

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### How men became the local agents of change towards gender equality

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The Work-Sharing Couples Study was an action research project conducted in the early 1970s to reconcile work, family and gender equality in families. Its design involved both spouses working part-time and sharing childcare and housework. This article is based on a follow-up study of the original couples 30 years later. The men played a key role in initiating work-sharing in their families and how the men became agents of change is the topic of the article. Biographical influences from their families of origin and domestic skills, facilitated by the contemporary concept of a modern, profeminist masculinity, were important background factors, and promoting the careers of wives emerged as an important motivational factor. Their authoritative agency in promoting more egalitarian patterns of work and care in their own families also invokes the question of a constructive use of male power. This could give rise to a further discussion of power and masculinity and men as agents of change towards gender equality.

**Keywords:** men; part-time; masculinity; power; work/family reconciliation; gender equality

#### Introduction

The aim of this article is to discuss men's motivations for, and agency in, achieving gender equality and a better work/family balance, based on a longitudinal, qualitative follow-up study of Norwegian couples who worked part-time and shared the responsibility for housework and childcare in the early 1970s. A thematic analysis of the men's backgrounds and motivations is conducted to answer the following research question: what made the work-sharing men take the step to work part-time and change priorities in their lives? Answering this question will add to our understanding of why, and under what circumstances, men become agents of change, which will in turn add to the ongoing discussion of change and innovation and/or stability in men's adaptations to work and family. The term 'traditional' here is used to refer to a situation where the woman of a heterosexual partnership performs the bulk of the domestic work and childcare and the man performs the bulk of paid work outside of the home.

The work-sharing men were found to play an essential role in initiating as well as implementing the work-sharing arrangement, which is the reason for focusing particularly on the men. This study finds that biographical background, domestic skills and the will to

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promote their partner's development, were the main factors explaining these men's desire to shape more egalitarian partnerships. It is also acknowledged that the women in these relationships chose these particular men as partners but this is not pursued in the research here.

Research into men as fathers has increasingly addressed fathers' work/family and workplace adaptations (Haas and Hwang 2000, Hobson 2002, Cooper 2002, Bekkengen 2002, Morgan *et al.* 2005, Kvande 2005, Puchert *et al.* 2005, Pringle *et al.* 2006, Holter 2007), and some (Holter 2007) claim that family-driven innovation of men's work/family practices is going on, in particular in the Nordic countries.

There is, however, no clear indication that men are changing their adaptation to work as a result of caring responsibilities (Puchert *et al.* 2005), with the possible exception of Sweden, where recent developments may indicate a change in this direction (Haas *et al.* 2006). Gambles *et al.* (2006), in a comparative study of seven countries ranging from India to Norway, found the tensions of work, family and gender equality to be much the same in Norway as worldwide.

On the background of the current research (as well as in policy-making) on men, family and gender equality, it is of interest to study men who have changed priorities in their own lives and acted as local agents of change towards gender equality.

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

The Work-Sharing Couples Study was carried out in Norway between 1969 and 1975 at the Institute of Sociology, University of Oslo. The project was led by Professor Erik Grønseth<sup>1</sup> on the initiative of the Norwegian Family Council and its leader, Ola Rokkones. Thirty years later the participating couples were interviewed in a follow-up study. The original project was an action research project to promote gender equality in families, and was based on both spouses working part-time and sharing childcare and household work. This study made contact with four large production companies and provided a total of 40 jobs to be shared by a husband and wife. Due to the lack of response from working-class participants, the study recruited participants through media publicity and snowball sampling. This resulted in 16, mainly middle-class couples being selected for the study. Some of these couples started work-sharing as a result of the project but, as revealed by the follow-up study here, some had already begun work-sharing and were then recruited to the project. As the title of the main report<sup>2</sup> (Grønseth 1975a) indicates, changing the way men related to work was one of the main strategies for achieving gender equality. The effects of the arrangement on sharing domestic work and childcare were a major focus for the project.

The participants in the work-sharing project consisted of couples in different occupations, most of them middle-class academics, but three held lower clerical positions. A quarter of the couples shared the same job, but the majority had different part-time jobs for different employers and arranged work and care in different ways: they worked every second day, every second week or shared the week between them. They worked part-time at their own expense, and received no financial compensation. Part-time work was combined with shift-parenting and the one who stayed at home was usually fully responsible for running the house on his/her days.

The original study found that such a work/family arrangement did correspond to the sharing of domestic work and childcare. Moreover, the participants recorded high levels of gender equality, better marital relations (including sexual relations), less stress and more equal power relations between the spouses (Grønseth 1975a); but childcare was more

equally shared than housework and a gendered division of household tasks persisted in many families (Grue 1978).

### **Methodology**

The original project used detailed questionnaires at the point of inclusion and when the project was ended as its main method of data collection, supplemented by interviews with the couples (referred to here as 'couple interviews') with one-third of the participants. The published reports (Grønseth 1975a, 1975b, 1975c, Grue 1978), based largely on the questionnaires, are the main sources of our knowledge about the original project.

This follow-up study is based on couple interviews with 14 of the original couples, 11 of which were still married. Two of the divorced men and three women were interviewed separately. This paper is based on the couple interviews with the couples that were still married, which have been transcribed and analysed both as couple life-stories and individually, with a particular focus on the men's narratives. In other papers I present other aspects and findings from the follow-up study, such as more detail on the background and methodological and epistemological aspects of the follow-up study, and the couples' common life trajectories as well as those of the divorced couples (Bjørnholt 2009a), father-son intergenerational transmission (Bjørnholt 2009b, 2010b) and the work-sharing men's professional biographies and careers (Bjørnholt 2010a). In this paper the emphasis is on another aspect of individual biographies; how do the work-sharing men explain, and reflect in retrospect on, their active role in initiating and implementing a more equitable pattern of work and care in their families and what motivated their decisions.

The question of which kinds of data biographical interviews represent has increasingly come into focus. I take a pragmatic view, mindful of the gap between the story told and the life lived (Wengraf 2001) and I take a critical realist position (Hollway and Jefferson 2000), acknowledging that biographical interviews do not give direct access to lived experience. On the other hand, I disagree with the extreme constructivist position that tends to deny any reality beyond the narrative or text (such as Derrida's view that 'there is nothing outside the text' [1976, p. 158]). In this paper I treat the biographies and retrospective reflections that emerged in the interviews as good enough data on informants' life courses, including childhood experiences and past motivations.

Recently, the advantages of the couple interview over the individual interview in studies of couples have been increasingly acknowledged (Valentine 1999, Syltevik 2000, Doucet 2006<sup>3</sup>, Magnusson 2006). The couple interview provides an insight into the couple's life as a couple (Martinsson 1997). Further, those who argue that couple interviews are superior to individual interviews of couples find that partners tend to be more loyal and that less criticism appears in the individual than in the couple interviews. In the present follow-up study I found that the couple interviews produced very rich data and that intra-couple dynamics also contributed to useful individual life stories.

The use of couple interviews as a source of data on the individual life course needs some consideration. Bjørnholt (2010a) deals with individual professional biographies and careers which were extracted from the couple interviews. The present paper, in addressing the men's (and their wives') reflections in retrospect on the men's past agency and motivations, deals with data of a less tangible, more personal and potentially sensitive kind. It is legitimate to ask how the couple interview situation may have influenced the ways in which the men (and women) spoke of the men as agents of change and their past motivations. It is acknowledged that the origin of the data in this particular setting may represent a limitation but I do not feel that this renders the information invalid.

With the decline of naïve realism, it is generally acknowledged that the qualitative research interview represents a specific situation in which data are co-produced in the interaction of the interviewer and the interviewee within more or less agreed-upon cultural scripts, such as the personal biography. In this case the couple context cannot easily be shed.

Claiming the superiority of the individual research interview takes for granted an individualist view of self; one could argue with Mead (1934) that the self is inherently relational and that the biography which is produced in a real-life context involving significant others from the informant's life world may be as 'true' as the one produced in an individual research interview.

Finally, retrospective interviews invoke the question of the ways in which we deal with cumulative processes over time. Becker (1960) introduced the notion of commitment as a process through which an individual feels obliged to take a particular line of action to such an extent that any reversal becomes increasingly psychologically costly. The work-sharing couples continued their part-time arrangement for a substantial period of time, which is an argument for presenting a more positive view in retrospect. On the other hand, the participants spoke quite freely and some negative aspects did arise during the interviews, particularly concerning financial considerations, and the participant who expressed the most negative views (see Ola below) was the one whose experience of the arrangement was the longest.

## **Results**

### ***Special men***

The work-sharing men were clearly 'children of their time'. A commitment to gender equality as part of contemporary modern masculinity, as well as political radicalism (Andersson *et al.* 1997), including pro-feminism (Bengtsson 2001, 2007) and anti-materialism, were ideologies shared by several social movements at the time. But the work-sharing men differed from their contemporaries – and even from the average man today – on one decisive point: in contrast to other men, who may have shared their ideological convictions, the work-sharing men did in fact implement changes in their own lives.

The men took the initiative in half the cases, and an additional quarter saw it as a joint initiative. The majority of the men were thus actively involved in initiating the work-sharing arrangement.

### *The present study and perspectives on childhood loss*

To explain why they acted against the grain, the men interviewed for the follow-up study often pointed to childhood experiences. They shared some biographical influences from their families of origin: for a considerable proportion of the men one of the parents had been ill (six) or they had experienced the early death of a parent (three) (Grønseth 1975a, p. 73). In addition, their mothers had taken on paid work to a greater extent than most women at the time, and the work-sharing men regularly had to be responsible for housework from an early age. In the follow-up interviews, the men still referred to these childhood experiences as an important explanatory factor as to why they found it easy and natural to participate in, and even initiate, the work-sharing arrangement.

Not everyone referred to childhood experiences: Roger, who had also lost his father at the age of 10, did not mention any increase in domestic duties: rather than childhood

experiences, he emphasized, as the main explanation for his stance on work and gender equality, important life experiences as a young adult, including those he gained during the Second World War.

Other researchers into gender equality in the family have also drawn attention to the importance of childhood loss as part of men's biographies (Deutsch 1999). In an analysis of the backgrounds of pioneering 'male feminists' (those men who supported the suffragette movement), Morgan (1992) drew attention to biographical influences very much like those of the work-sharing men here, such as childhood experiences of loss, alienation and grief, and the influence of a woman – either the mother or other women – but also the influence of social networks, radical movements and the concept of chivalry. All these factors are present in the work-sharing men. The concept of chivalry, men having to contribute actively to gender equality, was part of a pro-feminist, modern masculinity in the 1970s.

#### *The present study and perspectives on strong, working mothers*

Many of the men interviewed for the follow-up study expressed their admiration for their strong, working mothers who shouldered both paid work and full responsibility at home. John was the youngest of five children, and his mother had a clerical job in addition to running a farm, and commuted to her job in town every day. He went to school nearby, and from the age of 12 it was his duty to cook dinner for the family. He also greatly admired his mother:

My mother more or less did everything, even though she had the cows and worked at an office, (she) ran the house with five children and commuted a long distance to work. It was inhumanly hard work. It was a rather traditional pattern, my father never became a house-father.

Some referred to particularly close relationships with their mothers, such as Robert, who was an only child and strongly attached to his mother. He recalls how he, as a small boy, resented leaving his mother to go to the playground. When he was about 10, his mother fell ill and was bed-ridden for several years; he had to take over responsibility for several tasks at home, while his father continued working long hours.

The work-sharing men seem to have become sensitized to a woman's world, sometimes by taking over in the absence of a parent or by carrying out traditionally female tasks in their families of origin. Their mothers were engaged in paid work to a larger extent than was common at the time. Their fathers, on the other hand, were mostly traditional in their approach to domestic life, even though there were two examples of less traditional fathers: one who had been a ship's cook and did the cooking on Sundays; another did feminine things such as sewing and mending clothes, but these were exceptions.

This emphasis on the relationship to the mother in the development of a caring masculinity (and the absence of fathers as 'role models') corresponds to other research into men who are innovative in gender equality and care. In a Nordic study, Ekenstam (2007) found that egalitarian and caring men often established their own caring practices in contrast to their own fathers (this was also reported by Holter and Aarseth [1993]) and that the relationships with their mothers were key. Christian's (1994) study of contemporary anti-sexist men found that mothers, and the influences of feminist women, were important but the small minority in his sample who had had nurturing fathers also reported being influenced by their fathers.

Gupta (2006) found that maternal employment was important to men's performance of housework as adults, which is explained by maternal employment creating a broader repertoire of masculine behaviour.

*The present study and perspectives on domestic skills*

As a result of the special circumstances in their families of origin, a majority of the work-sharing men entered the couple relationship with above average housework skills. Even those who came from intact families had participated in household tasks to a greater extent than most boys at the time, like Per, who was one of four boys in a family of five siblings. They lived on a farm, and had many guests in the summertime; their father travelled a lot, and all the children were expected to participate in household work, such as cooking and dishwashing.

When reflecting on the work-sharing arrangement in the follow-up study interviews, the work-sharing men emphasized housework and were in general still proud of their skills. Some even boasted of their skills, saying things like: 'I am good at cleaning'; 'I am a better cook'.

Both husbands and wives saw the domestic skills that the men brought to the relationship from their families of origin as of great importance for the work-sharing arrangement, as well as for their relationships as a couple. Interestingly, however, the early experience with housework which a majority of the men emphasized in the follow-up interviews, was not reported in the original study where none claimed to be 'used to housework' (Grønseth 1975a, p. 73).

In spite of the importance attributed to men's housework skills, the original study showed a persistent, gendered division of household tasks (Grue 1978). This pattern had not changed; rather, the follow-up study revealed that a gendered sharing of household tasks had since been strengthened. This was explained as a development towards a more flexible and efficient organization of household work and can be illustrated by one man who changed two car tyres and announced that now he had changed his, she would have to change hers, a story the husband and wife both laughed at today. Only one man assumed responsibility for washing and ironing clothes, and only one woman changed the car tyres; but even though the actual sharing of tasks remained gendered, the husbands' knowledge of, and participation in, the unpaid work at home were seen as important to their perception of the family as a joint project.

The emphasis on domestic work is an interesting contrast to today, when women have reduced their time spent on housework, but men have not filled in to the same extent (Vaage 2002). Brandth and Kvande (2003, p. 167) call housework an 'incomplete democratic project'.

A couple of the men, however, disagreed with the strong focus on housework in the project, and saw other factors, such as getting closer to children or promoting wives' careers, as more important. They seemed to agree that they should take their turn as house-husbands so that their wives could go out to work, but they disagreed with the principle of sharing each task in the home equally.

The persistent and even strengthened gendered sharing of household tasks even within these egalitarian couples may be interpreted in different ways. On the one hand the strengthening of sharing of tasks may be understood in terms of family myths (Hochschild and Machung 1989) – the couples are sharing unequally but still claim they are equal. On the other hand this also touches upon another discussion of how to understand and measure gender equality: is the equal sharing of every task, and the equal representation of men and women in every sphere, the only aim of, and an adequate measure of, gender equality?

The development towards a less egalitarian sharing of household work may also be seen as an example of how structural inequalities outside the family, such as the labour market, influence everyday struggles for equality. From the outset the majority of the

work-sharing men had higher educational attainment than the women. There was also a gendered pattern in that the women to a greater extent tended to be in health and caring professions. As presented in more detail in Bjørnholt (2010a), the men appear to have been rather successful professionally. During the work-sharing arrangement most were still in an early phase of their career, but the men to a greater extent embarked on full-time careers as managers after the work-sharing arrangement, whereas the women to a greater extent took time off work for further studies, continued to work part-time or even stayed at home as housewives. The fact that more of the men pursued full-time management careers meant that their work demanded more of their attention and also that they earned more than their partners. A recent Norwegian survey on gender equality (Holter *et al.* 2009) found that income difference was the most important factor in explaining inequality in the family. Even if the work-sharing couples shared an ideology of equality, it is not unreasonable to assume that the differences in careers and incomes also contributed to the development of a more unequal division of domestic work (see Bjørnholt [2009b] for a case that illustrates this dilemma).

The 1970s was a decade of experimentation which saw a change in gender relations that paved the way for new gendered identities and practices and reshaped heterosexual relationships and the family. An important credo of the women's movement at the time was the claim that the personal is political; concurrently justice and redistribution were a common focus of several social movements.

For the work-sharing couples, the active promotion of gender equality was a legitimate framework for the couples' arrangements around work and care. They talked proudly of domestic work as the subject of open discussion and negotiation, which in some families took place in formalized meetings. An egalitarian distribution of domestic work can be said to have been part of their wider relationship for both the work-sharing men and the women.

This is a contrast to today; in a recent study of Nordic couples, Magnusson (2008) found that gender equality and arguments of justice and power were uniformly delegitimized, and that discussions of gender equality were seen as threatening to love and relationships and were therefore avoided.

One explanation of this shift is offered by Fraser (2000), who points out that struggles for justice and redistribution, which were so important in the 1970s, have largely been substituted by struggles for recognition and identity politics. The way the work-sharing couples speak of their past and present sharing of household work illustrates how everyday practices take place within, and are legitimized by, past as well as contemporary discourses. When speaking enthusiastically about sharing domestic work in the past they speak, as it were, within the discourse of redistribution of the 1970s. When they use arguments that normalize a more traditional sharing of tasks today they can be seen to draw implicitly on contemporary discourses in which redistribution is no longer a topic for negotiation.

#### *The present study and perspectives on self-confidence and caring*

The men seemed confident they could work part-time for a period and then return to full-time work, which often resulted in them later being offered managerial positions. None of the men were surprised to be offered such jobs despite having worked part-time. Neither did they feel embarrassed by neighbours or family members who sometimes had negative attitudes or expressed astonishment and thought that the men might be imperilling their careers or that they were unmanly.

Per demonstrates an authoritative and caring attitude in his recollection of how decisions were made after the arrival of their first child just as he was graduating as a civil

engineer. Per's wife already had two children when they were married, including a son who was perceived as having a particular need for a father, and Per's concern for his stepson was part of his considerations. When they heard about the work-sharing project, Per took the initiative, and they were both offered part-time jobs at the same firm where they worked for four years. This innovative solution was the subject of some local gossip, but Per states that he was not worried at all, and his attitude illustrates a combination of authoritative control over the situation, guided by a caring attitude and self-confidence.

John took the initiative for himself and his wife, Karen to share jobs with another couple, David and Rita, who were colleagues at the same workplace. Karen had been looking forward to having some peace and quiet at home when the children were older and less demanding, but her husband was eager that she get back to work before it became too difficult, and Karen accepted John's initiative reluctantly. In John and Karen's case, we could argue that John's insistence she return to work demonstrated a (caring) attitude on the verge of paternalism. In the follow-up study it was found that John's brother had been outraged after seeing John ironing tea towels on a television programme about the work-sharing couples, but John states that he laughed, seeing his brother, 10 years his senior, as hopelessly old-fashioned.

According to his wife, Roger was pitied when arriving at the playground with the children and when hanging up clothes on the washing line. The neighbours, discovering he was not a widower, but that there was in fact a (much younger) wife, assumed she had forced him into this. Many of the wives were blamed for forcing their husbands into the work-sharing arrangement, while the men were mostly praised, particularly by women, and to a great extent they were also rewarded at work (Bjørnholt 2010a).

Roger pointed out that self-confidence was important to his success:

I think that for a man, it implies a confidence (...) I felt I had experienced so much before (...) that the opinions of neighbours and family did not matter. I am totally independent of what they think.

Most of the work-sharing men appeared consistently self-confident, caring and authoritative, but Ola gives a more ambivalent response. He had chosen a vocation in a female-dominated, caring profession and a less traditional work/life adaptation, but he strongly disliked his work. Working less and having more leisure time were part of his motivation for joining the work-sharing arrangement and he continued to work part-time until falling ill and taking early retirement. Despite his vocation, he appeared otherwise rather traditional in his ideology; he was the dominant one in the couple relationship and did little housework but he was also confident and did not care what others thought of him. In retrospect, however, he regretted not having changed vocation, and in spite of his confidence in relation to others, he expressed self-contempt for having stayed in a job he disliked.

The work-sharing men seemed to possess an inner strength and an alternative philosophical approach to the world, which effectively deflected any negative responses of others to their life choices. This also touches upon the question of power; in being authoritative and self-confident, the work-sharing men were in command of their lives and, in taking the initiative to work-share, they had power. Can we understand the work-sharing men as constructively using their power to initiate change and thus dismantle the source of that power? In a critique of the studies of Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity, Moller (2007, p. 266) discusses the 'tendency to occlude those techniques and tactics of masculine power that do not quite make sense as dominating or oppressive: to see power as *only* domination'. Pease (2000) also explores, theoretically as well as empirically, men's possible contribution to changing gender relations from a position of power.

### ***Motivational factors***

#### *The present study and perspectives on fostering wives' personal and professional growth*

The relationship with their wives emerged as the main motivation for many of the men. Some were quite explicit about the importance of fostering their wives' personal and professional growth, and used arguments of equality and fairness, though these were often mixed with self-interest. David's case is an example. For him it was important that marriage and children should not 'prevent his wife having a career'; but his wife working outside the home also added to his self-esteem. David was an active member of a union, and he admitted that promoting his wife's career was part of his self-image of being a modern and radical man.

Roger is an example of man who actively abstained from male privileges to shape more democratic and equal relations with his wife and children, and illustrates the desire to break with the model of male dominance in the family. The family lived a simple life, having neither car nor holiday cabin, both of which are highly valued objects of prestige in Norway. This was not only due to financial constraints, but was a choice based on their anti-materialist values. However, they did eventually buy a boat, a wooden sailboat with two sets of oars. Commenting on this, Roger said:

There is low prestige in such a boat. It's not exactly a show-off boat. But the point was that when you watched on the fjord, the daddies always sat and steered and there were typical 'daddies boats' everywhere, but with this boat the children had to take part in the rowing and take part in general, and the whole family took part. So we broke down this authority relationship that there often is on boats; that the father sits there and dominates everything. I think it is very important as an illustration of more equality in the family. (...) I had seen so many families where the father was extremely dominating.

Roger also illustrated a pragmatic attitude; he was much older than his wife, and wanted her to be able to take care of herself and the children if she were widowed. Arguments of self-interest played a role too; Roger enjoyed being with his children and his leisure time (he often went hiking or skiing during the day when the children were at playgroup). He also wanted his wife to be an intellectually attractive partner with whom he could have professional discussions, and supported her in her decision to study and finally become a social scientist like him. He was quite pleased about working part-time for the rest of his professional life while his wife had a full-time job, and it did not bother him that she had become the main breadwinner.

Robert also supported his wife's career, but expressed some ambivalence, and even regret, about her having a career while he did not. Robert and Vera are both civil engineers. They studied together and she was the first woman on a highly male-dominated study programme. When they had children, she stayed at home for about a year with each child, and started to work part-time. She had made no plans for combining children and a career and was prepared to stay at home to take care of the children but it appears she formed this view before she had realized how much time and effort it took. However, Robert discovered that she was unhappy and missed work. He also believed that it was self-evident that she should work and unfair that she, who had the same education, should not have the same opportunities to pursue a career. Commenting on her reflections about staying at home, he said:

When you had attended (NN technical university) as we had (...) you were in a way singled out to become a leader or have another high position in society (...). Staying home, being a housewife, that would be weird.

Robert quit his job at a private consultancy to work part-time and started working at his wife's place of work (at a state agency). She has made a career as a top manager, while he has not, and his lack of career was a source of some regret that he returned to several times during the interview.

The beneficial effect on the relationship of the wives' careers and personal development emerged as an important motivational factor. Rita recalls she felt quite good about leaving for work and handing over responsibility for the home to her husband.

Rita: I think I also became more attractive to you.

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

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

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

This quote also illustrates how promoting wives' growth became part of caring for the relationship; such attitudes were shared by other men, like Per who was worried that the differences in educational levels between him and his wife could become a strain on their marital relations and he encouraged his wife to get further education.

Despite arguing and acting from a different position than the other men, Ola's is a position of interest here. He admitted to being the dominant one in the relationship, arguing that his wife needed to earn her own money to gain some independence from him and reduce conflicts about spending money. Ola's case illustrates that men can promote gender equality for different reasons.

Relationships with wives and the men's desire to promote their wives' careers and independence emerged as stronger motivations for work-sharing than the relationships with children. In the original study, the marital relationship in general, and consideration of the wife's career and personal development in particular, also emerged as important motivational factors (Grønseth 1975a, pp. 101, 105), but the interpretation of which motivational factors were most important differs somewhat from the conclusions in the follow-up-study; in the original report negative job-related factors as well as the father-child relationships were seen as the main motivational factors for the men.

Differences in motivational factors between the original report and the follow-up study may be due to life-course changes, which may influence the interpretation and emphasis of motivational factors in retrospect. During the original study, the couples were experiencing their busiest years as parents of young children, and children were at the centre of their lives. Today, the children are grown up and have left the parental home, but the couple relationship remains and has probably gained increased importance. This may colour in retrospect the interpretation of the motivational factors for the work-sharing arrangement.

In the original study lack of job satisfaction emerged as a motivational factor for more of the men than it did in the follow-up study (Grønseth 1975a, p. 113). This may be due to a tendency to present a more positive view in retrospect, or it might indicate that the lack of job satisfaction was temporary: as the work-sharing men were in general quite successful occupationally (Bjørnholt 2010a).

Men's relationships with their wives were found to be of great importance for gender equality in the family by Haas (1977). Hvistendahl (1987)<sup>4</sup> found that men who participated more actively in the family saw their wives as the same kind of people with the same needs as themselves, while men who participated less in household work tended to see their wives as qualitatively different beings. The work-sharing men illustrate that

egalitarian values and agency originated in biographical experiences and were part of the men's general ways of being in the world.

The emphasis that the work-sharing men put on promoting wives' careers and personal development can, to some extent, be seen as part of a 1970s chivalry, serving as a conceptual framework for facilitating change. Being a modern, radical man included a pro-feminist stance, and it was also taken for granted that gender equality demanded something from men. In contrast, Haas and Hwang (2000, p. 141) point out that (in Sweden):

Up until now, efforts to bring about gender equality have not required men to relinquish anything; the focus has been on what men have to gain by sharing breadwinning and care.

In recent years, men's relationships with their wives/female partners have received relatively little consideration in discussions of men's work/life priorities and participation in domestic work. Recent Nordic studies of men and social innovation (Holter *et al.* 2007, Ekenstam 2007) draw attention to the importance of support for democratic values and equality of opportunity, as well as relationships with partners being given high value, by men, as key to egalitarian values being sustained. In particular, according to Ekenstam, Norwegian men emphasize that their partners should have the same opportunities as them. These values seem to have been shared by the work-sharing men.

*The present study and perspectives on relationships with children as a motivational factor*

Today, men's relationships with their children are seen as the main tool for changing men's attitudes to work, family and gender equality, and it is often taken for granted that men's greater interest in children and the emergence of a more child-oriented masculinity represent a step towards gender equality. Although being an involved father has increasingly become part of Nordic hegemonic masculinity, the relation between child-oriented masculinity and gender equality is being questioned (Bekkengen 2002). Several studies have found that men seem more eager to share the joys of parenthood than the duties of domestic work (Brandth and Kvande 2003, Gatrell 2007). Among the work-sharing men, the main emphasis was on their relationships with their wives, rather than those with their children, but the relationships with their children were also broached in the interviews. Looking after the children themselves was mentioned by the men in some of the interviews as a motivational factor, such as Robert, who referred to his own strong attachment as a child to his mother and objected to the idea of 'handing the child over to strangers'. In the original report, half the work-sharing couples mentioned looking after the children themselves as motivation for the arrangement (Grønseth 1975a, p. 95). Pragmatic considerations such as a lack of childcare facilities and negative experiences with childminders were, however, important as backdrops to the decision. Frank shared with his wife the view that children were best cared for at home as well as the view that he should be involved. Their ideas about childcare were also related to their interest in collective living (exemplified by a period in which they shared meals, domestic work and childcare with another couple) in contrast to traditional childcare.

Frank: We wanted to have contact with the children, both of us. It was perhaps me that (...). I thought it was sad about fathers who just fell into the role and did not have as strong contact with their children as the mothers. We (also) thought it a little crazy that others should take care of the kids. It was unnatural for us to not consider ourselves the best ones to have contact with and take part in the lives of our kids.

The quote above also illustrates how many of the work-sharing men saw their own fathering as part of a joint, parental responsibility. It is noteworthy that the men mostly

talked of childcare as a joint family responsibility and did not refer to an exclusive father/child bond; they seemed to view themselves as parents rather than as fathers in particular. The work-sharing men's common parental perspective is supported by other studies of fathers' parental identities, which find that fathers largely construct their parental identity as relatively more co-parental than mothers, and more often use the parental 'we' rather than a solo parental voice (Stueve and Pleck 2001). Lareau (2002) discussed fathers' use of a common parental subject as a methodological problem, blurring the fact that mothers did most of the parenting and making fathers appear more involved than they actually were. Lareau remarks that this made fathers less reliable as a source of knowledge about children's everyday lives. The work-sharing couples here however shared childcare more equally, and the fathers' joint parenting perspective cannot be seen as part of a cover-up for a lack of involvement.

Only one of the men, John, used an individualist argument for involving himself in the care of his children; he argued that it was important for him to have the same influence on the children's upbringing as his wife.

Getting more involved as a father was not an important motivation for everyone. David for instance, seems to have been less actively involved with his children, and his prime focus appears to have been on promoting his wife's paid work. He was very involved in union work during his part-time period and less involved as a father.

How the men talked about children differed from the way they talked about housework. None of the men boasted of their merits as fathers or indicated they had been better parents than their wives, while many were proud and even boasted of their housework skills. This is interesting, as the original study as well as the follow-up study revealed that housework was less equally shared than childcare. Perhaps we can hypothesize that practice speaks for itself, while compensatory rhetoric may develop when practice is thin.

#### *The present study and perspectives on leisure as a motivational factor*

Increased leisure time was a separate motivation for many of the men, who often spoke of outdoor and sporting activities during their free time when the children were at the playground. Sometimes the women broached the topic of leisure from a different angle, pointing out how the men had expected to be able to pursue hobbies on their days at home.

In various forms, leisure time emerged as an important motivation for the men, while this was not mentioned by any of the women as a factor in choosing to work part-time in the first place, despite the fact that for the majority of the work-sharing couples, sports and outdoor activities were part of joint family interests and activities.

McMahon (1999) suggests that leisure takes priority for many men. The uneven emphasis on leisure and the gendered sharing of household work may illustrate that the men were in positions of privilege and that there was a certain imbalance, even in these equality-oriented couples.

#### **Conclusion**

In this article I have presented the work-sharing men's motivations and explanations for how they came to work part-time and change priorities in their child-rearing life phase.

The work-sharing men shared ideals of a modern masculinity that included an active stance on gender equality in the family, abstaining from some male privileges, promoting their wives' careers and helping the women develop their potential. To a great extent, they

combined self-confidence with an open-minded and constructive approach to life. But why they, in contrast to most other modern men in the 1970s, took the step from idea to action, is probably due to biographical influences that sensitized them to women and the world of women, which equipped them with above-average domestic skills. While contemporary ideas of gender equality and perceptions of a modern masculinity served as a conceptual framework for change, biographical influences, personality and existent domestic skill were critical to the work-sharing men acting as agents of change in their own lives and families.

Like many other studies of men in the family, 'new fathers' or changing masculinities, the Work-Sharing Couples Study is a small, qualitative study of rather special men (as illustrated by their backgrounds and motivations) so caution is called for before appointing them to the vanguard of change.

One conclusion is that change is hard to achieve and only occurs in men who have experienced childhood family loss. This makes the prospect of promoting change through policies rather bleak.

However, not all the work-sharing men had suffered childhood loss, which allows for some more optimistic conclusions as well. Some of the men had acquired skills in domestic work without the loss or illness of a parent, and we might hypothesize that it is not the loss itself but the skills that are important and that there are other routes through which to acquire domestic skills as well as a familiarity with traditionally female domains. This allows room for reformatory action in which families and schools could play an important role in giving boys better training in household work as preparation for assuming a greater share of domestic responsibilities in later life.

Another important lesson is the importance of mothers and the mother/son relationship as a basis for transferring skills as well as values. The work-sharing men developed caring masculinities and practices in spite of having had traditional fathers, and emphasized their relationship to, and admiration of, their mothers rather than having their fathers as 'role models'.

A further lesson can be drawn from the importance that the work-sharing men attributed to the relationship with their partners and to promoting her career and personal development. This highlights the couple's relationship as the basis for change and gender equality in the family as an adult, intra-couple project.

The finding that for a small number of the men in this study leisure and broadening their life experience or minimizing the time spent in paid work were prominent motivations is interesting in the context of this experiment, which was ostensibly about promoting gender equality. It links to current discussions of work/life balance and illustrates that the relationship between work/life balance, family-friendly policies and gender equality are not necessarily straightforward.

The work-sharing men demonstrate the importance of men's agency and responsibility for achieving the kind of family and life they want to have. Their authoritative conduct in shaping more egalitarian patterns of work and care may inspire further research into, and the theorizing of, power and masculinity and men as the agents of change towards gender equality.

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## Notes

1. Erik Grønseth was rather enthusiastic about the follow-up study. He provided the material from the original study, as well as actively aiding the new study: he traced and contacted the first half of the participants before he died in the autumn of 2005.
2. *Også mannen på deltid i arbeidslivet*; 'The man who works part-time too' (author's translation).
3. With the qualification that Doucet used a special interview technique, called the household portrait.
4. I am indebted to Agnes Andenæs for drawing my attention to Hvistendahl's Master's thesis.

## Notes on contributor

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