



# Part-time work and the career and life choices of the men from the work-sharing couples study

Career and  
life choices

Margunn Bjørnholt

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

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – This article outlines the longitudinal consequences for men who participated in the work-sharing couples study which was a Norwegian, experimental research project in the early 1970s. The aim of the original project was to promote gender equality and a better work/life balance in families; the design involved both spouses working part-time and sharing childcare and housework. This paper aims to present the results of a longitudinal follow-up study of the participants in the work-sharing couples study. In this paper the work-sharing men's part-time adaptations and the impact of the work-sharing arrangement on their careers is the main focus.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The original project had a small scale, interventionist design based on couples working part-time and sharing childcare and housework; effects were documented by questionnaires and time diaries. In the follow-up study 30 years later, retrospective life-course couple interviews with the original participants were used. The current paper is based on an analysis of the couple interviews with a particular focus on the men's careers.

**Findings** – Obtaining part-time work was not difficult, and working part-time was mostly uncomplicated for the men. Neither did their working part time for a substantial amount of time have negative career effects, and they were rather successful professionally. Their experiences as work sharers were mainly positively valued at their workplaces as adding to managerial skills. For those who did not have a managerial career, this was due to personal choice rather than any negative effect of working part-time.

**Practical implications** – Changing men's adaptations to work and care is high on the agenda in family research as well as in policy making and the findings from this study contributes to new knowledge which is of interest in research as well as policy making.

**Originality/value** – The original project was unique internationally, and so is the longitudinal follow-up of this experiment. The work-sharing men's part-time adaptations and the longitudinal impact on their careers provide new and contra-intuitive insights into the question of men, work and family.

**Keywords** Gender, Part time workers, Norway, Quality of life, Equal opportunities, Family life

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

In this article, part-time work for men is discussed as part of a small scale reciprocal work- and care-sharing programme in Norway in the early 1970s that was designed to promote gender equality in the family and an improved work/family balance. The

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article is based on a longitudinal, qualitative follow-up study of the original couples who participated in the project.

This article will explore the experiences of the men who worked part-time in the early 1970s, at a time when part-time work was still unusual and men doing so was even more seldom: how were they received at their workplaces, and which workplace obstacles did they encounter? How did their careers turn out? What were the repercussions on their careers of their working part-time?

The tensions between paid work and family life have become a major focus of research and the subject of policy discussions in Europe, and involving men in the family has become an important part of gender equality policies. Norway has played a pioneering role in this respect, first with the Work-Sharing Couples Project (WSP) in the early 1970s, and, 20 years later, as the first country to introduce a paternal quota of parental leave, both of which attracted great interest internationally. As a relatively advanced country in relation to gender equality, ranked first on the UN Gender Related Development Index, Norway is often regarded internationally as a model as well as a test field for gender equality. Of particular interest is the fact that even in Norway, in spite of fairly short working hours, relatively lavish benefits for working parents and the active use of policies to promote gender equality, gendered patterns of paid and unpaid work persist and tensions between work, family and gender equality are much the same as worldwide. A recent study based on a survey of gender equality concluded that the world of work is lagging behind in the development of gender equality in Norway (Holter *et al.*, 2009). An international study of seven countries, ranging from India to Norway (Gambles *et al.*, 2006), concluded that the preeminence of paid work over family life, the invasiveness of the former into the latter and the gendered tensions involved in reconciling work and care constitute a global trend.

The general picture is thus one of a persisting gendered division of paid and unpaid work (see Vaage, 2002; Platenga and Remery, 2005; Pringle *et al.*, 2006) and responsibility for childcare and the running of the home is still borne mainly by women (Kitterød, 2005; Pettersen, 2004), even though sharing equally is the culturally dominant ideal in the Nordic countries (Magnusson, 2006) and Europe (Puchert *et al.*, 2005). Despite considerable variations between and within countries, and despite a greater proportion of couples sharing equally in Norway than in many other countries, Crompton and Lyonette (2007) concluded in a comparative study of seven European countries that the most frequent solution to women's increased share of paid work was a double shift for women.

The persisting, gendered division between household and care work has led to a renewed focus among researchers and policymakers in recent years on the need for men to contribute more to the daily running and management of their families. Research into men as fathers has increasingly also addressed fathers' work/family adaptations and adaptations at the workplace (Haas and Hwang, 2000, 2007; Hobson, 2002; Cooper, 2002; Bekkengen, 2002; Morgan *et al.*, 2005; Kvande, 2005). The question of men, work and care is the subject of the EU research programmes, work changes gender (Puchert *et al.*, 2005) and fostering caring masculinities (FOCUS) (Langvasbråten and Teigen, 2006).

Part-time work for men has recently (re)emerged as one possible solution to the problems of work/family reconciliation, and men in Norway work part-time to a greater extent than in most other European (EU and EFTA-) countries; 13 per cent of Norwegian men, as compared to 7 per cent of European men work part-time (Eurostat, 2005)[1]. Working part-time is, however, still mainly a female adaptation, and the share

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of part-time workers among Norwegian women is 44 per cent. In a recent Nordic study of men, gender equality and social innovation (Holter, 2007b), part-time work for men emerges as “a frontier area in the interviews. It is something that many fathers want, but few of them manage to realize” (Holter, 2007b, p. 258).

In spite of a doubling of part-time work among men in Western countries since the early 1990s, the number of men who work part-time is still low (Puchert *et al.*, 2005). Neither is the rise in men working part-time a result of men’s greater day-to-day involvement in their families. The European research project work changes gender, to the researchers’ slight surprise (Halrynjo and Holter, 2005, p. 106), found no strong link between less paid work and the amount of domestic work put in. Men who work part-time do so mainly due to reasons other than family obligations, such as being students, taking early retirement, adapting to illness (Hakim, 2000) or preparing for their next career (Puchert *et al.*, 2005). Men in general seem not to consider part-time an option to reconcile paid work and family obligations (Sheridan, 2004).

Cooper (2002) describes how a total commitment to work is taken for granted by both traditional fathers and “superdads”, who represent different levels of childcare involvement, but not different levels of work involvement. Sweden may represent a promising development, as more than half of Swedish fathers reported having adjusted their working hours to spend more time with their children (Haas and Hwang, 2000; Haas *et al.*, 2006).

When asked, fathers say they want to spend more time with their families and participate more actively in parenting and household work (Puchert, 2005). However, accepting these expressed preferences at face value as preparedness to change behaviour may be jumping to conclusions. Kitterød (2007), using survey data from Statistics Norway, discusses the paradox that parents of young children express a preference for shorter working hours, and a substantial proportion of the parents who want to work less also think they would be able to get a reduction in working hours, but in spite of this combination of preference expressed and opportunity perceived, they do not reduce their working hours. Kitterød concludes that an expression of preference is not a good predictor of behaviour.

Several explanations have been proposed to explain why men do not change their priorities concerning paid work and care. One explanation is the persistence of the male breadwinner norm as an important part of Western masculinities, and a deeply embedded, masculine moral order (Lamont, 2000). The interpretation of commitment to work as commitment to family needs further discussion. Dermott (2006), in a large study of British households, found that despite the fact that fathers as a group work longer hours than non-fathers, the significance of fatherhood in relation to hours of paid work disappears when other factors are taken into account.

Another explanation for men’s strong commitment to work is the male worker norm, which sees workers as unencumbered by other responsibilities and free to devote all their time, focus, energy and loyalty to work (Acker, 1998; Halford *et al.*, 1997). Despite the widely accepted idea of involved fatherhood in the Nordic countries (Brandth and Kvande, 2003; Bekkengen, 2002), and in other European countries, the “daddy-track” lacks institutional support in working life (Puchert *et al.*, 2005; Larsen-Asp and Rusnes, 2006; Holter, 2007b). Haas and Hwang (2000, 2007) and Bäck-Wicklund and Plantin (2007) found that managers showed little interest in effecting such policies. Hochschild (1997) found that using family-friendly policies was hindered by an organizational culture of long working hours. Processes of globalization and the development of global business masculinities linked to a total commitment to work and

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limitless time regimes enhance a male worker norm (Connell, 1998, 2000, 2001; Collinson and Hearn, 2005). Kvande (2005) discusses how the development of the global business masculinity is at odds with the Norwegian welfare state's efforts to link men to care through the paternal quota of parental leave.

The strong emphasis on external factors, such as an adherence to social norms, a lack of opportunities, obstacles at the workplace or a lack of institutional support for the "daddy-track" is an interesting contrast to the strong emphasis on agency in feminist theory and in current conceptualizations of childhood and children. While women and children are generally seen as competent agents, even in the worst of circumstances, men as fathers tend to be constructed as victims, even though they may occupy privileged and well paid positions of power. The present image of the working father makes one's thoughts turn to Wrong's (1961) "oversocialized conception of man", and is overdue for a corresponding critique.

Critical researchers into men and masculinities argue that men and fathers have to be made responsible, by naming fathers as men (Hearn, 2002) and men as men (Collinson and Hearn, 2001; Hearn and Pringle, 2006). As fathers and men they are often in positions of power and privilege in the family[2], as well as in organizations. Bekkengen (2002) points out the combined effect of structural inequalities between men and women at the workplace and the family as the main reasons for the gendered division of paid and unpaid work. As employees, men are subordinate at the workplace, while, as men, they are superior in the family. The combination of relative powerlessness as employees and relative power as men in the family is a favourable bargaining situation for men, while women are subordinates both at the workplace and within the family.

Rather than looking for reasons mainly outside of men themselves, and relying entirely on a model of male powerlessness in relation to a greedy working life, it is important to ask of what possible benefit current work/family arrangements are for men. Work is not only a necessary evil, but is also of intrinsic value to men and the workplace is an important arena for male-identity formation (see Alvesson, 1998; Cooper, 2002; Solbrække, 2005), as well as for the reproduction of gendered power relations (Collinson and Hearn, 2001). As Hochschild (1997) has shown, work can also be a relief and an acceptable reason to escape the strains of family life. Others point to the development of a new, male ethic of work based on a romantic discourse of creativity and personal growth (Alvesson, 1998; Solbrække, 2005) – which boils down to the need to put in many hours at work (Højgaard, 1997).

McMahon (1999) argues that men's interest in and gains from the existing gender arrangement are the main reason why men have not responded to women moving into working life and have not taken more responsibility for the unpaid work at home.

In spite of controversy about the explanations for men's lack of adaptations to work and care, there is general agreement that men's relations to work remain a major challenge to the pursuit of gender equality, and to the need for men to allocate their time differently between paid and unpaid work so they can be more actively involved in care for their families. Working part-time is often the solution for women to combine work and care, and men also working part-time might be part of a dual earner/dual carer model.

Part-time work has, however, been documented to be negative or even "detrimental" to careers (Crompton and Birkelund, 2000; Crompton, 2002). The negative effects are not restricted to low-skilled, part-time jobs; part-time professionals also face occupational downgrading and fewer opportunities for training, promotion and communication (Dick and Hyde, 2006).

The status of part-time work differs between countries and working part-time work may not have as negative effects on careers in Norway as it does in many other countries. This may be due to special features of the Norwegian labour market, which is based on a long history of successful industrial democracy and the promotion of democratic and egalitarian relations as a means to increase efficiency and productivity in Norway. Norwegian industrial democracy started as a joint initiative in the early 1960s between the main employer's organization Norsk arbeidsgiverforening (NAF) and the main worker's organization Landsorganisasjonen (LO): the initiative was led by Norwegian social scientists in collaboration with researchers from the Tavistock Institute, London (see Emery and Thorsrud, 1964; Emery *et al.*, 1976). It culminated in the Working Environment Act passed in 1979, which prescribed industrial democracy by law. Today, the tradition of cooperation and workplace democracy is being challenged by the globalization of companies in the private sector and the introduction of reforms based on the New Public Management concept in the public sector. Kvande (2005) describes how working in transnational organizations represents much harsher conditions for work/family reconciliation for Norwegian fathers: such organizations make hitherto unknown demands for limitless time and effort to be put in.

Another reason why part-time work in general may not be as negative in Norway as in other countries is the active use in the public sector of part-time work. This allowed women to combine paid work and motherhood by unburdening women of care responsibilities and offering part-time work in the growing public care sector, the outcome of which has become known as the "woman-friendly welfare state" (Hernes, 1987).

Due to the gendered labour market and the fact that very few men work part-time to adapt to family and care responsibilities, there is little evidence about men working part-time on the same terms and for the same reasons as women.

The argument that working part-time should be worse for men, is quite common, but is not well founded. Holter (2007a, p. 429), for instance, claims that "studies show that the penalties for leaving the full-time path may be even greater for men than for women", referring to Stevens *et al.* (2004). The Stevens study, based on a British survey, found that 56 per cent of the men and 45 per cent of the women feared there would be negative effects on their careers if they reduced their working hours. Negative career effects were thus expected rather than experienced; the study clearly provides no evidence that men are penalized more harshly for working part-time.

To move beyond speculation based merely on beliefs and perceptions, there is a need for national empirical research into the actual, longitudinal effects on careers of part-time work for men in different contexts. In the next section of this article the experiences and longitudinal effects on the careers of a group of men who worked part-time in the early 1970s will be explored.

### **Men who changed their work/family priorities**

Efforts to promote more equal and democratic relations in working life during the 1960s and 1970s had a counterpart in sociologist Erik Grønseth's life-long preoccupation with more equal and democratic relations in the family. And parallel to the use of action research as a method to promote more equal relations in working life, the WSP was launched as an action research project aiming at more equal relations in families. The project was carried out at the Institute of Sociology at the University of Oslo between 1969 and 1975, and led by Professor Erik Grønseth in close cooperation with the Norwegian Family Council and its head, Ola Rokkones. The project was based on both

spouses working part-time[3] and sharing childcare and household work. Thirty years later 14 of the original 16 couples were interviewed in a follow-up study.

In orchestrating a reciprocal change and reallocating paid and unpaid work between men and women, as well as linking the private relationships between men and women in the family to a change in working life and society, the project anticipated present discussions of work/life balance and gender equality. Gambles *et al.* (2006) emphasize reciprocal change between men and women as an important part of solving the tensions between work, family and gender equality, arguing that “it is important to explore the interactions and reciprocity between men- women- relationships and other parts of life at individual, systemic and societal level” (p. 83).

The participants in WSP were 16 couples in different occupations, most of them middle-class academics, while some had lower clerical positions and some worked for private consultancies, thus representing a variety of middle-class positions. The original idea was for the couples to share the same job, and four different production companies were persuaded to provide 40, shared, blue-collar jobs. But due to a lack of response from working-class participants, participants were instead recruited through the media and snowballing techniques, resulting in a mainly middle-class sample, one-fourth of whom shared the same job, but the majority had different part-time jobs for different employers.

The lack of blue-collar, working-class participants was criticized at the time, although today, some of the lower clerical positions would probably have been coded as working class. In orchestrating the equal sharing by men and women of breadwinning and care, the WSP pursued a strategy of gender equality, which increasingly has come to be seen as mainly fitting with a (white) middle-class family ideal (Mirza, 1997; Skilbrei, 2003). Against this background, the lack of working-class response as well as the predominantly middle-class sample were to be expected. These were men who shared the ideals of gender equality based on the equal sharing of breadwinning and care, and the ones who could be expected to pursue corresponding strategies for the reconciliation of work and family.

The couples shared work and care in different ways: working every second day, every second week or sharing the week between them. Part-time work was combined with shift parenting and the one who stayed at home was usually fully responsible for the running of the house on his/her days.

The effect of the arrangement on sharing domestic work and childcare was one of the project’s prime focuses, which was found to be a success. The participating families experienced less stress and better marital relations, and an extraordinary level of gender equality was reported within the participating couples (Grønseth, 1975b). These beneficial effects on family life were to a large extent confirmed in the follow-up study (Bjørnholt, 2009a, b) 30 years later. In the follow-up study, the active role of the men in initiating and implementing the work-sharing arrangement emerged as an important theme.

### **Methodology and data**

The longitudinal follow-up study employs an embedded design, that is, multiple levels of analysis within the same study (Yin, 1984). The data consist of semi-structured, qualitative interviews, which were taped and transcribed, with couples who participated in the work-sharing couples experiment during the early 1970s. The interviews had a biographical design with particular regard to interviewees’ reflections in retrospect on their participation in the work-sharing experiment and covered both

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the interviewees' common lives as couples, and the individual life course of each spouse, with a particular focus on professional biography.

Biographical interviews may be analysed in several ways, and at different levels. In other papers, the interviews are analysed at the couple level (Bjørnholt, 2009a), from an intergenerational perspective (Bjørnholt, 2009b), and with a focus on the personal biographies and motivations of the work-sharing men (Bjørnholt, forthcoming).

Bruner (1986) makes an analytical distinction between three aspects of biographical interviews: the objective, empirical aspect of the life course, the subjective experience and life as told in a narrative form. In this paper, the main emphasis is on the empirical aspect of the life course. Further, I have restricted the analysis to one aspect of the men's biographies – their professional biography – drawing on the individual, professional biographies from the individual section of the couple interviews, and, in some cases, additionally, workplace – and career-relevant information that arose in other contexts during the couple interviews.

Analysis, however, does not start with the reading of the interview transcripts. When planning the follow-up study, I wanted to collect specific biographical data on several aspects of the work-sharing couples' life course, including their careers and during the interviews, and I aimed to cover certain points that had emerged as important in the research literature, such as work-place obstacles and potential negative effects of part-time work. I asked about how they obtained part-time work, possible workplace obstacles, their experiences of working part-time during the work-sharing period, any reactions at the workplace to their working part-time, their actual careers and the positions they obtained over their life courses, and the possible impacts of their part-time work on their careers.

During the analysis, I conducted several readings of the interview transcripts. My first, cross-case reading of the interview transcripts searched for main patterns in career trajectories. During the next reading, I searched for variation within the broad categories that I had first identified, such as those who had managerial careers (one half) and those who did not (the other half). Within these categories, I identified different patterns and different ways of reasoning. The analytic structure was constructed on the basis of these variations and I have ordered the presentation of the cases into a structure of main categories and sub-groups, in order to display both general trends as well as some of the variation in the material.

The main focus is on the men, and the analysis draws on the whole sample of men. In addition, I present a small sample of women's experiences, which is strategically selected to highlight differences between the work-sharing women as compared with the work-sharing men, as well as differences within couples and intra-couple dynamics in career choices and outcomes.

### **Obtaining part-time work**

As (mostly) young parents, the majority of the work-sharing men were at an early stage of their careers, some of them starting their first job, and some changing jobs to be able to work part-time. As newcomers, their bargaining power was not that great. On the other hand, as highly educated academics in an expanding labour market, they were attractive employees, probably affording some room for negotiation. Most of the men obtained part-time arrangements without great difficulty[4], even though some employers were surprised and some of the men had to bargain to be permitted to work part-time. Employer attitudes ranged from seeing work-sharing men as particularly attractive employees or good for company image building to different degrees of reluctant

acceptance. For the majority, however, obtaining part-time was uncomplicated, and none faced serious obstacles at the workplace. Employer reactions varied from strongly positive to reluctant acceptance as the examples below illustrate.

*Work-sharing men as attractive employees*

Arne finished reading economics shortly before the birth of the couple's first child and stayed at home with his wife for the first few months, and then applied for an advertised, part-time job as a statistician. The response was quite positive.

I think they found this motivation (wanting to work part-time to share childcare with his wife) quite interesting. Oddly enough, I got the job without even having an interview.

When he later changed job, he continued to work part-time, gradually increasing his work share from the original 50 per cent, through a period of working 60 per cent, ending up at 80 per cent before starting working full-time after six years of different part-time arrangements for two different employers. He recalls no problem obtaining part-time conditions in his second job, when he was working in the financial department of the social services of a large town. As a female-dominated sector, part-time work and parental leave were normal, and he thinks that "a man asking for it, was in a way only positive".

*Company image building*

Per was graduating as an economist when his first child was born. He took the initiative to find part-time jobs for himself and his wife and they were both employed at the same shipping firm, she as a clerk and he as an economist. They were offered part-time jobs by the employer following publicity in the newspapers about the project and their looking for part-time jobs. According to Per and his wife, their rather conservative employer considered them good publicity for the company – it would appear to be a modern, flexible organization – and they stayed in their part-time jobs at the same employer for four years.

*Reluctant acceptance*

Robert is a civil engineer and quit his job at a consultancy to start working at his wife's place of work at a state agency to be able to work part-time. There were some discussions when he – a man – wanted to work part-time. But their managers supported them, and he was granted permission. They split the weeks between them, working alternately two and three days each, sharing the same office, but not the same job. They continued working part-time for 12 years, gradually increasing their work share from the original 50 to 80 per cent.

*From reluctant acceptance to company image building*

Two couples, John and Karen and David and Rita, all working for the same branch of another state agency, cooperated to share jobs. It had become increasingly usual for women at the agency to share jobs and work part-time when they had children, but no-one had ever heard of men working part-time when John and David applied to share John's job – which involved teaching internal training programmes. In contrast to the majority of work-sharing men, they were not academics, but they had been working at the agency for a long time.

One argument against John and David sharing John's job was the more skilled character of the job, compared to the women's shared job. Due to gendered career paths



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in the agency, men were trained for administrative and managerial positions, while women remained mainly in more mundane jobs. This was also the reason they could not share jobs as husband and wife, but rather chose to cooperate as couples, so that the two men could share one job and their wives another.

Their wives, Karen and Rita, had no problem sharing a job, but the men had to apply to the top management before they were allowed to work part-time. After they had been given permission, however, the agency used the work-sharing couples to promote the agency as a modern, flexible and attractive workplace. Later, two more couples at the same agency also started work sharing, which is the only example of a direct spread effect from the project.

### **Working part-time**

After they had started work sharing, the arrangement ran smoothly for all the men, and none of them had to give up working part-time due to difficulties at the workplace, even though a few had to endure some disdain or mockery from employers or colleagues. In contrast, one of the women had to give up her job to stay at home as a housewife for two years, due to a lack of adaptation to her wishing to work part-time at her workplace. The examples below illustrate the common experience of the men of being valued at the workplace due to the work-sharing experience, as well as examples of negative reactions at the workplace, which were mentioned by a small minority of the men. The contrasting experiences of the women are illustrated by one couple.

#### *The husband: earning goodwill through part-time work*

Frank is a lawyer and worked for the state administration. Frank's wish to work part-time was welcomed by his employer due to a special situation at his workplace: one person there did not function well in the job, and Frank suggested to his manager that this job be shared between him and this person. This also involved him quitting a full-time, permanent position for a part-time deputyship, which did not go unacknowledged and was appreciated by his employer.

#### *The wife: forced to resign*

Frank's wife, Vera, is a special needs teacher and worked at the time within paediatric and youth psychiatry. During the work-sharing arrangement they both had 50 per cent jobs, working every second day. In contrast to her husband, Vera faced growing problems combining care and work. When her husband was offered a full-time manager's position, she urged him to accept it, because she found it hard to combine work and children, mostly due to the lack of accommodation and adjustment to her working part-time from her employer. She felt obliged to quit and became a full-time housewife for two years. As well as pointing out obstacles at the workplace as the main problem, she is also implicitly criticizing the focus on sharing domestic work, and intra-familial and couple relations in the project.

I think we were quite successful at home, but it was very poorly arranged at work, even though I was working in a job to do with children and care. This impression is still stuck in my mind, how poorly arranged it was [ . . . ] I was also forced to resign.

#### *Negative reactions at the workplace*

A couple of the men experienced negative reactions at their place of work. Sigurd was selling technical equipment in a private business and his colleagues complained they

never knew when he would be there. He worked on regular days, and maintained it should not be difficult to keep track of his work rhythm.

Roger worked as a social scientist in an administrative position, and felt his working part-time was unpopular at his workplace:

*Roger:* You must note down that it was unpopular at my workplace. I had not only done this, I had also taken half a year's unpaid leave from my work place (before having children). That was not good!

*Interviewer:* No?

*Roger:* It reveals you are not ambitious and (don't) want to move up in the world.

*Interviewer:* Yes?

*Roger:* Yes, so I was a little frowned upon by people, as I have told you, my career was at a standstill for 27 years as a senior official. But I think many men would find it difficult to take such a choice because of the terror you will be exposed to. You will be harassed at the workplace.

*Interviewer:* This was your experience?

*Roger:* Well, to a certain extent, but I was not on good terms with my colleagues. I had a different background, I thought they were, to put it a little flippantly, "clever schoolgirls", people who had been sitting at university and had never experienced anything, I thought.

*Interviewer:* No?

*Roger:* But I had experienced many things. There was some distance between us. Actually, I only became friendly with one of these colleagues.

In Roger's case the negative reactions at the workplace were not only due to him working part-time to take care of children, but were a part of a number of complex relations to colleagues. But challenging the male, worker norm and his perceived lack of ambition was certainly part of this picture. Even though Roger felt his colleagues' disdain, he did not have any problem with the managers at his workplace and he was allowed to work part-time as he wished to for the rest of his professional life.

#### *Lack of obstacles*

The lack of obstacles at the workplace to men's part-time work challenges the idea of there being great(er) difficulties for men to ask for and obtain part-time work, and is in accordance with other recent research (Ekenstam, 2007; Gislason, 2007; Bekkengen, 2002), which found neither workplace obstacles nor negative reactions to men taking parental leave or their carrying out domestic work. Gislason also points out that Icelandic fathers on parental leave received quite a lot of praise. Olsen (2007) found that both men and women felt they could not speak their minds at the workplace before the conflict between work and family forced them to do so, but when they eventually broached the topic, it was no problem for their workplaces and they were allowed to work less, but they had to take the initiative themselves to broach the topic of work/family reconciliation.

#### **Career and work**

The work-sharing couples continued their untraditional arrangement for a substantial amount of time, ranging between 1.5 and 30 years, with seven years as the mean and most frequent duration. Contrary to what might have been expected, working

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part-time for such a long time has not been an obstacle to forming a career. Rather, half of the men obtained managerial positions, mostly shortly after or while still working part-time, and the man being offered a managerial position was a frequent reason for quitting the work-sharing arrangement.

The men who became managers, however, all stopped working part-time after assuming a managerial position, while one of the women who held a top managerial position at a large, male-dominated state agency continued working part-time in an 80 per cent job share for her first year as a top-level manager.

Eight of the men and four of the women obtained managerial positions. The men were managers within state, county or municipal units, with one exception – a man who was the manager of a small, private business. Among the non-managers there were two dentists, one of whom had a PhD, a social scientist in an administrative position, a civil engineer working as a senior consultant, a university professor of science and a musician. Overall, measured by general standards of success, the work-sharing men appear to be quite successful professionally.

Below I present examples of the men who pursued careers and the men who abstained from career and how they reflect on the impact of the work-sharing experience on their further professional life course.

#### *Part-time and career*

For the men who pursued a career, the work-sharing experience was valued positively rather than negatively by employers. John was offered a leading position after three years of work sharing and has never had any negative feedback about his working part-time. He thought his experience as a housefather[5] had made him more empathetic and a better leader, particularly during a recent major downscaling process. He also felt this experience had been acknowledged as a qualification: “My experience as a housefather and of childcare is in fact a qualification, instead of being a professional idiot. I have had comments about that”. Statements like this were common.

Frank helped solve a difficult situation at his workplace by stepping in for another person who did not perform well. His period of working part-time allowed him to prove himself to be a constructive and responsible employee and a very capable person and did not have any negative repercussions on his career: rather, the opposite was true and he was offered a leading position after 1.5 years in the part-time arrangement.

After working part-time for four years, Per and his family had two periods abroad for a Norwegian development aid organization. He has worked full-time since and carved out a career as a high-ranking manager in public administration. The fact that he had worked part-time has not been a direct obstacle to his career. However, he did have one negative experience when he did not get a job because of his previous period of part-time work. He later learned that his working part-time had been interpreted by the employer as political radicalism, which made him unattractive to the employer. Even though several of the work-sharing men certainly were radical politically, no-one else experienced working part-time or their radicalism being a hindrance to forming a career. But even though Per experienced this once, he later did get a career as a manager.

#### *Valuing caring men*

The men who pursued a career got one, regardless of how long they continued working part-time. The lack of negative effects on career and the positive evaluation of the men's part-time adaptations are contra-intuitive to the widely presumed difficulties for

men working part-time and prioritizing family obligations. Haas and Hwang (2000) also found examples that fathers' use of parental leave was seen as positive for some men and valued by some employers as something that added to personal growth and to the development of new skills.

In the work-sharing follow-up study, only men referred to their experiences of fathering and of being house husbands as skills recognized in relation to their careers. No woman gained any recognition at the workplace for her skills as a housewife or carer. David, for instance, found that his experience as a housefather was positively valued by the couple's joint employer, while Rita, his wife, said "I think they have acknowledged that I have a big capacity for work, but no one has related that to the experience of my having been a housewife". This touches upon a "paradox of valuation" (Williams, 1995; Bekkengen, 2002); men being in privileged positions as men, and thus with the power to transform experiences into skills.

#### *Abstaining from career*

Some of the men abstained from having a career. Leisure and other life values were important motivations for the men, and choosing not to go in for a career seemed to be the result of deeper sets of values and personal choices, rather than the result of family obligations or working part-time. In the group that abstained from career there was more variation than in the group that pursued a career, which will be illustrated by the examples below.

*Leisure and other life values.* Roger continued to work part-time for the rest of his occupational life, while his wife studied more and made an academic career. As described above, he felt his colleagues disapproved of his adaptations of working life. But he was also quite explicit that he did not want to become a leader:

*Roger:* I had experienced many things, intellectually and during the war (. . .) and I was not very interested in advancing to become head of the office at my workplace. Rather, I wanted to spend time with the children and experience other things and cultivate my curiosity and sense of wonder. (A manager's job was) totally un-interesting. So it was not difficult for me to work part-time.

*Interviewer:* Did you see working part-time as irreconcilable with becoming head of the office?

*Roger:* No, it was uninteresting, totally uninteresting. I had a job I enjoyed and an arrangement that involved me working three days a week. I had an arrangement I was very satisfied with and I continued to work three days a week after the children had grown up. I had adapted to this kind of life.

While Roger, earlier in the interview, had linked his lack of career to his working part-time, in the excerpt above his lack of career emerges as the result more of a personal, value-based choice, than as a punishment for part-time work. We must also bear in mind that for a social scientist, advancing into an administrative position may not be more attractive than staying closer to one's discipline.

*Personal change and changing priorities.* Gunnar was quite absorbed in his highly theoretical work as a university professor of science. His was one of the few couples in which the wife clearly was the main initiator and actually persuaded her husband to share work. She also forced (both husband and wife used this word) him to participate in several consciousness-raising groups, including a men's group with which he until recently had maintained close contact. As a result of this, he changed as a person, becoming more interested in people and giving greater priority to lecturing and

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student contact, at some expense to his scientific career. In retrospect, he was grateful for having had a much richer life than he otherwise would have had. But he also recognized the costs in terms of a less high-flying scientific career. The change in direction in Gunnar's career was the result of processes of personal change and changed interest, rather than a negative effect of working part-time.

*The discontent(s).* A minority of the men were discontent with their jobs, and this was part of their motivation to work less, while none of the women mentioned this as a motive. In the original study, this was reported as a motive for one-third of the men, while only two, Roger and Ola, mentioned this in the follow-up interview: and as Roger was not discontent with his work, but rather with his colleagues, only one remains who was clearly discontent with his work.

Ola was working in a traditionally female, caring occupation, and had positions as a manager at homes for the elderly, that he had to some extent shared with his wife who had the same professional background, but he had returned to shopfloor work in a hospital. They moved and changed jobs several times and sometimes shared the same job, usually opting to halve the job. In one of their workplaces, they were forced to split the job 70-30 per cent between them, rather than halving it, which was what they wanted, Ola being expected to take the larger share, which both Ola and his wife regretted. He disliked his work and regretted that he had not changed vocation. She lost pension rights after remaining in such a low job-share for five years.

Recently he had to accept early retirement after falling ill, which was a hard blow to his self-esteem, and he would have preferred to continue working, even though he did not like the work. But his last employer was not willing to offer him suitable work after his illness and Ola saw the lack of adaptation to his illness as a result of his previous working arrangements; having worked part-time in addition to changing workplaces and employers several times. In Ola's case part-time work in combination with frequent job-changes contributed to his negative experiences.

*Ambivalence and regret.* In one of the couples, the husband's lack of career was a topic of ambivalence and regret on his part. Ann and Robert are civil engineers and worked for the same state agency after Robert had quit his former job at a consultancy to facilitate their both working part-time. Ann has held several top managerial positions, while Robert did not go in for a career and his lack of career was a source of ambivalence and regret that he returned to several times during the interview. This was partly due to the fact that there was no room for two top leaders from the same family at the same agency. But he also enjoyed his work and his colleagues, as well as the freedom he had as a highly valued professional.

Nevertheless, he was ambiguous about not having lived up to the expectations of him, a once brilliant student, and also about the fact that Ann's income was almost twice his own. He has taken upon himself leadership roles and tasks in organizations outside work. In this case, Robert's choice not to have a managerial career appeared to be the indirect outcome of several, intertwining factors; but having worked part-time was not among them.

*The best of both worlds?* Robert's wife, Ann, never experienced any problem with her working part-time, and unlike the men who went into managerial positions, she continued working 80 per cent part-time during her first year as a manager. She felt she was getting the best of both worlds; as one of the first women to graduate in a prestigious, male-dominated, technical profession, she was the equal of the men in the organization. At the same time she could draw on the organization's general acceptance for female employees reducing their work hours without losing out in terms of her

career. On the other hand, unlike the work-sharing men who obtained managerial positions, her experience as a housewife was not regarded as adding to her management skills; in addition, her occupational and financial achievements roused in her husband feelings of ambivalence.

### Discussion

In this article I have tried to answer the following questions: how did the work-sharing men obtain part-time work and what were the repercussions, if any, for them as employees and on their careers? Obtaining part-time work was not difficult and employers were generally positive, even though the work-sharing men were seen as untraditional. Neither did they suffer any negative career effects. Those who pursued careers succeeded, and half of the men obtained managerial positions. Their experiences as housefathers were in fact valued by employers as adding to their skills rather than being seen as negative in relation to careers. Those who did not pursue careers opted out by personal choice, rather than as a negative effect from working part-time or from prioritizing their families.

The picture for the men as a group was more positive than for the women, some of whom experienced on-the-job obstacles, and unlike the men, the women's experiences as housewives were not regarded by their employers as adding to their work or management skills.

How to explain these findings and what are their possible implications? The work-sharing men's relatively privileged class position in terms of formal education and occupation may have played a role in their being able to obtain part-time work at the workplace. For the majority, obtaining part-time work was rather uncomplicated. In contrast, the two non-academics who wanted to share jobs had to await a formal decision taken at the top level of their organization. Once approved, however, the consequences on their careers were as positive for these men as for the others.

In Goldthorpe/Erikson-Goldthorpe's class scheme (Goldthorpe *et al.*, 1980; Erikson and Goldthorpe, 1992), the main distinction is that between employees involved in a service relationship with their employer and those whose employment relationships are essentially regulated by a labour contract. Belonging mainly to "service-class occupations", the work-sharing men's high levels of expertise and autonomy may have reduced the cost of part-time employment, and consenting to their working part-time may have been part of the employer's strategies for building trust and commitment.

Taking a culturalist view of class, drawing on Bourdieu's different capital forms, cultural capital could also be important for how part-time is seen and valued. Within the background of a high level of cultural capital, the untraditional work/family adaptation may be interpreted positively, signalling strength of character, an interesting personality and being in control of self as well as of the environment. In line with this argument, the valuation of the work-sharing men's house-father experience as managing skills may be understood in terms of a "resourcing of self" (Skeggs, 2004), in which resources in one field may be converted into value in other fields.

The results of this study also indicate that the disadvantages of part-timework are more to do with gender than with hours of work. This conclusion needs some further discussion. Gender in this context has a class dimension, as the work-sharing men had, at the project's outset, higher formal educational levels as well as higher occupational positions, that is, they did to a larger extent belong to the "service class" and had higher cultural capital than the women.

Consequently, the men had greater access to class-related structures of privilege and were in a better bargaining position vis-à-vis their employers than the majority of the

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women. This is likely to have positively influenced their room for manoeuvre at the workplace. The woman who made it to the top of a male-dominated organization while still working part-time experienced no negative effects. Rather she felt she was getting the best of both worlds, competing on equal terms with the men, while enjoying a woman's privilege to work reduced hours. On the other hand, unlike the men who obtained managerial positions, her experiences as a housewife were not valued as adding to her management skills. This suggests that what appears as gender is to some extent about class, but that gender cannot be reduced to class, as this study also suggests that what men do tends to be valued more highly than what women do.

One implication of these findings is that, due to the combined privileges of class and gender, men may be at an advantage when attempting to obtain the kind of working arrangements they want and to work reduced hours without risking losing out in terms of their careers. Men, subsequently, may have a key role in negotiating the boundaries of work and family and in acting as agents of change towards a better reconciliation of work and family and more egalitarian patterns of breadwinning and care. A change of practices in this direction may, on the other hand, not necessarily immediately lead to gender equality in working life, as gendered hierarchies of privilege and the paradox of valuation may moderate the effect on gender equality.

What are the social and political implications of these findings? The findings challenge current perceptions of men, work and care which tend to focus on men's powerlessness in working life, and men as victims of the demands of work.

Current conditions at work are often held to be more demanding, and in many occupations within the high-skilled "service class" total commitment to work is expected by employers as well as internalized as part of professional dedication by employees. On the other hand, there is also strong ideological support for involved fatherhood in most countries, and in Norway, as well as in most other Nordic countries, policies and welfare rights support fathers' caring, such as the paternal quota of parental leave and the possibility to share parental leave. In addition, fathers' rights have been strengthened in several ways in Norway as well as in most other Western countries. This further enhances men's opportunities and agency in shaping their work/family arrangements.

Men working part-time in the 1970s probably challenged to a much greater extent contemporary masculinities as well as norms of working life than fathers who today choose to reduce their working hours to take care of their children. Fathers in the early 1970s had neither the ideological nor the financial support to get involved in the care of their children that has increasingly been made available to Norwegian men since the 1990s. Nevertheless, the work-sharing men managed to work part-time, to prioritize care and other aspects of life for a substantial period of time, and this did not prevent them having a career; their working part-time and their experiences as househusbands and fathers were positively rather than negatively valued in relation to careers. This is an interesting reminder of men's responsibility, agency and scope of action in relation to work and in shaping gender equality in their families that forcefully challenges the present image of male powerlessness, with three important qualifications: firstly, in Bjønholt (forthcoming) I point out that the work-sharing men were rather special men, and warn against generalizing from such a small and highly selected sample to make assumptions of future change or to appoint them as vanguards of change. The positive response to their part-time in the workplace, as well as elsewhere, and the lack of negative consequences, however, are worthy of attention, regardless of the particularities of the work-sharing men themselves.

Caution is also warranted as the work-sharing men were mostly at an early stage of their careers when having children and working part-time, and those who pursued careers all stopped working part-time when they accepted managerial positions. Today, parenthood is often postponed and parents are older than in the 1970s, which implies they have reached higher career levels when they have children. The higher age and occupational levels of parents of young children might make it more difficult to work part-time today than it was for the work-sharing couples, in spite of the stronger ideological and financial support for caring fathers today. Globalization and new public management reforms add to the difficulties of combining work and career.

Finally, the work-sharing couples' careers illustrate that most of them are/were employed in the public sector. This may be one reason why working part-time was not an obstacle to careers. On the other hand, neither for those who worked for private firms, there is evidence of real obstacles nor of negative effects from their working part-time.

The fact that the work-sharing men were rather exceptional, both in the 1970s and compared to men today, is interesting in a discussion of change, or more precisely the lack of change in men's relations to work and their work/family adaptations over the last 30 years. Why is it that men's relations to work and the male-worker norm have proved so persistent despite the great changes in women's participation in the labour market and the increase over recent decades in expectations of (and policies supporting) involved fatherhood?

Rather than treating as empirical facts perceived or feared workplace obstacles, men's practices should, at least to some extent, be seen as the outcome of priorities and studied as such. This would imply focusing on men's actual work/family adaptations and their empirical effects, and on the collective formations of men's practices, ideologies and masculinities in preferred masculine spaces such as the workplace.

### Notes

1. The average part-time work week in Norway was 20 h, and the average for EU and EFTA countries was 19 h a week (Lohne, 2005).
2. The concept of male power in the family is challenged by Nordic researchers into men and masculinities (see Holter *et al.*, 2007), while couple and family researchers still tend to see gendered power relations as important.
3. None of the spouses was to work less than 16 h a week and none more than 28 h (Grønseth, 1975a, p. 9).
4. Working part time was one of the main inclusion criteria for participation in the study. There were also seven additional couples who were interested, but who did not start work sharing, but the original project does not account for why they dropped out. These couples could not be traced for the follow-up study.
5. They often referred to themselves as housefathers – a male reformulation of the Norwegian word for housewife, *husmor*, which means house mother.

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**About the author**

Margunn Bjørnholt is a Sociologist and Independent Researcher. Her previous research covers a wide range of topics, such as social movements in the financial sector, flexible working arrangements, parenting, gender equality and cultural heritage studies. As a researcher at the Department of Sociology and Human Geography at the University of Oslo 2007/2008, she was engaged in a research project on men, work, family and gender equality in an intergenerational perspective, with a focus on intergenerational transmission and fathers and sons in particular. Margunn Bjørnholt can be contacted at: [margunn.bjornholt@gmail.com](mailto:margunn.bjornholt@gmail.com)