Intimate Commitment in the New Economy: A View from the U.S.

Kathleen Gerson
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Intimate Commitment in the New Economy: An Overview

- Whither Commitment?
  - Puzzle of Conflicting Trends in Gender & Relationships

- What is the Context?
  - Rise of Insecurity in Economic & Private Life

- What are the Emerging Strategies?
  - Growing Up in New Era of Gender, Work, & Family
  - Emerging Strategies: Clues from Heart of the New Economy

- What are the Implications?
  - For Future of Gender, Work, & Care
  - For 21st Century Social Policy
The Puzzles of Change: Conflicting Views of US Trends

- Two Dominant, but Contradictory Perspectives
  - End of the gender revolution
    - Women “opting out” of careers; labor force participation at plateau
    - Men resist domestic equality & parental involvement
    - Recreation of traditional courtship & marriage
  - VS.
  - Rise of women & decline of men
    - Women outpacing men in education, aspirations, & earnings
    - Men confused & threatened by women’s rising status
    - Rising individualism as men reject breadwinning & women reject marriage
- Opposing arguments, but both posit linear change
Why So Much Disagreement & Confusion?

- New economy, like Industrial Revolution, is transforming economic & personal life
  - **Work & economic life**: Predominance of hi tech & service jobs
    - Working class: Decline of unions
    - Middle class: Decline of employer loyalty
    - For men: From “careers” to “disposable” jobs & workers
  - **Personal & family life**: Diversity & fluidity in relationships
    - For women: From stability to uncertainty in marriage
  - **Market-Domestic Connections**: From “separate” to “blurred” spheres
    - Daily: Permeable space & time boundaries between home & workplace
    - Life Course: Unpredictable changes in adulthood
  - **U.S. Cultural & Policy Context**: Individual self-reliance, weak collective support
Consequences for Family, Work, & Gender Arrangements

- Decline of predictability in work & marital paths undermines “gender bargain” between breadwinner husbands & caregiver wives
  - Rise of Breadwinner Moms
    - 40% of U.S. households with children under 18
    - 1/3 are married mothers who earn more than spouse
    - 2/3 are single mothers (divorced & never married)
  - Rise of Optional & Fluid Relationships
    - Singlehood, Cohabitation, Delayed Marriage
    - Divorce & Remarriage
    - Same Sex Unions

- Creates new uncertainties in work & private life
Lives vs. Institutions: From Alignment to Conflict

- New economic & interpersonal uncertainties for individuals
- VS.
- Rigidity in U.S. work & caretaking institutions
  - “Ideal worker” structures & norms
  - “Intensive parenting” caregiving structures & norms
  - Weak social safety net & ideal of traditional, self-sufficient families

- Clash creates contradictions & cross-pressures
  - Individuals: Tensions between economic self-reliance & care of others
  - Relationships: Tensions over division of work & care
New Dilemmas of Work & Care
(not one-directional change)

• New work-care conflicts
  ● Undermines received practices
  ● Requires innovative responses

• But no institutionalized resolutions or pathways
  ● No clear, socially supported responses
  ● Instead, “damned if you do & damned if you don’t” options

• What are emerging strategies?
• What do strategies imply for future?
• What policies to needed to achieve work-family integration, gender equality, & family security?
Mapping the Revolution: Two Studies

- **Children of the Gender Revolution: Growing Up in Changing Families**
  - 120 interviews, ages 18 -- 32; 50% women, 50% men (5% LBGT)
  - Diverse locations in New York area (urban, suburban, ex-urban)
  - Diverse class, racial, & ethnic backgrounds

- **Work & Care in New Economy: Today’s Emerging Strategies**
  - 120 interviews, ages 35 – 46; 50% women, 50% men (10% LBGT)
  - Diverse locations in Bay Area & New York (excluding wealthy)
  - Diverse class, racial, & ethnic backgrounds
  - Mix of “old” & “new” jobs (professional & nonprofessional, mainly in tech, service, education, & finance)
The Contending Options
(from “The Unfinished Revolution”)

- **“Neo-traditional”**
  - Enduring commitment to partner
  - Each “specializes” in breadwinning or caretaking (even if both hold paid job)

- **“Self-reliant”**
  - Don’t count on partner (whether single or married)
  - Prepare to “be on own” (whether single, married, or co-habiting)

- **“Gender flexible”**
  - Enduring commitment to partner
  - Personal blending of work & care
  - Egalitarian sharing of earning & caretaking
  - BUT “equality” is vague: equal division? gender-neutral? take turns?
Ideals vs. Fallback Positions
(from “The Unfinished Revolution”)
Emerging Strategies: Clues from New Economy Strongholds

- How are people responding to gap between ideals & options?
  - People living at cutting edge of change: Silicon Valley & NY Area
  - Age group facing peak pressures to build work & family commitments

- Dominant Patterns
  - Reluctantly Neo-Traditional (about 1/3)
  - Going Solo (about 1/3)
  - Reflects trends toward traditionalism and individualism

- Emerging Patterns
  - Uneasy Reversals (15 percent)
  - Egalitarian Compromises (15 percent)
  - Gender transgressive trends, but facing big obstacles
Back to the Future: Reluctantly Neo-Traditional

- Becoming Neo-Traditional (33%)
  - Partners aspire to vague visions of equality
  - But economic pressures leave fathers with time-demanding jobs & on-call constantly

  - KYRA: After years of more successful career, followed husband to new job; with young child & one on way, unable to resume own career

  - TIM: Wants to care for new child, but can’t cut back or take time off; physician wife pulls back from work, but grows angry

- Result:
  - By default, mothers perform carework, pull back from paid work
  - Fathers overworked, with little family time
  - Tensions in relationships
  - Commitment endures, but equality is undermined
Too Much or Too Little?
Navigating Adulthood Without a Partner

- **Going Solo** (33%)
  - Hoped for lasting relationship
  - But job and/or relationship setbacks
    - Left without a committed partner (men & women)
    - Rearing children on own (women)
  - **MICHELLE:** Facing unplanned pregnancy, partner left & had child on own, but moved from CEO of nonprofit to more secure, less demanding job
  - **JASON:** Job setbacks & periods of unemployment led to breakups; with lack of secure work, feels “unmarriageable”

- **Result:**
  - Singlehood in lieu of commitment
  - Single parents doing it all; childless feel disconnected
  - But personal networks help with care & social connection
Trading Places: Uneasy Gender Reversals

- Reversing Breadwinning & Caretaking (15%)
  - Couples hoped for equality
  - But women found steady “old economy” jobs & men hit roadblocks or pursued risky job paths
  - 16% of U.S. stay-at-home parents are men

  - DOLORES: Thrived in career; husband followed & became primary caretaker, but his inability to find steady work fuels resentment of both

  - ADAM: Relied on wife’s stable job & modest income to pursue dream of “making it big”; cares for son, but copes with stigma

- Result:
  - Women chafe as sole/primary breadwinner
  - Men struggle as can’t meet “breadwinner” standard
  - Commitment becomes fraught & uncertain
  - Work & care remain “separate spheres”
Trying to Beat the Odds: Egalitarian Compromises

- **Fighting for equality, but overwhelmed & unsure (15%)**
  - Committed partners, each with time-demanding jobs

  - **CARMEN**: Upward mobility as administrator for series of start-ups, but no time for having children; sharing care of nieces & nephews with spouse

  - **DANNY**: Split childcare by working at home half-time, but unable to trust in other caretakers; exhausted & uncertain about sustaining 50-50 arrangement

  - **ALEC**: Has equally work-committed partner, but no time for parenthood

- **Result**: Choice between
  - Juggling work & care -- exhausting & difficult to sustain
  - Or avoiding care responsibilities
Explaining Divergent Strategies: Common Dilemmas, Different Compromises

- Beyond “tradition” vs. “individualism,” diverse commitment patterns
- Personal preferences cannot explain outcomes
  - Women & men share egalitarian values: integrating & sharing work & care
- Instead, exposure to new economic & family uncertainties offer different options
  - Job insecurity creates high work demands for some & too little work for others
  - Relationship fluidity leaves some without partners & others in relationships with uncertain futures
- Diverse paths, but difficult trade-offs & conflicts for all
“Doing It All” vs. “Having It All”: What Works?

- For most, aspirations subverted by institutional barriers
  - “Neo-Traditionals” & “Singles”: Irresolvable conflicts between commitment & equality
  - “Reversers” & “Egalitarians”: Dearth of structural & cultural supports undermine efforts to create more egalitarian forms of intimate commitment

- Small proportion able to achieve egalitarian ideal
  - Secure, flexible work for both partners
  - Time boundaries at work & support network of caretakers
  - Able to share work & care, without undue sacrifice to self or relationship
  - But these arrangements are rare & difficult to sustain
Where Do We Go From Here?
Politics & Policy in Era of Uncertainty

- **Politics: Reframe the Debate**
  - Inexorable economic & social shifts, not moral decline, are reshaping relationships

- **Policy: Create Institutional Supports for New Gender Bargain**
  - Integration of work & care
  - Flexible, egalitarian relationships

- **Restructured Social Safety Net**
  - Programs: “Use it or lose it” leave policies, publicly supported dependent care, flexible work paths with caregiving timeouts, economic support for transitions
  - Legal protections: Limits on working time, no gender or caregiving discrimination

- **Conclusion**
  - Without institutional realignments, patchwork of inadequate, individualist strategies will impose costs on relationships & society
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