Cultural Explanations of the Stalled Gender Revolution

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Abstract

The gender revolution that restructured American families during the last quarter of the 20th century stalled in the middle of the 1990s. We offer a cultural explanation for this stall based on the rise of seven themes that grew rapidly in the 1990s: married mothers' distress from trying to combine work and family, higher standards for child-rearing that led to intensive mothering, egalitarian essentialism that reaffirmed equality while conceding essential gender differences, mommy wars that pitted stay-at-home mothers against working mothers, media interest in working mothers who "opted out", welfare reform that made work a duty rather than an opportunity, and a policy emphasis on work/ family balance that inadvertently reinforced a "mommy track" stereotype. Content analyses of 859 articles from the *New York Times* and 567 articles from the *Washington Post* supports most but not all of these cultural trends.

Cultural Explanations of the Stalled Gender Revolution

While some controversy remains, there is now general consensus that the gender revolution that restructured American families during the last quarter of the 20th century stalled sometime in the middle of the 1990s (Cotter Hermsen and Vanneman 2004; England 2010). Most of the trends that had been moving consistently and inexorably towards gender equality unexpectedly plateaued in the 1990s. The stall was not a reversion to the so-called "traditional" family of the 1950s, but it certainly marked a new era for changes in gender and family relations. A cultural explanation for this stall is suggested by three separate arguments:

- Egalitarian trends stalled across a broad front ranging from economic to political to family (Cotter et al 2004).
- Popular attitudes about gender and family stopped becoming more egalitarian at almost exactly the same time that the structural trends stalled (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 20xx).
- The more structural explanations behind the rise of feminism in the 1970s (e.g., lower fertility, the advent of the pill as a convenient and effective birth control, greater demand for female labor) did not record any significant shifts in the 1990s that might explain the stalling of the egalitarian trends.

A shift away from a commitment to gender equality that had dominated American culture in the last quarter of the century would be consistent with these three phenomena. But a cultural shift on gender and the family would not be a reversion to the 1950s

celebration of the Ozzie and Harriet family. What had been a contest between two

polarized positions became a more complex conflict with a new cultural frame drawing on

elements of both feminist and "traditional" portraits of the family. This paper describes the

elements of that new gender culture and provides some preliminary trend data from

systematic content analyses of the New York Times and the Washington Post that supports

the rise of this new frame.

The seven elements of the new gender culture.

The shift away from gender egalitarianism had its roots in seven reinforcing but

somewhat independent trends that may have grown significantly in the 1990s:

1. Distressed Mothers. Susan Faludi's popular book, Backlash, identified a new kind

of anti-feminist argument that supplanted the older, more traditional defense of "separate

spheres". The new backlash no longer critiqued feminism for the problems it created for

children of working mothers; the new attack claimed that it was women themselves who

had been hurt by the gender revolution. Working mothers were encountering a "second

shift" of housework and childrearing after returning home from their paid jobs. This

double burden made it unrealistic for mothers to try to "have it all" by being both

successful career women in the workplace and primary caregivers at home. Instead, such

unrealistic goals had only led to stressed-out mothers, guilty that they were not spending

enough time with their children but frustrated in their careers because of family

responsibilities.

2. Higher Standards. Reinforcing mothers' guilt over the problems of balancing work

and family, the rise of intensive mothering (Hays 1996) raised the stakes for what was

thought necessary to raise successful children. Haunted by middle-class status anxieties, parents felt that only the "concerted cultivation" (Lareau 2003) of their children would enable them to succeed in an increasingly competitive global world. These challenges also provided a rationale for a renewed "devotion to family schema" (Blair-Loy 2003) that required as much talent and energy as a career and promised to provide equal fulfillment.

3. Egalitarian Essentialism. In the new cultural frame, a stay-at-home mother was distinct from but equal to the career woman of the 1970s. This frame granted half of feminism's demands, equality, but accommodated half of traditional familism's core principle: women and men were different. In particular, women were more caring and nurturing. But the insistence that nurturing was equally as important and just as difficult as career success enabled women to shift their focus away from workplace equality without identifying themselves as subordinates.

4. Mommy Wars and Choice Feminism.   By the 1990s, the principal dissent to an emphasis on career equality came not from traditional mothers of the 1950s who had never held important work positions (nor ever had much opportunity to do so), but from women who had begun successful work lives but had then returned home after their children were born. These women defended abandoning their careers by arguing that feminism's purpose was to give women choices that they had not had in the 1950s. So a choice to become a full-time mother in fact captured the freedom that feminists had always sought. But different women were making different choices so the unavoidable interaction with women who made the other choice only re-raised anxieties that perhaps each had made the wrong one. The need to justify their choices – to themselves and to the world –

often led to hostile interactions and reinforced the salience of the cultural debate about which was the right choice.

5. Opting Out. Lisa Belkin's 2003 *New York Times Magazine* article described an "opt-out revolution" reversing the past rising trend in mothers' labor force participation. Although in one sense overstated – married mothers' labor force participation could be better described as having plateaued rather than reversed – in another sense the article was already several years late in catching the changed trends in mothers' employment. In fact, news stories about an opting out trend had been around for decades, even long before there was any empirical basis for reporting a change. Nevertheless, the Belkin piece was significant in seeming to certify a new post-feminist regime had now become dominant in professional circles.

6. Welfare reform. It may not have been an accident that the gender revolution stalled at the same moment that the government required poor mothers to get a job rather than being supported by AFDC. Several observers noted the irony that while conservatives were especially vocal in demanding that poor mothers must work, the same voices were often blaming every social problem on feminism's success in getting middle-class mothers out of the home and into careers. But the contradiction may not have been so clear once work was re-interpreted in the new cultural frame. So much political space was taken up with the welfare debates, working became more closely identified with poverty, minorities, and the less educated (in spite of the fact that higher education remained positively correlated with mothers' labor force participation). The discussion of welfare mothers' work might have shifted the image of work, perhaps subconsciously, away from a status enhancing professional careers towards a more stigmatized impression.

7. Work-family balance reforms. In 1989, Felice Schwartz, long a champion of gender

equality at the workplace, published her infamous advocacy in the *Harvard Business Review*

that businesses needed to better accommodate the family responsibilities of their female

employees. The article was immediately denounced for advocating a "mommy track" (not a

phrase Schwartz ever used) that would sideline women into subordinate positions in the

workplace. Despite the furor, the next decade of demands for change did in fact witness a

shift from demands for equality in the workplace (occupations, wages, promotions, etc.)

towards workplace changes (more flexible hours, longer parental leaves, more part-time

work). In Congress as well, legislation shifted from an equal opportunity frame to work-

family accommodation (Burstein, Bricher, and Einwohner 1995). The Family and Medical

Leave Act was passed in 1993, just before the stall of the gender revolution. The timing

may be more than coincidence.   In a sense, the decade after Schwartz's article seems to

have witnessed the cultural triumph of the mommy track. There is irony here too, of

course, since feminists demanding more flexible workplaces were aiming to enhance

gender equality, especially maintained growth in labor force participation. Instead, the

opposite happened. Inadvertently, a policy emphasis on work-family balance may have

reinforced a cultural frame of women as less career oriented. The new frame may have

blunted feminist demands for workplace equality and strengthened employers' resistance

to those demands.

Empirical questions

By now, these new cultural themes have been identified and analyzed in many

places. Two principal questions remain to be asked. First is a problem of timing. The stall

in the gender revolution can be dated surprisingly accurately. Trends in married mothers'

employment, in occupational segregation, in the gender gap in housework, in political office

holding, and in attitudes about women and work – all stalled in the mid-1990s. The

cultural trends are more difficult to date and in fact media analyses range widely over

recent decades. Faludi's book was published in 1991 and described a media backlash in the

1980s – and yet the 1980s were a good decade for gender equality.   Hays identified the rise

of intensive mothering only somewhat later, publishing her book in 1996 when If the

gender revolution had stalled in the 1980s in the midst of the "Reagan revolution", after the

failure of the Equal Rights Amendment, during Faludi's backlash or Hays' rise of intensive

mothering, the stall would be easier to understand. But what events can be identified in

the 1990s that would succeed in blocking years of egalitarian trends when the 1980s

backlash had not?

On the other hand, Belkin's equally well know analysis of "opting-out" was not

published until 2003, well after married mothers' employment rates had stalled. Although

the media were attacked for using a handful of cases to manufacture a "trend" – a practice

that had indeed happened in earlier decades – in fact, the media and their critics had been

too slow rather than too quick to recognize the new situation. Timing is important here.

Cultural shifts that happened after the revolution stalled, or many years before, are not

good candidates for causal explanations.

A second problem with past analyses of cultural change is the uncertainty about

their scope. Faludi, Hays, Douglas and Michaels, Hochschild, and others are brilliant

detectives in identifying examples of shifts in the cultural landscape. But how do we know

these shifts are representative? Might they merely have chosen apt examples that stood

out in contrast to previous years but had not yet established any cultural predominance?

Cultures are complex of course so we can always find contradictory examples of whatever frames we are looking for. If we are looking for a cultural shift that was strong enough to thwart many years of egalitarian change, we really need to look for a pervasive set of ideas that drowned out earlier feminist themes. More systematic measurements would help here.

METHODS

We have selected samples of 859 articles from the N*ew York Times* between 1981 and 2010 and 567 articles from the *Washington Post* between 1978 and 2011. These are, of course, two narrow slices of elite culture during this period, and we make no claim for their representativeness. It might be argued that these newspapers were "cultural gatekeepers" (Pescosolido et al, 19xx) and so especially worth of early attention. But the relationship between trends in these papers and in less elite popular culture must remain an issue for future study.

The articles were selected by a search through Lexis/Nexis for any mention of either working mothers or stay-at-home mothers. [1] The search included daily news articles, op-ed opinions, letters to the editor, book reviews, articles in the weekly magazines, and everything in the local sections of the two newspapers. This search produced thousands of articles in most of which the mention of working mothers or stay-at-home mothers was only incidental. For example, a biographical article might say, "his mother worked as a baker." The number of articles was narrowed by limiting the sample to articles where the search terms appeared at least three times. Of the resulting 859 and 567 articles, a few

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[1] The exact search string used in the Lexis/Nexis database was: (work! OR employ! OR career OR housewi! OR homemaker OR stay at home) w/2 (mom OR mother!)

dozen were eliminated because they were not relevant to working or stay-at-home

mothers despite satisfying the search criteria (e.g., "Mother Teresa worked…"); several

others were dropped because they were duplicates of articles in other editions. This left

808 *Times* and 556 *Post* articles.

Coding for the above seven themes is still underway. All *Times* articles have been

coded but for only four themes listed above (distressed mothers, higher standards, mommy

wars, and opting out). The *Post* articles have been coded for all themes, but only three

fourths of the articles have been coded. Nevertheless, these preliminary results are quite

revealing. We report trends for the two papers combined where available, and for the *Post*

where there are no codes as yet for the *Times* (i.e., for work/ family policy and welfare

reform).

Coding rules were created for each of the seven themes. Additional codes are

reported for other themes that provide contrasting trends from these backlash themes. For

example, a code for the "traditional critique" of feminism recorded arguments that children

were hurt by mothers' work (or benefited from stay-at-home mothers). Another code for

the main "feminist critique" recorded arguments that women benefited from work (or that

staying home created problems). More detailed descriptions of the codes are found in

Appendix Table 1. Each article could be coded for multiple examples of a code.   In this

analysis, we simplified the scoring to presence/ absence. Occurrences were then summed

across all articles for each year yielding a measure of the extent of that theme for each year.

RESULTS

Means and ranges of each of the codes are presented in Table 1. The most common theme is distressed mothers. These stories are overwhelmingly a recitation of the problems of working mothers although stories celebrating stay-at-home mothers' benefits are a small part of this code also. To some extent, this negativity reflects a media preference for stories about difficulties; happy people don't make news. At the opposite extreme are stories that include some discussion of egalitarian essentialism. Only *Post* stories have been coded for this, but the frequency is still negligible. In fact, the code records any mention of essentialist ideas, the egalitarian qualification was not included during coding. Because of its low frequency, we have not analyzed this theme further. The low frequency does not suggest irrelevance: we still believe the idea captures the core of the cultural shift in the 1990s. However, it may be a nuanced concept that does not lend itself to easy media treatment.

----- Table 1 about here -----

Overall, the total number of stories in the sample creates an analysis problem. Normally, 1426 stories should present a large enough base for inference. But we are interested in annual differences and spread over more than three decades we are left with an average of less than 50 articles per year. The small samples for each year produce much random noise. We resolve this, as do most quantitative analyses of media trends, by calculating averages over a number of years, in our case calculating a moving average of the number of stories in the previous five years. Our measure for the year 2000, for example, is the average number of stories coded for each theme between 1996 and 2000.

The first theme we examine, married mothers' distress, was suggested by Faludi's contention that much of the success of the backlash could be attributed to a shift among anti-feminists from a focus on the problems created for working mothers' *children* to problems created for working mothers *themselves*. We coded any references to the guilt or anxieties experienced by working mothers trying to balance work and family. Such stories averaged about 10 per year during the 1980s and early 1990s. In the last half of the 1990s they became steadily more common and by the new century had stabilized at a level about 50% higher. That is, about the same time as the gender revolution stalled across a broad spectrum of equality indicators, the popular culture was shifting to an increased emphasis on the problems mothers experienced in trying to combine work and family.

This increase is not a simple function of more stories about working mothers in general. Other characterizations of working mothers showed quite different trends (Figure 2). For example, we also coded stories for the feminist argument that work was good for mothers and that it was stay-at-home mothers who faced problems of boredom and frustration. That trend, always less common than the number of distressed mothers stories, also increased during the mid- to late-1990s, perhaps as journalists' search for balance in their stories. But the growth was much more modest than for distressed mothers stories, and the increases fell back at the start of the twenty-first century. Frequencies have vacillated since then. The two themes show not entirely different trends, but the rises and falls are not exactly synchronized, and the changes in the feminist theme are always smaller.

The pattern for the "traditional family" argument against working mothers is quite different. Examples of this theme have varied much less over these three decades although

a general downward trend is noticeable. Faludi would not be surprised at the negative

slope; her argument was that the new backlash had supplanted the older traditionalist

objections to mothers' work because they were, in fact, more effective. Stories about

working mothers' distress were not tied to a 1950s vision of the nuclear family that

subordinated wives to their husbands' authority. Equality was not being challenged;

overload was.

The second theme, higher standards for raising children (Figure 3), shows an even

clearer pattern of a late 1990s rise. Stories about enhanced expectations for parents' child-

rearing practices averaged between three and four stories a year during the 1980s and

early 1990s. They jumped to almost twice that during the second half of the 1990s and

have remained at almost that level since.

Similarly, stories about working mothers "opting out" because of work/ family

conflicts doubled during the late 1990s and have more or less remained at the higher level

since then (Figure 4).   There are more annual fluctuations of opting out stories before and

after the late 1990s than for higher standards stories or even for distressed mothers stories.

But the overall pattern is remarkably similar. The counts make it clear that these stories

had become quite prevalent well before Lisa Belkin's well-known 2003 article in the Times

Magazine (which is, of course, one of the 2003 stories in the Times sample).

The last of the themes coded for both the *Times* and *Post* stories is recognition of the

conflicts between these mothers who have "opted out" to stay home with their children and

mothers who have returned to work after the birth of their children. These so-called

"mommy wars" have elicited frequent regrets on both sides that these recriminations only

made all mothers' lives more guilt ridden (a theme we also coded in results not reported

here). Nevertheless despite calls peace in the mommy wars, stories confirming the mutual

hostility have risen steadily since the early 1990s. The trend is somewhat different from

the three themes just reviewed which showed dramatic acceleration in the late 1990s and

then a new equilibrium at the higher level.   The trend for mommy wars stories is more

gradual and consistent throughout the last two decades. From its low point of about two

stories per year at the start of the 1990s, these stories have grown to over three times that

frequency in recent years. That trend is consistent with the timing of the stalled gender

revolution, but still distinct from the trends for distressed mothers, higher standards, and

opting out stories.

Trends for the remaining two themes, work/ family policies and welfare reform, are

based only on the smaller number of Post stories so we should be more cautious in their

interpretations. They show a quite different although not unexpected pattern over time.

The work/ family policy code recorded any example of a story that discussed public or

corporate reforms to include: extended parental leave, more flexible time schedules, a

greater availability of part-time work, or more possibilities of working at home, especially

for telecommuting in the internet age. All of these have been advocated as reforms that

would make it easier for parents (or more particularly mothers) to combine work and

family demands.

Work/ family policy stories have peaked at two distinct times over the last three

decades. They rose steadily during the 1980s until the passage of the Family and Medical

Leave Act of 1993. With that success, the frequency of this theme fell off in the late 1990s,

just as distressed mother, higher standards, and opting out stories were growing. The

correlation between legislation and media stories is well acknowledged in the media literature so the peaked pattern before and after the passage of the Act should be no surprise.

However, the FMLA covered only parental leave – and even for that it applied to only a section of the labor force; nor did it provide paid leave as in most other high-income countries. Feminists' continued advocacy of broader work/ family policies led to a second rise in work/ family policy stories beginning in the early part of the first decade of this century that continues to this day.

Whatever the causal relationships might be between work/ family advocacy, endorsement of a mommy track, and the stall in the gender revolution, the trends over time do not show support for any temporal associations. Nor do trends in the work/ family policy theme show any relationship with the backlash themes described earlier. That should not be surprising. The sources, much less the intent, of these themes are not just dissimilar but antagonistic. The backlash themes all exhibit a fairly clear anti-feminist rhetoric whereas the concern for policies promoting better work/ family balance have equally clear feminist roots.

Another policy focus of concern to working mothers has been promotion of better and more widely available child care. Trends in stories with this theme are shown by the red line in Figure 7. For ease of comparison, the graph repeats the trend for work/ family policy (the black line). Concern for child care also has peaked twice in the last three decades but at different times than the peaks for work/ family policy. Child care stories peaked first in the late 1980s earlier than the peak in the work/ family policy stories. Child

care stories then peaked again at the turn of the century. Both of these peaks correspond

to increased concern for welfare reform and the legislation then under consideration.

Stories about welfare reform are tracked in the maroon trend also in Figure 7. The two

peaks for welfare reform stories closely match the two peaks for child care stories. The

close association reflects the continued debates about how much government support for

child care was to be included in the bills that required welfare mothers to return to the

labor force.

DISCUSSION

Trends in four of the media's themes about working mothers show both marked

similarities among themselves as well as consistency with the timing of the stalled gender

revolution. Stories that report

- guilt and anxiety among working mothers,

- more rigorous expectations for child-rearing,

- conflict between working and stay-at-home mothers, and

- working mothers leaving their careers to stay home with their children

all show dramatically rising frequencies in the late 1990s that resulted in rates during the

current century that are often two to three times those of the 1980s. All of these might be

characterized as "backlash" stories – accounts that if not intended to undermine feminism

at least could be easily understood to have that effect. The fact that the gender revolution

stalled exactly during this period when backlash stories increased raises central questions

of the causal relations between culture and structural outcomes that we begin to address

below.

Perhaps as important as the similarity in the trends in these four themes are the different temporal patterns for other media themes about working mothers. The contrasts with other trends reassure us that the pattern is not just a universal trend for all stories about working mothers. For example, the traditional critique of feminism, that mothers' careers end up costing children, shows if anything a gradual decline over these three decades. The new backlash critique seems to have successfully crowded out the older and less fashionable critique. And interest in policies to promote more day care availability or to ease work/ family conflicts follow different patterns with identifiable peaks that correspond with legislative debates and heightened advocacy. In contrast, the backlash themes are less tied to particular events but seem to reflect broad shifts in the popular understanding of mothers' work.

[More on: questions of causality; on lack of data prior to the 1980s; on the need to look at less elite sources; on class differences in the themes;]

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Working mothers: distressed

Working mothers: 3 themes: distress, benefits, kids suffer

higher standards

Opting Out

mommy wars

work family policy

policy: work/family, child care, welfare reform