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The Career Mystique

PROFILE: LISA AND DAVID

When Lisa was a teenager, she wanted to “have it all”: a husband, children, and a stimulating career. This was the goal of most of the women of her generation (now in their late thirties), and American culture touted having it all as the path to gender equality.

David also wanted it all. He envisioned a future with a wife and children, where he was able to provide comfortably for them financially, as well as to be actively involved in raising his children.

Both did all the things necessary to attain their goals. Each graduated from high school and then from college. Lisa earned an undergraduate degree in business; David’s was in engineering. Lisa’s first job was working in the human resources department of a medium-sized corporation, Bright Manufacturing.¹ During her first month she met David, who was an engineer at the same corporation. Lisa was attracted to David’s maturity and compassion. He was attracted to her outgoing personality and energy. Lisa and David fell in love, and they married two years later when Lisa was twenty-seven and David was thirty. Lisa enjoyed her work and was soon promoted to director of human resources. David was respected by his colleagues and supervised a large division within the corporation. Lisa and David felt like they were living the American Dream. They had successful careers, owned a nice home, had an active social life, and were in love.

When Lisa was thirty she became pregnant. Unfortunately, her pregnancy coincided with a time of corporate restructuring within Bright

Manufacturing, the company for which Lisa and David worked. The firm instituted large-scale layoffs. Feeling insecure about her job, Lisa took only a five-week maternity leave following their daughter Emily's birth, then went back to work full time.

Then things started to unravel. Finding full-time day care was difficult. The couple went through a series of day care providers. The first quit, and the second was a bad fit with their daughter. On the third attempt they put Emily in a day care center. Lisa's hours were very rigid. Because she was a director, she needed to be available and in the office from 8:30 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. David's job was even more demanding, and being concerned about the ongoing layoffs, he was afraid to signal to his boss anything but absolute commitment. He typically left for work at 7:00 A.M., not returning home until around 6:30 P.M. Lisa became exhausted with her daily routine of getting Emily up and out to day care before 8:30 A.M. At the end of her long workday she picked Emily up at 5:30 P.M., ran errands (e.g., groceries, dry cleaning, ATM), and then cooked dinner. Their evenings were filled with doing laundry, picking up the house, and getting ready for the next day. Lisa and David were both exhausted. Their social life dropped off the map. Something had to give.

Lisa decided to quit her full-time job, taking a job working ten hours a week in a physician's (her brother's) office. Two years later, in order to maintain their lifestyle (an expensive home and two cars), David left his job at Bright Manufacturing to move to a larger company. His hours increased dramatically, but so did his salary.

After eight years of marriage, Lisa and David divorced. They were still good friends and devoted parents, but their marriage had not worked out. When we interviewed them, they were sharing custody of their daughter.

After the divorce, Lisa found a full-time job in the human resources field. Full-time work was necessary to provide herself with medical benefits and to support her separate household. Emily went to day care after school and all day during the summer. For the next five years things went relatively well. Lisa and David both felt stretched by their daily routines, but were getting by. Each wanted to spend as much time as possible with their daughter, but both also wanted to excel in their careers. David's company allowed him flexibility, so he could take time off or work at home when necessary. Lisa's company was less flexible.

Things got much worse for Lisa, however, when her corporation merged with another. She kept her job, but others were let go in the consolidation. Those who remained had to take on the responsibilities of laid-off coworkers. Everyone in Lisa's department had to work at minimum a forty-eight-hour week. This wreaked havoc with Lisa's personal life. She saw far less of her daughter and had no time to develop other relationships. Lisa approached management several times, offering to take a dif-

ferent, less-demanding job or even a cut in pay so she could work fewer hours. Each time her request was denied. One evening, as she picked Emily up from David's house at 9:00 P.M., she decided to quit. At the time we interviewed Lisa, she had been out of work for two months. She was depleting her savings and considering dissolving her 401(k) retirement fund. Lisa was determined, however, to find a job that would give her more flexibility.

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THE FEMININE MYSTIQUE

In the 1950s, things seemed simpler, at least for middle-class Americans. In the ideal world, men were the breadwinners, working full time in careers that promised security and a comfortable living for those willing to make work their top priority. Women were the caretakers of the home and family, supporting their husbands emotionally and socially so that they could focus single-mindedly on climbing career ladders or at least hanging on. Lisa and David, born in the 1950s, both had parents exemplifying this lifestyle. Lisa's father was an accountant; David's father worked in an office. Both of their mothers stayed at home throughout their childhood.

Although this lifestyle worked for some, it was never a reality for poor women or men, those on the fringes of the labor market. Still, the breadwinner/homemaker family became the icon of the American Dream. "Success" for men entailed a career that enabled their wives to stay home. "Success" for women meant being married to a "successful" man. Although not all families in the 1950s could afford this version of the good life, even those on the outside looking in—poor families, immigrant families, divorced or single parents—aspired to this breadwinner/homemaker lifestyle, replete with a house in the suburbs and a car in the carport, if not the garage. Books, movies, advertisements in magazines, and television shows depicted American women and men as homemakers and breadwinners, reinforcing and sustaining this gender divide.

But all was not well on the home front. Despite cultural consensus that marriage and motherhood are women's "master" roles, many emulating this archetype in the 1950s and 1960s felt a deep lack of fulfillment and a sense of unease. One of them, Betty Friedan, frustrated and depressed by the absence of opportunity to use her education and talents, actually began to write about this "problem with no name."²

In the 1950s Betty Friedan struggled to be a good homemaker, wife, and mother. Tucked into a residential suburb, she felt cut off from the

mainstream, embroiled in her small world of full-time domesticity, of women and children isolated from the “real world” of business and industry. Frustrated by the absence of opportunity, she began to write about this “problem with no name,” eventually calling it the *feminine mystique* (which became the title of her groundbreaking book). In that one phrase, Friedan captured the myth of middle-class womanhood in the middle of the twentieth century. Marriage and motherhood were touted as totally fulfilling, as a rewarding life peopled by children and other mothers in the new residential suburbs sprouting up in postwar America. Women were the family consumers, chauffeurs, cooks, and caregivers. They were also deft at handling contradictions, at being both sex symbols and the keepers of the nation’s morals.

Leading to the feminine mystique were, first, jobs that paid a *family wage* (that is, enough to support a family on one income). A burgeoning post-World War II economy fit well with beliefs and values honed on the American experience, the American Dream of individual achievement and self-sufficiency.³ The dream captures the frontier spirit of enterprise, energy, and optimistic expectations so emblematic of the United States. Success can be earned, people can pull themselves up by their bootstraps, anyone can move up the occupational ladder. For many in the middle of the twentieth century, this dream seemed within reach. Even blue-collar jobs with no such ladders offered a clear path to seniority and with it higher salaries, the wherewithal to own a home, and economic security. A measure of men’s success became the fact that they could afford to support their wives as full-time homemakers.

In her book Betty Friedan showed the underside of this myth of domestic fulfillment. Many middle-class homemakers felt isolated, inadequate, alone, and unhappy. Sometimes living up to this ideal caused hardship for the rest of the family. Many girls saw their mothers grapple with being “just a housewife.” Many families struggled to maintain a middle-class lifestyle on one salary.

The feminine mystique was only part of the story, half of the gender divide. It was, paradoxically, embedded in the American Dream that anyone could make it through hard work. Only, that “anyone” was assumed to be a man. What emerged for American men following World War II was a *lockstep* template—a one-way pathway from schooling through full-time, continuous occupational careers to retirement. This lockstep career path both *enabled the feminine mystique* and *was sustained by it*. Men could lead work-centered lives precisely because their wives took care of the daily details of family and home. Wives even supported their husbands’ careers by entertaining bosses and relocating from state to state as their husbands followed jobs or moved up company ladders. Although men expected to fall in love, marry, and have children, their jobs were their

main act, who they really were—doctors, salesmen, plumbers, and members of the growing white-collar bureaucracy that worked in offices, not on factory floors. For most middle-class households, there was one job—the paid one. Men’s careers, thus, offered the only path to security, success, and status—for their families as well as themselves.

Women’s lives in the middle of the twentieth century, by contrast, offered no such starring role. They were the stagehands, set designers, walk-ons, caterers, and coaches of others’ lives: their husbands, their children, their neighbors, their friends. Still, most worked for pay before marriage or motherhood, as well as during World War II. Growing numbers of women attended college and developed occupational aspirations of their own. This mismatch created the cultural contradictions of the feminine mystique, a mythical vision of womanhood that limited options and idealized the breadwinner/homemaker family, even as many young American women were entering colleges or the workforce as a matter of course.

Whether people achieved it or not, the breadwinner/homemaker template provided cultural guidelines about careers, families, and gender that effectively *decoupled* paid work from unpaid family-care work, creating a fictional divide between them, a divide that became embedded in occupational ladders and prospects, assuming someone else—a wife—would attend to the details of daily living. In this way, an *imaginary divide* between paid work and unpaid work became a very real *gender divide*. Today the borders are both fraying and more permeable than ever before, but the roles, rules, and regulations about a lifetime of paid work remain in place, while care for the nation’s families remains mostly women’s unpaid work.

In *The Feminine Mystique*, Betty Friedan pointed out the cultural contradictions of assigning full-time homemaking to half the adult population. But she paid scant attention to its mirror image, the *career mystique*, the expectation that employees will invest all their time, energy, and commitment throughout their “prime” adult years in their jobs, with the promise of moving up in seniority or ascending job ladders. Some captured the reality of this mystification of occupational careers—C. Wright Mills wrote *White Collar*, William H. Whyte described *The Organization Man*, and Sloan Wilson painted a vivid fictional account in *The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit*. But none of these recognized that the *career mystique* rested on the premise of a gender divide, with men occupying the jobs offering seniority and ladders and women making men’s homes, nurturing their children, and providing them with support and encouragement.

The Feminine Mystique was a bombshell. With it, Betty Friedan helped usher in the Women’s Movement of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s, which, along with an expanding service economy, has literally transformed the

lives of American women. But in rejecting the norms and values of the feminine mystique, much liberal feminism came to embrace men's lives as the yardstick of equality. The senior author recently overheard a young girl in a toy store saying she wanted boys' toys. This was, in essence, what feminism of the latter half of the twentieth century wanted as well: Many thought that the way women could be equal to men was through affirmative action, enabling them to have men's jobs and men's career investments and to reap men's economic rewards, advancement, and prestige.⁴

By the 1990s, most American women, like Lisa, took it for granted that they could—and should—have it all: career, marriage, and family. The world of paid work became increasingly important to middle-class women's lives—throughout all stages of their lives. Lisa, for example, explains how she felt after she reentered full-time employment following her divorce.

Incredible, I was so stimulated and fulfilled. It's like this part of me totally woke up again, my intelligence and using my brain, incredible. I thought, "Thank you God, I am blessed. I love this job." It was so challenging and rewarding, and I gained so much self-confidence. When I got back to work full time we [Lisa and her daughter] almost immediately appreciated every bit of time that we spent together because we didn't have as much time together. I wanted to just be with her so much when I wasn't with her. I gave her better attention and our relationship improved.

In the last thirty-five years the workplace and family life have been transformed as record numbers of women have entered, reentered, and remained in the workforce. Women today are closer to approaching equality—using men's experience as the yardstick—than ever. But the domestic details and crises of daily life have not disappeared.

What *has* disappeared is the full-time homemaker, or else the role has become a short-term project for some when children are young. Three out of four employees in the U.S. workforce have no full-time homemaker to back them up on the domestic front.⁵ When all adults in the family work for pay, no one is left to do the care work of families, homes, and communities, except as an overload, part of a hidden second shift.

Lost in women's push to equality was recognition that the *career mystique* (that Americans give their all to paid labor in order to "make it") rested upon the feminine mystique. The American Dream required hard work by *two* people—one at a job, one at home. Today, couples, much less singles or single parents like Lisa and David, cannot afford to hire a wife, to pay someone to be there for their children, their ailing relatives, the repairman, the FedEx delivery, and the myriad other minutiae of their domestic lives.

The career mystique remains a taken-for-granted attribute of the American experience. Almost all aspects of life in twenty-first-century America embrace a cultural regime of roles, rules, and regulations fashioned from this myth. Consider how Americans work the hardest, put in the most hours, and take the fewest vacation days of any advanced nation. Consider how various policies—health insurance, Social Security, unemployment insurance, pensions, vacations—all are tied to the presupposition of full-time, continuous employment. Consider the ways Americans structure time: week days, weekends, retirement, rush hours, lunch hours, blue Mondays, TGIF Fridays. All are embedded in the mythology of lockstep career tracks consisting of five-day, forty-hour (or more) workweeks—over a lifetime of employment.⁶

But reality is at odds with the myth, and there are growing cracks in the American Dream. Many men and women are trying to follow the career mystique, working long hours at demanding jobs only to climb ladders that lead nowhere or else to find the promised ladders no longer exist. Women and minorities often find that such career ladders as do exist have glass ceilings. In the past, sociologists and economists divided work and workers into two types: the *primary* workforce (mostly unionized or middle class with continuous full-time employment, full benefits, and opportunities for advancement) and the *secondary* labor market (mostly women, but also including men of color, immigrants, and those with few skills and little education). But today's global economy has an international workforce, new information technologies, and a never-ending story of mergers, buyouts, acquisitions, and bankruptcies. Ambiguities and uncertainties about the future abound in boardrooms and offices and on factory floors, coloring the sensibilities of employees and their families as many face the realities of corporate restructuring, in good times as well as bad. Restructuring, or downsizing, often means forced early retirements and layoffs for some, fewer benefits and greater workloads for others. This "risk" economy effectively places almost everyone in something akin to a secondary-labor market.

Americans in the 1950s also faced the specter of unemployment and financial insecurity. But the contract between employers and employees (official for unionized workers and unofficial for the nonunionized) was based on the seniority system, awarding advantages to those who would follow the lockstep mystique. Middle-class (mostly white) men with many years of employment were sheltered from economic dislocations. It was the last hired—typically women and minorities—who were the first fired. Today, the proportion of the workers under union contracts is at an unprecedented low. And the implicit contracts—trading mobility and job security for continuous full-time employment and unwavering loyalty—have disappeared, even for white middle-class men.

What has not changed is the *career mystique*, the myth that hard work, long hours, and continuous employment pay off. What has not changed is the *career regime*, the cultural bundle of roles, rules, and regulations built up around the mystification of this lockstep organization of paid work. Most employees—especially men—continue to make heavy investments of time and energy in their jobs—every day, every week, every month, every year—from the time they leave school to the time they retire. The regime of policies and practices built upon the career mystique means that occupational success is possible only for those engaged in continuous, full-time (or more) paid work. Not in the United States are there such European institutions as long summer and winter paid vacations, paid parental leaves of absence, and part-time employment with guaranteed benefits. Americans pride themselves on working hard, taking work home, staying late at the office, not even taking all of the few weeks of paid vacation they may accrue.

The purpose of this book is to show that most Americans—men and women—and most American institutions continue to presuppose the career mystique, even though it is out of date and out of place in twenty-first-century America. Although myths are important—providing a vision of what is possible—we see the career mystique as a *false myth*, standing in the way of creating new, alternative workplace and career flexibilities. It is “false” for five reasons. First, climbing the ladder of occupational success was never possible for all workers, even in the 1950s. Hard work paid off only for a select group of mostly white, mostly middle-class men. Second, the feminine mystique provided the platform undergirding the career mystique. It is no accident that those most successful in climbing career ladders in business and in government have been men with either homemaking wives or else wives who put their own careers on the back burner. Third, fewer and fewer jobs offer possibilities for security, stability, and advancement; the old contract trading continuous hard work for wage increases and seniority is long gone. Fourth, neither men nor women want to live with an old-fashioned and unequal gender divide. American women have not simply traded one mystique for another—moving from strictures about the “good” mother or the “good” wife to those embodied in the “good” worker; rather, many are trying to be it all—the good wife, the good mother, *and* the good employee. Growing numbers of American men are trying to be all as well—egalitarian husbands and caring fathers as well as productive and competitive on the job. They, too, find it almost impossible to do so. Fifth, very few men or women can live by the old rules. One job per family—the old breadwinner/homemaker model—is often a ticket to economic privation given that wages have not kept pace with inflation or living costs, the minimum wage is a poverty wage, and “middle class” today means something very different in today’s consumption economy.

Why do Americans cling to this patently false mystification of careers as the path to the good life? In part, because it epitomizes the American Dream. The career mystique incorporates both an endurance ethic and a work ethic, both crucial to American values of individualism and free enterprise. Sacrifice by working hard, the myth goes, and you'll reap wealth, security, status, health insurance, pensions, respect, love, admiration, and happiness. Like the sitcom reruns of the 1950s, the mystique remains. But the Faustian bargain of trading a lifetime of paid work for a lifetime of income security is probably gone forever. Still, children, young people, adults, retirees—along with CEOs, managers, union leaders, and government policy makers—buy into the career mystique. It is woven into the very fabric of the American way of life, making it hard to envision alternatives.

In the middle of the twentieth century, Betty Friedan captured the voices of suburban housewives asking (as did Peggy Lee), *Is that all there is?* Today, most American women feel liberated from the feminine mystique. The few who become, or remain, full-time homemakers tend to do so by choice, not because of the constraints of custom or cultural expectations. Many women of Friedan's generation aimed for an equality that would open to women the doors leading to men's occupational prospects and rewards. Many of these doors have opened. The feminist movement, the shift to white-collar service (rather than blue-collar manufacturing) jobs, changing technologies, and affirmative action legislation have made the possibility of equal opportunity in education and in occupations more attainable than ever before. But twentieth-century liberal feminism sought equality using the yardstick of occupational achievement. In other words, many women bought into the career mystique of climbing a ladder to success. The rungs of that ladder are increasingly available to women, and sometimes women's pay is even close to that of men's. However, the career mystique typically requires two conditions: (1) an expanding economy with upward or at least secure occupational paths, and (2) workers with someone else—a full-time homemaker—to provide backup on the domestic front. Today, these two conditions are seldom met for either men or women. Both are beginning to ask, of their jobs and their career prospects, *Is that all there is?*

Americans are living on a moving platform of change. The taken-for-granted social arrangements about work, retirement, schooling, and life no longer fit the realities of twenty-first-century America. The possibilities of fulfilling the career mystique may be dwindling, but its regime of rules, routines, and regulations remains deeply embedded in social policies, in occupational paths, in workplace regulations, and in the education-employment-retirement lockstep life course. Given the large-scale social upheavals characterizing the twenty-first century, the only

thing clear to generations coming of age or moving toward retirement today is that their lives will not resemble those of their parents. How do Americans manage in a world where career ladders are precarious at best, where men and women alike live with incompatible and unachievable goals?

We show in the pages that follow that most men and women typically go along to get along, adopting “work-friendly” strategies. They try to follow taken-for-granted blueprints for jobs, careers, and success that are ill fitting at best. Some draw on new information technologies to manage the multiple strands of their lives. (Picture a leading TV commercial; a mother at the beach with her two children frolicking in the waves while she is on a conference call.) Such technological advances permitting people to work anywhere, anytime, may be family-friendly, but they are also work-friendly, encouraging employees to work everywhere, all the time. Other key family-friendly business innovations, such as child care and flex time, are also work-friendly, making it possible for employees to pursue the elusive career mystique by devoting more time to their jobs. Even the watchword “balance” itself is work-friendly. Rarely do both spouses in a marriage balance their work and family goals and obligations. Rather, one spouse (usually the wife) typically scales back (balances) in order that the other spouse (the husband) can put in long hours, travel, be on call, and try to climb, or at least hang onto, an increasingly shaky career ladder. We view the metaphor of balance as a cultural convention reinforcing gender inequalities at work and at home, while failing to challenge the career mystique.

We wrote this book to do three things: first, to describe how the career mystique remains part of the human experience of Americans at all ages and stages; second, to show the mismatch between the career mystique and contemporary reality, as well as to show how Americans accommodate this mismatch; finally, and frankly, to lobby for change. Can Americans devise new, more realistic scripts—about success, about careers, about the roles of men and women? We believe that the nation is still caught up in the career myth precisely because it is so interwoven into the social fabric, such a taken-for-granted part of life—and work—today. We portray the career mystique for what it is, a social invention perpetuating a regime of roles, rules, and regulations reifying imaginary divides—between home and workplace, between men and women, between paid work and unpaid care work. “All” that is required for American society to move beyond the career mystique is imagination and the will to change.

We begin with a brief overview of how Americans came to the career mystique, along with describing the moving platform of change that characterizes life early in the twenty-first century.

HOW DID WE GET TO THE CAREER MYSTIQUE?

Families function as “role budget centers,” allocating family members’ time and energy to paid work, schooling, community engagement, and domestic activities.⁷ Prior to the Industrial Revolution (occurring in the United States in the latter half of the nineteenth century), families operated as a cohesive unit; all family members, regardless of age or gender, typically engaged in productive labor—either on farms or in small family businesses. With this agrarian model, there was no concept of a career. Even during the shift to industrialization, the old strategy of all family members engaging in production persisted for a time, with wives as well as husbands, and children as well as older adults, expected to earn their keep through wage labor. This model still characterizes much of the developing world today. In Europe and the United States, as more men left agriculture for industry, they sought jobs that paid enough to support a family (a “living” wage). That, along with protective legislation, eventually produced a new blueprint, the breadwinner/homemaker model. Thus, industrialization sharpened distinctions, dividing activities into gender spheres of paid work and unpaid domestic work, of public and private life. Along with the living wage and the notion that women were only a secondary part of the workforce (leaving it when they married or had children if they could afford to), there developed identifiable career pathways in particular occupations.⁸

For most of the last century, those who could manage it financially “solved” potential paid-work-family-care work conflicts by having one spouse (typically the wife) serve as a full-time homemaker. This solution was truly work-friendly, freeing the other spouse (typically the husband) to concentrate exclusively on paid work and occupational development—to follow the career mystique. Advanced industrial societies were possible only because wives, daughters, and mothers did the unpaid care work of society, enabling husbands, sons, and fathers to invest their time, energy, and emotional commitment in being productive on the job. This created the three-phase, lockstep, career regime of middle-class men’s lives: education, then continuous full-time employment, then the continuous full-time “leisure” of retirement, typically at age sixty-five. Occupational careers occupied most years of adulthood. Jobs were “greedy” institutions, assuming workers were able and willing to work long hours, to put in mandatory or “voluntary” overtime, to move for occupational advancement, to travel as needed, sometimes to work weekends, and, more recently, to work from home.

This lockstep blueprint, by and large, became the pattern of most blue-collar and white-collar men who grew up during the Great Depression and World War II, many of whom became the fathers of today’s (aging)

baby boom generation.⁹ This meant completing schooling, getting married, and starting a family while simultaneously obtaining a job and launching a career. It meant having and raising typically two or more children while building seniority and establishing themselves at work, watching their children grow up and leave home, then retiring to the sidelines of society.

Compared to men, most women's life paths have been both more complicated and more family focused. Wives have often found their lives shaped by their husbands' careers (including geographical moves to advance their husbands' job prospects) and by their husbands' retirement. Most women in the years prior to and right after World War II, left paid work following marriage or motherhood (if they could afford it), with many returning part year, part time, or intermittently once their children were older.¹⁰ Motherhood became women's absorptive, full-time (but not always completely fulfilling) occupation, despite the fact that growing numbers were getting a college education.¹¹

What is key is that both the breadwinner/homemaker *gender divide* (of paid work and unpaid family-care work) and the life course as a three-part sequential *age divide* (education, employment, and retirement) are *social inventions*, products of industrialization, urbanization, suburbanization, and bureaucratization. They have become a taken-for-granted part of the landscape of American culture, shaping the institutions that sustain the American way of life. Thus, most colleges are geared to educate young people, even though growing numbers of "older" adults are returning to school to complete degrees, to retool or change careers, or simply to learn. Government legislation and corporate policies still reserve "good" jobs for prime-age adults, rewarding continuous, full-time employment by providing benefits in the form of health insurance, unemployment insurance, vacations, and pensions. Social Security provisions, as well as other pension regulations, along with declining training opportunities, encourage the retirement of older workers.¹² Those seeking success at work or even just job security believe both require continuous employment, long hours, and heavy occupational investment—in other words, following the lockstep model of the career mystique. Life in the suburbs began when middle-class families were breadwinner/homemaker families: One parent (the father) commuted to his job while the other (the wife) served as family chauffeur and full-time mother. The widening geographical distance between businesses and homes in post-World War II America became a spatial marker of the sharpening division between men's and women's life experiences, lending credence to the imaginary divide between work and family.

HOW DID WE GET TO THE MISMATCH?

A Changing Work Force

Consider these statistics: At the beginning of the twentieth century, only one in five American women worked for pay. Today, fully three out of five women are employed. As figure 1.1 illustrates, most dramatic has been the changing experiences of married women. Fewer than one in ten (6%) were employed in 1900; that number grew to one in five by 1950 and now has reached more than three in five. Having children no longer signals a retreat from the workforce. Today, unprecedented numbers of American mothers of young children, even mothers of infants, are employed (see figure 1.2). Growing numbers of women of all ages are working the way men have always worked: at year-round, full-time jobs (although still fewer women than men work full time or long hours). Today, knowing whether or not a woman is married or whether she has children tells us little about whether or not she is in the workforce. Lisa is typical of her generation. She has remained continuously employed through marriage, parenthood, and divorce. Unlike her mother, Lisa always assumed that she would have a job, regardless of whether she got married or had children.

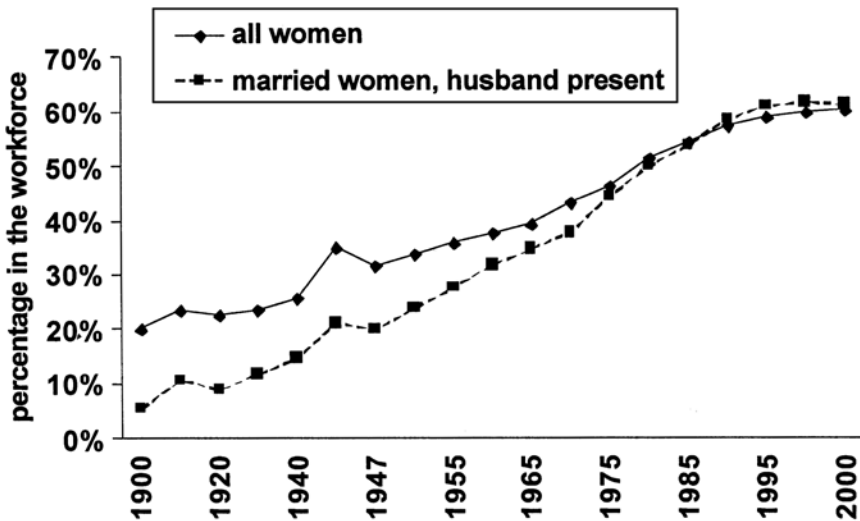


Figure 1.1. Unprecedented proportions of American women, married and unmarried, are employed. (Sources: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1999 *Statistical Abstract of the United States*, Section 13, p. 11, and 2000 *Statistical Abstract of the United States*.)

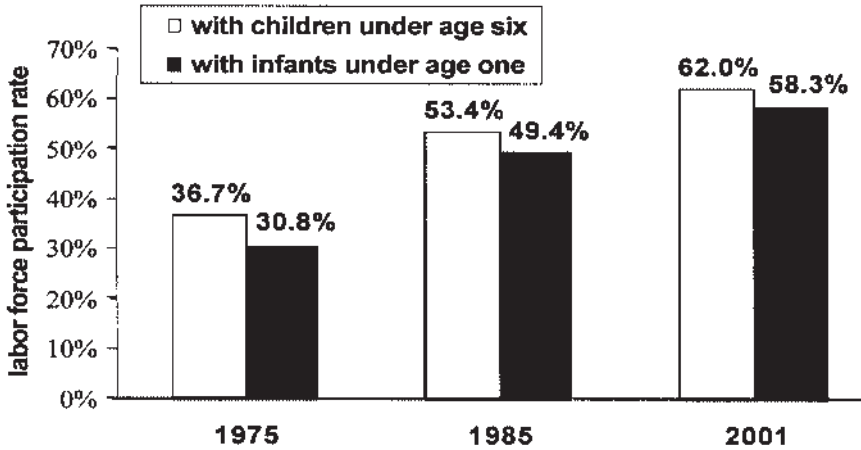


Figure 1.2. Married mothers increasingly engage in paid work. (Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *2002 Statistical Abstract of the United States*, p. 373.)

The fact that more women have jobs also means that there are more working families, that is, families in which all adults are wage earners. Half of all employees in the United States are now married to other employees. Husbands and wives are increasingly both working for pay. Neither they nor the rising numbers of singles and single parents have support on the home front, someone caring about the details of living while they are busy making a living.

More employees than ever before—whether single, single parent, or married—have child care, elder care, or other domestic responsibilities in addition to their job responsibilities, or will have them in the future. Few are prepared for the complications of combining work and family goals and responsibilities. Doing so typically falls to women, especially those who are mothers. As Lisa discovered,

Beforehand, I didn't think there would be too much of a change when I had children. I'd go back to work and she would go to a babysitter. It was amazing. It surprised me how much everything changed. . . . I couldn't function in a full-time job. It was a lot harder than I thought. Hard to find balance and still keep your own identity as opposed to [being] just a mother. I didn't want to work full time. I couldn't balance it. I didn't have any time for her [Emily]. If I worked full time and spent time with her then I didn't have time for me.

David had less difficulty adjusting to parenthood. He felt less conflicted about pursuing the career mystique, handing off many of the caretaking responsibilities to Lisa. Although David was a very nurturing father who

relished his time caring for his daughter, he saw his major role as being the breadwinner.

One key challenge of life in the twenty-first century is how to make incompatible roles compatible. Men are expected—and expect themselves—to pursue the career mystique, but most lack the backup of a wife at home. Women are increasingly expected—and expect themselves—to pursue the career mystique as well as to care for the people in their lives.

Increases in longevity, declines in fertility, and the aging of the baby boom generation are producing another challenge: a graying workforce and a growing “retired” force. The heyday of the breadwinner/homemaker lifestyle after World War II produced a large number of children—the baby boom of 1946 to 1964. Doing the math shows these seventy-six million baby boomers are now approaching their sixties. This means that the number of employees in their forties and fifties is reaching a historical high. Sixty-something boomers will not in any way resemble their sixty-something grandparents or parents. We believe baby boomers and the cohort just ahead of them are in the process of creating a new life stage, one that is *midcourse* between the career-building years and the infirmities of old age. Most Americans in their fifties and sixties are looking for new ways to phase into retirement, wanting jobs that are part time or part year. But the lockstep career regime of policies and practices offers but two options: full-time (often, in fact, long-hour) work or full-time retirement. Social Security and pension regulations reinforce this inflexibility around the paid work/retirement transition.

The new longevity is also changing the landscape of unpaid care work and family life. A large proportion of employees have at least one living parent who needs, or will need, care. Some will have to care for spouses as well. Growing numbers of contemporary employees have adult children (along with grandchildren), who may need support and may even return home for a time, between jobs or following a divorce or other personal crisis. The decline in the number of full-time homemakers means that few contemporary employees have someone else to take on the kin keeping or actual care of infirm or aging relatives, care work that typically has been the lot of adult daughters, daughters-in-law, wives, and sisters. Because neighbors, sisters, grandmothers, and aunts also have jobs, no one is at home, next door, or down the street to help out with children or infirm relatives or even to let the washing machine repair person into the house—in other words, to help make life work.

Five Societal Trends

The United States stands at something of a crossroads in the ways we think about, organize, and regulate careers and the life course. Five historical

forces are creating a disjuncture between the mystique of an orderly, sequential, lockstep to success on the one hand, and the reality of (often disorderly) contemporary life-course experiences on the other. Long-hour, demanding, and insecure employment throughout adulthood can be at odds with employee health and well-being, as well as with the time parents need for their children, the time adult children need for their aging parents, the time neighbors need to build a sense of community, and the time individuals of all ages need for personal renewal. Particularly disconcerting is the experience of those who have followed the rules of the career game, putting in decades of hard work only to be downsized, laid off, or pushed into retirement. What happened?

First, recent shifts in marital and educational paths now challenge conventional notions of the transition to adulthood. Growing numbers of young people are delaying the school-to-work transition¹³—staying in and graduating high school, attending junior and four-year colleges, even going on to graduate or professional schools. This means that the demarcation between youth and adulthood has become blurred as many in their twenties, and even thirties, are still in school, remaining economically dependent on their parents, student aid, and government loans. Moreover, unprecedented numbers of adults in their thirties, forties, fifties, and beyond return to school to upgrade their skills, finish uncompleted degrees, or embark on new careers. Young people often delay—some even forgo—marriage or parenthood. Such traditional markers of adulthood no longer operate as such.

Second, there is a disconnect between the traditional (male) career mystique and the growing number of women in the workforce, a disconnect challenging conventional (gendered) work and family divides. Increasingly, the workforce consists of (1) men whose partners are in the labor force, (2) women whose partners are in the labor force, and (3) men and women without partners but with family obligations or other interests beyond their jobs. This is producing a crisis of care.¹⁴ Despite this crisis, the career mystique remains the fulcrum around which American institutions are fashioned, meaning that Americans must organize (or aspire to organize) their lives according to its tenets. Care work, paid or unpaid, is relegated to the backwaters of public, governmental, and corporate concern. But the career mystique was made possible by the feminine mystique of women as providers of care. The “new” woman and the “new” man of the twenty-first century now expect (and are expected) to follow the career mystique *and* to be caring parents, spouses, and children. But career paths come prepackaged for those willing to give complete commitment; benefits, raises, and promotions are available only to those following the career mystique, giving all to their jobs. Responsibilities for family are off the business radar screen.

Third is globalization, and with it, the changing relationship between employees and employers. In the middle of the twentieth century, there was an implicit contract (a legal one in union settings) between those hired and those doing the hiring. It was this contract that set the stage for the career mystique. The rules of the game went like this: Employees traded their labor, work hours, and commitment for what frequently was a lifelong job or at least the steady income and job security that accompanied seniority. This contract has virtually disappeared. Today's global economy, with its emphasis on the bottom line, competition, and productivity, is a world of mergers and acquisitions, of restructuring and downsizing. Even middle-class managers and professionals at the apex of their careers may lose their jobs when firms seek to reduce labor costs. Employees, especially women, minorities, and immigrants, have always been vulnerable to a changing economy. But the downsizing trend means that midlevel managers and professionals are no longer immune from layoffs, even in good economic times.

Still, job ladders persist as cultural metaphors, yardsticks workers use in assessing their own work experiences. In fact, many employees put in far longer hours than did their parents' generation. The restructuring of work includes new technologies that "free" employees to work anywhere, anytime, hence, often everywhere, all the time.

Fourth are the revolutions in longevity and retirement, which are challenging conventional notions of old age. The aging of the baby boom generation, record low fertility rates, and increasing life expectancy mean a graying workforce and growing retired force. Since downsizing often takes the form of incentives offered to encourage early retirement, many employees in their fifties, and even in their late forties, find themselves suddenly encouraged to retire from their career jobs or else face the threat of unemployment. Those eligible for early-retirement incentive packages usually take advantage of this option, creating some very young retirees. In fact, retirement has become a very blurred transition. Many older workers leave their primary career jobs only to take on "second acts"; many retirees also seek second acts in paid work or unpaid community service.

Fifth, these enormous societal transformations characterizing life in the twenty-first century make existing cultural expectations and social policies out of date. Old customs and routines persist in the face of changing realities.

Today, a culture of occupational and educational equality among men and women coexists with the continuing gendered expectation that women should do the bulk of unpaid family-care work. But doing this second shift of family care¹⁵ means moving in and out of the workforce, working part time or not at all.¹⁶ This perpetuates gender discrimination

in the types of jobs available to women, with employers presuming women lack long-term job commitment given that their checkered career patterns are at odds with the career mystique.

Increasing Work Hours

Still other changes suggest why some groups of workers today are putting in an unprecedented number of hours on the job. First, wages have not kept pace with living costs, requiring employees to work more hours to maintain their standard of living. Second, workers try to gain some measure of job security by signaling their commitment to their jobs and to their employers by putting in long hours, including working evenings or weekends. Third, the rising demand for consumer goods means that some workers work more to earn more to spend more. Fourth, women's increasing labor force participation means more total time spent on paid work by all adults in a household. Welfare reform legislation also presumes that poor women should support their families through paid work. More than nine in ten (95%) American workers reported (in a 1999 survey) being concerned about spending time with their immediate family. It is important to note that this is an issue for all employees—regardless of their age, income, race, ethnicity, or gender. Those with children under eighteen are especially concerned about having time to spend with their families.¹⁷ Some researchers don't agree that working hours have really gone up,¹⁸ but whether their actual hours are increasing or not, most American workers feel strapped for time.

THE END OF THE LOCKSTEP LIFESTYLE

In the 1950s most Americans finished school, found jobs, got married, and become parents before age thirty. The cultural template—on television, in middle-class suburbs, and in grade school readers—was the breadwinner/homemaker family, with gender dividing family and career even as commutes divided paid work from home life. Although some families could not afford a stay-at-home wife and mother, and others did not fit this two-parent, one-earner template, most Americans aspired to this vision of the good life, buying in to the career mystique for men and the feminine mystique for women. The conventional lockstep career shaped the life course not only of (typically male) breadwinners, but of their families as well.

Today, as we show in this book, there is no "normal" life path. Americans marry later or not at all, postpone parenthood, have fewer children (or none at all), move in and out of jobs, in and out of schooling, in and out of marriage or partnerships, and in and out of retirement. Most Amer-

icans hold values of gender equality; few now subscribe to the feminine mystique. But the career mystique of lockstep ladder climbing remains, even as the odds of achieving its promised success and security are smaller than ever. Most families still live in suburbs, only now all adults in the household are commuting to jobs, emptying neighborhoods for much of the day.

Career patterns in the United States remain one size fits all, with continuous, full-time employment a given for those serious about their jobs. The rhythm of paid work still shapes the (work-) day and the (work-) week. Career achievement and even popular notions of career paths continue to rest on the fragile edifice of hidden, unpaid family-care work.¹⁹ As we show in the chapters that follow, somehow Americans manage to construct meaningful lives, in spite of outdated institutions designed for a different economy and a different workforce. Our years of research lead us to conclude that the costs of sustaining the myth of the career mystique—to individual and family life quality, to gender equality, to lifelong opportunity, and to a sense of community—are unacceptably high.

INTERNATIONAL TRENDS

These large-scale transformations in the United States mirror international trends. Sweden and China lead in their proportions of women in the workforce. Moreover, the revolution in family and lifestyle patterns characteristic in the United States is evident in the contemporary life course of individuals in most industrialized nations (see figure 1.3). In

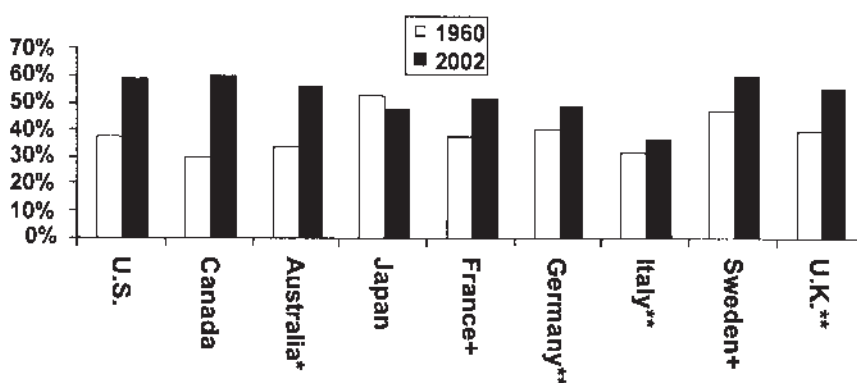


Figure 1.3. Civilian labor-force participation rates among women in selected countries, 1960 and 2002. (Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004, "Comparative Civilian Labor Force Statistics for Ten Countries, 1959–2002.")

⁺1960 data was not available; 1964 data was substituted.

⁺1961 data was substituted for 1960 data.

^{**}2000 data were not available; 1999 or 1998 data were substituted.

fact, in some European countries, marriage customarily occurs only in tandem with pregnancy—or not at all. Fertility rates are also at a historic low, with some countries, such as Italy, having children at less than replacement level (see figure 1.4).

Other countries both lead and lag in the development of policies and practices geared to the needs of the twenty-first-century workforce. Scandinavian countries have been on the cutting edge in adopting innovations that make it possible for both men and women to maintain their involvement in paid work and spend time with their families. Still, the Scandinavian workforce remains heavily segregated by gender, with men and women in Sweden, like those in many other countries, still reproducing many aspects of the gender divide. The age divide persists in Europe as in the United States, with older workers moving or encouraged into full-time retirement.

The lockstep pattern of lives—education, paid work, and retirement—remains the norm throughout Europe and Asia as well as the United States. This cultural blueprint both shapes and is shaped by social policies still geared to (1) full-time, continuous, paid work as the key to economic and occupational stability and success; and (2) the image of retirement as a one-way, one-time, irreversible exit from the workforce. The lockstep pattern of men's lives remains the yardstick against which all workers'—men's and women's—experiences are gauged.²⁰ However, contemporary American employees are more vulnerable to economic and other vicissitudes than are those in other countries. For example, while Canada, Sweden, Germany, and other countries in the European community experience high unemployment rates, they also maintain safety nets. Still, the trends toward early retirement, corporate restructuring, and the changing

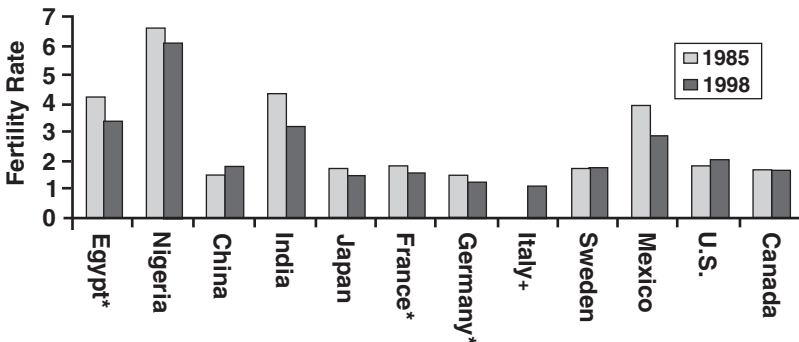


Figure 1.4. Fertility rates in selected countries, 1985 and 1998. (Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1998.)

*1990 data was used because 1985 data was unavailable.

+1985 and 1990 data was not available.

employer/employee contract are also evident in Europe, the Americas, and Asia. For example, state socialism in China used to mean secure state jobs (a situation known as the “iron rice bowl”); with the introduction of capital markets, however, state jobs are no longer as prevalent or as secure as they once were.²¹

REFRAMING THE PROBLEM

Sociologists, psychologists, economists, and anthropologists study paid work, unpaid work, retirement, families, education, and leisure—but typically not all together, not all at once. Understanding the pervasiveness of the career mystique requires putting the multiple strands of lives together, side by side with the institutions constraining them, that is, the outdated regime of rules, roles, and regulations shaping the contemporary life course. But social scientists are part of the very culture they study, frequently taking for granted the very lockstep of education, careers, and retirement that is at odds with contemporary lives. This is evident in the questions scholars investigate and the ways they define both issues and solutions.²² For example, in the 1930s through 1950s, key work–family concerns were unemployment and stress, given the dislocations of the economic downturns of the Great Depression and World War II. Scholars focused on men’s war absence and men’s unemployment. Implicitly, if not explicitly, the breadwinner/homemaker cultural template defined their principal research questions.

In the 1960s and the 1970s, in light of discussions of the feminine mystique and the reinvigorated Women’s Movement, many scholars turned their attention to the equality of opportunity for women in school and at work. Wage and occupational discrimination were prominent on researchers’ agendas. But equality was defined in conventional male terms as equality on the job. Some feminists raised the issue of women’s unpaid care work, but by and large that was not on the nation’s research or policy agenda. Submerged in a culture embracing the conventional breadwinner/homemaker template, scholars investigated the possible harm to children of having a working mother. Having a working father was problematic only if men lost their jobs.

Note that poor women who combined paid work with family-care work were (and continue to be) part of welfare, not work–family, debates. Welfare legislation until the late 1990s made it possible for poor single mothers to continue as homemakers by depending on state support. Although growing numbers of middle-class working mothers could be seen as challenging old breadwinner/homemaker blueprints, by and large both the media and the scholarly community in the 1960s and 1970s

defined this as simply women's problem. Researchers addressed how women could balance their paid work and unpaid family roles and continued to study the gender gap in earnings and status,²³ rarely questioning fundamental contradictions between the career regime and family responsibilities.

Feminist perspectives changed the work–family discourse in the 1980s and 1990s, bringing the division of domestic care work to the research agenda. Still, the balance metaphor persists in the framing of the work–family interface, with the burden of the balancing placed on women's shoulders. Proposed solutions to the problem of working mothers were “mommy tracks”—part-time jobs and/or less demanding occupations for women.²⁴ For men and women unwilling to lower their occupational aspirations, the career mystique of the lockstep career regime remained unchanged.

In the 1980s and 1990s, in response to the feminization of their workforces, large corporations began to move the *work–family* issue into the larger domain of *work life*, recognizing that not all their employees are parents or even married. In addition to information on subsidies for child care, many companies developed programs around elder care, flex time (changing start and stop times—either on a fixed basis or daily), personal days off, telecommuting, and parental leave. These changes accompanied the enactment of the Family and Medical Leave Act, signed by President Bill Clinton in 1993, mandating unpaid time off for new parents or those with sick children or other relatives (restricted to employees in organizations with fifty or more employees). Researchers began to follow suit, investigating work–life effectiveness along with the effects of the Family and Medical Leave Act and “family-friendly” initiatives in the private sector.²⁵ Gender issues related to equal pay for equal or comparable work remained on the research agenda. But few questioned the lockstep career regime: the roles, rules, and regulations that require committed employees to work long hours on a continuous basis, discouraging them from using family-friendly benefits for fear of seeming less committed to their jobs, and pit paid work against unpaid family work.²⁶

Today many feminist scholars are shifting the terms of the debate from focusing on fitting women into the lockstep career regime to valuing unpaid (as well as paid) care work. Their studies show how family and community care work provides the scaffolding supporting not only men's career paths (as unencumbered workers), but the very infrastructure of communities, schools, and the market economy.²⁷ We argue that the issue is not how employees can balance their personal lives with the demands of their jobs, but how the career mystique and the regime of policies and practices built up around it constrain women's and men's options at every stage of their lives.

RETHINKING CAREERS

In the pages that follow, we focus on the career mystique as it permeates men's and women's life courses and document how individuals and families at different ages and stages think and strategize about their options and goals. We highlight (1) dynamic processes of development and change—from children envisioning their careers to those midcourse who are thinking about retirement; (2) the changing social, economic, and cultural environment that is the moving stage upon which contemporary Americans construct their lives; and (3) the significance of the career mystique and the career regime as outdated cultural metaphors, organizational arrangements, and social policies constraining life choices and life chances around paid work, unpaid family and community work, and retirement, as well as possibilities for gender equality.

In the 1950s, the career mystique matched the feminine mystique: Men in middle-class and unionized blue-collar jobs could focus on breadwinning because their wives did the homemaking. Just as they were in the middle of the twentieth century, today workers are expected to work long hours (including mandatory overtime and "choosing" to work evenings and weekends), to travel, and to relocate if their employers require it. The career mystique has persisted: Only now it is mismatched with the new risk economy and the needs of a new workforce that is more diverse, more female, and older than ever. This mismatch is a graphic example of *structural lag*,²⁸ in which old customs and routines persist in the face of changing realities. Although the feminine mystique, along with full-time homemaking, has become a relic of the mid-twentieth century, we show that many couples manage by prioritizing one person's job. They do so because the career regime relegates benefits, higher wages, and future prospects to those willing to follow the continuous, long-hour career mystique. Given the risks of the global economy, many adults feel that investing in at least one "good" job per family is the only way to achieve even a modicum of job and income security.

We also show that cultural expectations about the career mystique are changing at a glacial pace. Employers, men, women, and, frequently, even children take for granted that regular, paid work means spending five days, or forty or more hours, a week on the job (a standard enacted in 1938 by the Fair Labor Standards Act), that education is for children and young people, that retirement is a one-way, one-time, irreversible exit, and that family-care work is women's responsibility. This sense of the career mystique as "the way things are" creates, perpetuates, and exacerbates inequalities—financial and emotional—between men and women; strains working families; and fosters the rolelessness of retirement.²⁹ The myth of careers as long hours and lockstep only reinforces gender divides and

gender differences in both salary and advancement prospects. When men earn more than women and have a greater chance of moving ahead in their jobs, it makes sense for couples to invest in husbands' occupational careers, even if it means shortchanging wives' own prospects. Thus, the weight of coordinating work and family responsibilities rests, for the most part, on the shoulders of wives, mothers, female single parents, and the daughters of ailing parents. The gendered nature of care work, in turn, reinforces and perpetuates inequalities between men and women in opportunities for on-the-job training and advancement. Both employees and employers buy into the notion that family-care work responsibilities are private troubles to be handled alone (and typically by women), rather than public issues requiring systemic changes in the career regime. Many also use gender stereotypes in the ways they hire and promote workers, presuming that women have (or will have) family responsibilities that will lower their productivity and tenure and increase their absenteeism. In this way, cultural myths about careers disadvantage women at all life stages, including retirement. But we also show that they disadvantage men as well, effectively reinforcing their provider economic role, meaning that men's time for their families, their communities, and themselves is curtailed.

BEYOND LOCKSTEP LIVES

Life in the twenty-first century is definitely not lockstep. Americans' transitions into and out of school, marriage, parenting, paid work, and care work are more varied than ever. People today are changing not only their jobs but also their occupations; returning to school at all ages or staying in school longer; marrying later, divorcing, or staying single; delaying childbearing or having no children; retiring early, late, not at all, or several times. The United States and, indeed, nations around the world stand in a whirlwind of demographic, economic, technological, and social change. But policies and practices remain caught in a time warp.

In this book we chart how the career mystique fosters a false divide between the two most fundamental life dimensions—job and family—as they play out over the life course. We show that most contemporary men and women want it all—including gender equality—but accommodate outdated and conflicting institutions through hybrid strategies—keeping one foot in the twentieth century and placing the other in the twenty-first—to deal with the risks and realities of contemporary lives. This means that women, wives, and single mothers still do most of society's care work without pay, even as they try simultaneously to maintain ties to the paid workforce. Men, husbands, and fathers put in long hours in paid

work, even as many try to help out at home. Most Americans believe in equal opportunities for men and women but simply can't make it happen, even in their own families.

The lockstep regime of the career mystique also fosters an age divide. Most Americans in their fifties, sixties, and seventies want to remain engaged in some form of productive activity, but conventional employment and retirement patterns make it difficult to do so.

The career mystique developed during very different times, for a very different workforce, in a very different economy.³⁰ The chapters that follow examine the hybrid strategies Americans adopt at various ages and stages to manage the contingencies and contradictions of their lives. We begin with the ways even young children learn the career mystique.