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Sabrina Tanquerel, Marc Grau-Grau

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Untangling the characteristics of men who dare to break the “ideal worker” norm

Authors: Sabrina Tanquerel (Normandy School of Management, France) & Marc Grau-Grau (UIC, Spain)

ABSTRACT

For many researchers (Acker, 1990, 2006; Blair-Loy and al., 2013; Minnotte and al., 2021), today the “ideal worker” image (Williams, 2001) is still the dominant norm in most organizations. It refers to the image of the most desirable worker as one who is totally committed, available and fully devoted to 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, despite the stigmas and barriers (Tanquerel & Grau-Grau, 2020) they may experience, some men dare to open other paths to increase their work-life balance. 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 we understand very little about 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. This article explores the characteristics of these men who dare to reveal their gender deviance and openly break the “ideal worker” norm. Based on 40 semi-structured interviews of working men in different types of occupations, organizations and sectors in France and Spain, the findings of this exploratory study present the different elements that may explain their “disclosure”.

Keywords

Barriers, fathers, flexible policies, masculinities, men, strategies, work-family 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. Organizations are a crucial arena, in which gender identities are produced and reproduced (Acker, 1990). Jobs are often seen as an abstract category with no body or occupant. The reality suggests that male workers with limited non-work obligations and emotions under control seem better suited to fulfil these disembodied positions. According to Acker (1998), ‘the ordinary worker is a man, an abstract person who has few obligations outside work that could distract him from the centrality of work’ (p. 197). This ‘universal’ (Ellingsæter, 1995), ‘abstract’ (Acker, 1990), ‘ordinary’ (Acker, 1998) or ‘ideal’ (Williams, 2001) worker is distinguished by being unencumbered (Halford and al., 1997), with no caring duties that require his time, energy and attention. It is now undisputed that men implicitly are the ‘ideal workers’ as they have been viewed as naturally unencumbered (Halrynjo, 2009). Although the notion of the ideal worker does not match the reality of many employees (Davies and Frink, 2014), the expectation to adhere to the norm of the unencumbered worker remains pervasive and dominant, especially for men, in contemporary organizations (Acker, 1990, 2006; Hochschild, 1997).

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. That is why some men leverage invisible strategies to avoid stigmas and backlash (Tanquerel & Grau-Grau, 2020).

Typologies of working men, barriers perceived, and strategies used:

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 borderers	Complicit masculinity	Passing as ideal worker	New father	Invisible strategies	Not using the “right to ask”	Informal flexibility	Being complicit of hegemonic masculinity and notion of ideal worker
						Hidden arrangements	
				Dissonance			
HGO deviants	Caring masculinity	Revealing from the notion of ideal worker	Super father	Visible strategies	Using the “right to ask”	Formal flexibility	Challenging hegemonic masculinity and the notion of ideal worker
						Visible arrangements	
				Divergence			
				Asking flexibility for other reasons			
				Asking flexibility for caring reasons			
				Quitting their jobs			

Source: TANQUEREL, Sabrina and GRAU-GRAU, Marc. (2020): *Unmasking Work-Family Balance Barriers and Strategies Among Working Fathers in the Workplace*. *Organization*, 27(5) : 668-700.

METHODS

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 40 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.

FIRST RESULTS

Our findings highlight the characteristics of these men who dare to reveal their gender deviance and openly break the “ideal worker” norm. We intend to identify the common traits and characteristics of these “progressive” men who challenge the dominant model

of hegemonic masculinity. Below are the first findings that are emerging from our analysis.:

New	<p>BORDERERS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * 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 	<p>Volitional PIONEERS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * rather young (or first career stage) * will be an involved father * working partner * egalitarian man * job position with flexibility possibilities * constructivist vision of organization 	
	Old	<p>CONFORMERS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * 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 	<p>Involuntary PIONEERS</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> * 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
	Old	Conduct	New

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