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Work-Family Justice: Untangling characteristics of men who dare to break the “ideal worker” norm

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INTRODUCTION

In most workplaces, a “good” employee is still considered today as a person who is totally engaged, available and fully devoted to work. The “ideal worker” norm (Williams, 2001) refers to the image of the most desirable worker as one who is totally committed to, and always available for his or her work (Acker, 1990).

Straying from this image presents risks, especially for men, who are the most expected to adhere to the work-devotion norm (Blair-Loy, 2003). Men who “do not fit into the straight-jacket of conventional masculinity” (Williams, 2010) face sizable job risks such as femininity stigma, flexibility stigma, job consequences, career penalties (Coltrane et al., 2013; Rudman and Mescher, 2013; Williams et al., 2013).



Nevertheless, contemporary men evidence more and more work-life balance needs. Despite the stigmas and barriers they may experience (Tanquerel & Grau-Grau, 2020), some men dare to open other paths to increase their work-life balance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

MEN AT WORK: ROOTED IN THE IDEAL WORKER NORM AND HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY

Stereotyped social identity is often pregnant in the corporate world: male identity is often associated with breadwinner role and the “good worker” image, and female expected identity is committed to caregiving responsibilities and the “good mother” norm.

Furthermore, the hegemonic construction of masculinity continues to tie masculinity to the work sphere (Liebig and Oechsle, 2017), which is linked with the notion of the ideal worker described above. Although some men reveal their deviance (Murgia and Poggio, 2009), in general, most men continue to embrace or pass as having embraced the ideal worker image (Reid, 2015). Digressing from these norms also raises the question of one’s gender identity. Asking for more flexibility in the workplace alters masculinity and has its price for men

Categorization				Strategies used			
Category	Masculinity	Ideal worker	Fatherhood	Main Strategies	Right to ask	Sub strategies	Consequences
HGO conformers	Hegemonic masculinity	Classic ideal worker	Old father	No strategy	Not using the “right to ask”	None	Reinforcing the ideal work norm and hegemonic masculinity
				Convergence			
HGO borderer	Complicit masculinity	Passing as ideal worker	New father	Invisible strategies	Not using the “right to ask”	Informal flexibility Hidden arrangements Asking flexibility for other reasons	Being complicit of hegemonic masculinity and notion of ideal worker
				Dissomance			
HGO deviants	Caring masculinity	Revealing from the notion of ideal worker	Super father	Visible strategies	Using the “right to ask”	Formal flexibility Visible arrangements Asking flexibility for caring reasons Quitting their jobs	Challenging hegemonic masculinity and the notion of ideal worker
				Divergence			

METHODOLOGY

This research explores the characteristics of these men who dare to reveal their gender deviance and openly ask for more work-life balance. In order to achieve this, we have conducted 41 semi-structured interviews of working men in France and Spain. We included in our sample all types of working men (in different hierarchical positions in different departments of a variety of organizations (e.g. schools, chemical firms and the automotive industry) in order to compare and understand why some men remain in the hegemonic schema while some dare to break the norms.



DISCUSSION

BORDERERS

- * middle-aged
- * perceived barriers to be an involved father
- * working partner but stopped working for a while
- * pseudo-egalitarian man
- * job position with flexibility possibilities
- * ideal-worker based vision of organization

Volitional PIONEERS

- * rather young (or first career stage)
- * will to be an involved father
- * working partner
- * egalitarian man
- * job position with flexibility possibilities
- * constructivist vision of organization

CONFORMERS

- * middle-aged/ aged
- * sexual division of labor
- * part-time working partner
- * conservative man
- * job position with no flexibility possibilities
- * ideal-worker based vision of organization & reject of organization role in WLB

Involuntary PIONEERS

- * middle-aged
- * perceived barriers to be an involved father
- * working partner and obligation to come to an arrangement
- * conservative man
- * job position with no flexibility possibilities
- * lack of organizational support

New

Culture

Old

Old

Conduct

New

SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH

Until now, research has mainly focused on the consequences of male deviance from the “ideal worker” norm on their job outcomes and career structure, but little attention has been put on the characteristics of such progressive profiles. These “progressive” men challenge the dominant model of masculinity and the traditional norms that still rule contemporary organizations. They are key to increase gender equality and justice at work and home.

