was usually responsible for a greater proportion of the work than Kari despite the fact that Ola strongly disliked his work, and that working less and having more leisure time were part of his motivation for joining the work-sharing arrangement: he worked part-time most of the time until falling ill in his early 50s: he was then given early retirement.

He admitted to being the dominant one in the relationship, and part of his motivation for work-sharing was that she would gain independence from him in financial matters. Ola regrets that he remained in a job he disliked and that he did not change vocation. His wife enjoyed her job and for the last five years she has had a fulfilling managerial position, before taking early retirement at 62. Having both worked part-time for such a long time, they will both have reduced pensions, and they regret they did not think about this before.

They do, however, both agree that working part-time gave them more opportunity for leisure and outdoor pursuits, which led to a less stressful family life. Ola's father died of the same illness from which Ola came to suffer, a hereditary condition whose onset is exacerbated by irregular working hours and night shifts: Ola's part-time work may in fact have saved his life: although he developed the same illness at the same age, he did not die of it as his father did.

Despite his untraditional vocation, sharing domestic work was not high on Ola's agenda, and he did little housework, even though he did his share on his days off at home. Today Kari is mainly responsible for most of the domestic work. Neither was he particularly involved in the upbringing of their two sons when they were small, but he was involved in their leisure activities as they grew up, and he has followed the same pattern with the grandchildren. In their parenting style, Kari and Ola emphasized independence, but they also think they were strict. Although they both express that they are not very close to their adult sons, Kari feels she has the closer connection.

Ola and Kari have medium-term education and worked in a non-academic profession. They started work-sharing after having heard of the project. Ola is one of the truly less career-oriented men among the work-sharing men, and for him working less and having more leisure time were important aspects of his motivation to work part-time. Leisure was stated as a major motivational factor for some, and an additional factor for a considerable proportion of the men. In this couple, in contrast to the majority, sharing domestic work was not a main issue, and their current pattern

was rather traditional. Ola's reflections on the potential health benefits from working part-time is broached in many of the interviews, although from a different angle, as the majority of the work-sharing couples were of good health.

The three couples represent three different patterns; one egalitarian, dual-earner pattern, a reversed pattern and a traditional pattern. I have not presented an example of another frequent pattern which is that of the man returning to full-time work and the wife staying in part-time positions, sometimes with breaks from work to study. An example of a post work-sharing adaptation with the husband working full-time and the wife working part-time is explored in detail in Bjørnholt (2009c).

Impact on marital relations and well-being

One of the main objectives and expectations of the original project was that the work-sharing arrangement would lead to better marital relations as well as better relations between all members of the family. The original study concluded that this was indeed the case, and one of the interesting findings from the follow-up study is the emphasis on the couple's relationship which the men stressed in retrospect as part of their motivation for participating in the work-sharing arrangement (see Bjørnholt, forthcoming a).

The importance of this as well as the impact of this on the couple's relationship are supported by empirical evidence which indicates that the work-sharing arrangement did indeed have a positive impact on the couple's relation. The number of couples still married is high; 12 out of 15 couples, or 80 per cent were still married and three couples were divorced. This is better than could be expected (with the important qualification that this is a small and non-representative sample). The majority of the work-sharing couples married in the latter part of the 1960s and the early 1970s. For comparison, in the 1965 marital cohort 25.8 per cent were divorced 30 years later (in 1995) and of those who married in 1974, 26.3 per cent were divorced 21 years later (Mamelund *et al.*, 1997).

The positive effect of men sharing more equally unpaid work in the home and the importance of shared life worlds was a topic which was broached in many of the interviews; one of the men expressed his view as follows:

It's very fundamental that both have a responsibility at home [. . .] this creates a basis for shared experiences and a shared understanding which make living together much simpler.

Another important indication of the positive effect on marital relations is the women's great appreciation of the work-sharing men's contribution at home: the men were often praised as good husbands and fathers by the wives. One of the women recalls that she felt quite good about leaving for work after having stayed at home as a housewife for several years. Being able to hand responsibility for the home to her husband, and knowing that he could tackle it, added positively to their marital relations. According to Ann:

He was rather a very constructive partner, taking his share of the work. You absolutely were! You knew what taking care of two kids was all about [*to her husband*].

In another publication I discuss a possible "paradox of valuation" related to the way in which the men were highly appreciated both by wives and employers (Bjørnholt, forthcoming b). The other aspect to the arrangement, that of women working outside the home was, however, also an important side to the project. As one of the women reflects:

Wife: I think I also became more attractive to you

Husband: Yes, you did, I like independent women with a will of their own, and having a job is part of that.

Wife: I also became more self-confident and that had an impact on our relationship.

Husband: And I became less confident when you went out to work and met other men, this adds a little to the relationship.

In conclusion, men's house husbandry and wives' paid work seem to have contributed to mutual understanding and shared life-worlds, as well as increased mutual attractiveness. When the couples talked about the work-sharing arrangement, the relations as a couple emerge as the main focus and the main arena of change among the work-sharing couples. The tendency for motherhood to outlast fatherhood in terms of emotional closeness and direct involvement with the now adult children, however, reveals a gendered pattern in parental involvement over the life-course even among these egalitarian couples.

Work/life balance

An important aspect to the work-sharing arrangement was to promote a better work/life balance, and a less stressful family life was expected to have a beneficial effect on all family relations as well as on individual well-being and health. Stress reduction and better relations were reported in the original project, and the follow-up interviews confirm this finding. The work-sharing couples are in general content that they were able to give their children calm, less stressful childhoods and provide a good atmosphere for the children's upbringing and they underline that this was a very good solution for themselves; some make comparisons with the stressful lives of young parents today. At the same time, they are at pains not to boast or give advice to others.

A possible link between working less and health was also broached such as the comment below:

One winter there was this terrible flu, but we all stayed healthy, [we wondered] whether this had to do with our calmer lifestyle and the lack of stress for us and the children.

Others think that the fact that they worked part-time during their busiest years as parents of small children has even been beneficial for their current health status, and make comparisons with colleagues or friends who have been working full-time and are now sick and tired.

The divorced couples

Although the majority remained married, three couples were divorced. All the women and two of the men agreed to be interviewed. The couples that divorced stayed in the work-sharing arrangement for between 3 and 13.5 years. In two of the couples, both spouses had the same high level of education in a health profession and in one couple both had little formal education. In all the couples that divorced, the husband and wife shared the same position. For the two men, leisure was expressed as part of their motivation to work less.

When explaining why they divorced, in two of the couples both the husbands and wives pointed out serious marital and interpersonal problems; by the third couple, no particular reason was stated. No-one referred to the work-sharing arrangement as a reason for divorce, but one of the men thought the arrangement might have made his wife more aware of the problems between them. Neither did the men refer to having felt threatened in their breadwinning role by the wife working, nor to feeling unmanly by working part-time and assuming traditional female tasks. They all claimed to have shared household work equally, and spoke positively of the time they had spent on the

work-sharing arrangement, apart from one of the women who felt that she had shouldered a disproportionate share of housework and breadwinning. None of the women mentioned violence or abuse by the husband, which has been found by other research to be important causes of divorce (Moxnes, 1996). The finding fits well with recent research on the causes of divorce, which concludes that, as a consequence of the normalization of divorce, serious reasons for divorce, such as violence, have become less common, and relational problems, as well as problems related to work and housework, have become more important (De Graaf and Kalmin, 2006). The work-sharing couples were pioneers in adopting an egalitarian pattern of breadwinning and care at a time when this was unusual, and it is reasonable to expect they were modern even in other respects.

Discussion

With the exception of the negative effects of working part-time long-term on pensions, the work-sharing arrangement has been overwhelmingly positively appreciated by the participants in retrospect. The arrangement seems to have had a positive impact on marital relations, work/life balance and gender equality, but a further discussion of cause and effect is warranted.

Many of the work-sharing couples started work-sharing independently of the project as a solution to their own challenges posed by balancing work and family as first generation dual-earners. Consequently, the actual work-sharing arrangements in the participating families were only partly a result of the work-sharing project, but, once included, the project probably influenced the actual arrangements and sharpened the focus on particular issues, such as the sharing of domestic work.

The majority of participants appreciated in retrospect the learning effect, their shared life worlds and mutual understanding, which they saw as a result of the work-sharing arrangement. But whether this effect stems from the arrangement or from underlying values is difficult to say. The duration of the arrangement does not seem to have played an important role in the impact on marital relations, nor in the persistence of egalitarian patterns over the life-course, which indicates that the perceived effects may not derive simply from the arrangement itself. On the other hand, it would be wrong to attribute the effects to values alone, as, in the work-sharing project, they were strongly interlinked. In contrast to other men who may have shared the general idea of a modern, radical and profeminist masculinity in the 1970s, the work-sharing men, by actually reducing their working hours, making space for their partner's careers, and taking upon themselves the responsibility as house-husbands, convincingly demonstrated their egalitarian values.

The impact of the arrangement seems to some extent to be linked to the way the reasons the men stated for joining the arrangement. The work-sharing men's personal motivation and agency, based on egalitarian values and a willingness to shape a more egalitarian family, seem to be important for the persistence of egalitarian patterns, while leisure and/or a lack of interest in work as a major motivation were less related to good marital relations and egalitarian patterns over the life-course.

Conclusion

The work-sharing project radically addressed the gendered division of paid and unpaid work and the project design itself represents an interesting approach to the gendered division of labour, through its orchestration of the synchronized movement of women into paid work and men into the home. Revisiting the project and the original

participants provided a unique opportunity to study the long-term impact of the more equal sharing of paid and unpaid work, and the findings illustrate the value of longitudinal research.

The number of couples still married, as well as the informants' own views concerning the positive impact on their couple relations, family life and well-being, indicate that the work-sharing arrangement has had an important impact on family life and couple relations. Further, a better work/life balance and working less during the period of child-rearing may have had a positive health effect.

However, as the examples of couples still married, as well as the divorced couples, illustrate, there is no simple and direct relation between the duration of the work-sharing arrangement, marital relations and the persistence of egalitarian patterns over the life-course. Based on the work-sharing case, the reduction of working hours alone does not necessarily lead to better marital relations or to more egalitarian patterns in the family.

More important in shaping and retaining egalitarian patterns seem to be the combined agency and caring attitude of the husband and his active willingness to share childcare and domestic work, promote joint egalitarian values and a focus on the family and the couple relationship as a joint responsibility.

On the other hand, reduced working hours seem to have had a positive impact on work-family balance, levels of stress and the participants' health, which occurred largely independently of the effects on couple relations and the persistence of egalitarian patterns.

Finally the follow-up study elucidates the interrelation between egalitarian patterns of work and care and fertility.

These results are of relevance to current debates, research and policymaking with respect to the work/life balance issue, gender equality, the persisting gendered sharing of paid and unpaid work and the still largely unresolved question of how to promote men's greater participation in unpaid work at home.

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About the author

Margunn Bjørnholt is a Researcher at the Department of Sociology and Human Geography, University of Oslo. She has been engaged in research and published reports and articles on flexible work, parenting, gender equality and culture. She is currently engaged in a research project on men, work, family and gender equality in an intergenerational perspective. Margunn Bjørnholt can be contacted at: mabjorn@online.no