

2014 PSA Presidential Address (Un)Changing Institutions: Work, Family, and Gender in the New Economy

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Abstract

Change is never linear, all-encompassing, or necessarily forward moving. In this essay, I explore the pace, prospects, and pathways for change in work, family, and gender at the societal and organizational levels. After a lengthy period of sustained progress, movement toward greater gender equality has slowed. This slowing has been accompanied by new cultural narratives about gender and gender inequality. These narratives have also penetrated organizations, which have their own change dynamics. Gender issues in the academy have received renewed attention in recent years as part of the National Science Foundation's ADVANCE initiative. Drawing from my own and others' research, I explore how academic leaders' narratives about work, family, and gender can slow or undermine change efforts. By deflecting responsibility for change to individual faculty, leaders' willingness, capacity, and resolve to act are weakened. Gender narratives are a central ingredient in the broader system of societal and organizational practices that reproduce inequality.

Keywords

gender, work, family, organizations, change, inequality

As sociologists, we are all students of change. In fact, at the most abstract level, change is central to sociological thinking and practice. The study of social life at all levels involves close attention to the reciprocal and interdependent relations between social reproduction and transformation, or between continuity and disruption. Both forces are simultaneously present in the social world—whether at the societal level, the organizational level, in social interaction, or within individuals. In the larger society, change and the forces that produce it receive much more attention than continuity or stability, and this is perhaps not that surprising. However, our agenda in sociology is to capture both the ongoing reproduction of social life and its moments of disturbance or disorder. An interest in exploring those relations as they are expressed in the interconnected realms of work, gender, and family motivates this address.

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The timing is right for this discussion. The year 2014 marks the 50th anniversary of the War on Poverty, which was launched by President Lyndon Johnson in his 1964 State of the Union Address. One of the most significant pieces of legislation passed that year was the Civil Rights Act. For those like myself who study workplace inequality, this law's most critical element is the fact that it outlawed discrimination by race, color, religion, national origin, and sex in employment. The inclusion of sex discrimination in this piece of legislation was the result of actions by an opponent of Civil Rights, who believed that including sex would kill the entire bill. To his surprise, the amendment prohibiting sex discrimination passed easily, as did the Civil Rights Act itself.

In his book *Inventing Equal Opportunity*, Dobbin (2009:22) notes that the Civil Rights Act was a "broad brush" attempt to forbid discrimination and promote equal opportunity, but it left open exactly what this meant and how it was to be done. Dobbin's argument is germane to this address in a number of important respects. First, the story of civil rights legislation is relevant for underscoring the important role of organizations, particularly work organizations, as a critically important arena where large-scale societal changes are played out. Second, the history of civil rights as told by Dobbin also underscores the messiness of organizational change and the factors that thwart or make it possible for change to occur. Among these factors is the process whereby legislation or other initiatives move from the realm of language to the realm of implementation and practice.

Finally, this history calls attention to the multifaceted and changing societal definitions of gender equality. The civil rights era made equal opportunity central to the meaning of this concept (Burstein, Bricher, and Einwohner 1995), and this emphasis remained predominant over decades of change in women's and men's lives. For example, almost 30 years after the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, President George H. W. Bush signed the Civil Rights Act of 1991 to strengthen laws prohibiting sex discrimination in the workplace, but he vetoed family and medical leave bills (Burstein and Wierzbicki 2000). Today, equal opportunity is viewed as a necessary but not sufficient condition for gender equality, while work–family issues and new narratives about equality and choice have become more central.

To examine these ideas, I begin at the societal level, reviewing progress toward and away from gender equality. Next, I turn to the topic of organizational change. Societal changes are played out in the workplace, but organizations have their own change dynamics. These dynamics are important in understanding why and how organizational change fails. Finally, I use an example drawn from my own research on the academic workplace to examine leaders' gender narratives during a time of organizational change.

Societal Changes in Gender, Work, and Family

The last half-century or more has been a time of fundamental change in gender, work, and family (Goldin 2006). In North America, Western Europe, and indeed throughout the globe, women's participation in the paid labor force rose steadily during the latter half of the twentieth century (Heymann and Earle 2009). In the United States, the increase in women's labor force participation occurred across all educational levels and among almost all racial and ethnic groups. During this time, women made inroads into jobs traditionally dominated by men and they made progress closing the gender earning gap. This pattern was fueled (and reinforced) by women's increasing levels of educational attainment—from primary school to college and to professional and graduate programs (Buchmann and DiPrete 2006). With respect to caregiving and household work, trends suggest a similar pattern of relatively continuous change over the past several decades and across a wide geographic area. Women spend fewer hours working at home, while more men spend more (Geist and Cohen 2011).

Gender attitudes have changed as well. Survey data show relatively consistent movement toward more liberal gender attitudes in the United States between the mid-1970s and 1990s (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2011). Majorities of both women and men came to agree that a

mother's employment was not damaging to her children, that women's role was not simply to care for the home, and that men did not necessarily make better politicians. North America, Europe, and other developed economies show similar patterns. In fact, attachment to women's and men's "traditional roles" has weakened among both women and men across the globe (Pew Research Global Attitudes Project 2010).

That progress toward gender equality in one area is connected to progress in another is not surprising. Thus, rather than a series of distinct changes, many note a pattern of convergence toward greater gender equality. One form of convergence is cross-national. For example, Claudia Geist and Cohen (2011) found that in the last few decades, the amount of housework shouldered by women declined faster in more traditional countries than in those that were less traditional. This created a cross-national convergence of sorts as countries moved at different rates as they converged toward the same outcome: greater equality in the domestic division of labor. Economist Claudia Goldin (2014) conceives of convergence in a slightly different way, referring to "the converging roles of men and women," which she views as among the most important advances in society and the economy in the last century. As evidence for this, she points to the shrinking gap between women and men in labor force participation, hours of paid and unpaid work, labor force experience, occupational attainment, and education.

Uneven Gender Change and the Stalled Revolution

The evidence for twentieth century change (and convergence) in gender, work, and family is thus powerful and compelling. Increasingly, too, is the evidence that progress toward gender equality has gone through a period of deceleration or "stalling," as Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman (2004) referred to it in their report for the Russell Sage Foundation (see also England 2010). However, while there is some evidence of a global slowdown in progress toward gender equality, the United States is distinctive in certain respects (Lee 2014).

Cotter et al. (2004) show that the slowdown in the United States occurred across a number of domains. For example, U.S. women's rates of labor force participation leveled off in the late 1990s and have declined from their peak in 1999. This leveling off appears to have occurred across all categories of education, presence of children, and marital status (Lee 2014). With respect to the gender wage gap, the pattern is roughly similar. The wage gap narrowed steadily through the 1970s and 1980s, but progress slowed in the 1990s and early 2000s (Blau and Kahn 2007). During the 10-year period between 2004 and 2013, the gender wage gap barely changed, declining by only 1.7 percent (Institute for Women's Policy Research 2014).

Sociological research has revealed other, more nuanced looks at the stalled progress toward gender equality. In their study of occupational sex and race segregation from the 1960s to the present, Stainback and Tomaskovic-Devey (2012) find that desegregation slowed considerably after political pressure by the civil rights and (later) the women's movement eased. Similarly, U.S. women's entrance into management positions increased steadily in the second half of the twentieth century, only to slow in the 1990s (P. N. Cohen, Huffman, and Knauer 2009). Although most women do not hold management positions—especially higher level positions—this slowdown has broader relevance. Several studies have shown that the demographic mix of managers shapes many aspects of the work environment, including the behaviors of managers themselves. The percentage of women in management jobs in an organization is positively related to the percentage of women in non-management jobs, and it affects the percentage of new jobs in an organization that are filled by women relative to men (L. E. Cohen and Broschak 2013).

Women in almost all industrialized countries earn a higher proportion of college degrees than men (Buchmann and DiPrete 2006; Charles and Bradley 2009). In the United States, the proportion of degrees received by women surpassed men in the early 1980s, and the gender gap has been growing steadily ever since, as men's college graduation rates decline. Despite their advantage in

college graduation rates, other aspects of education show a more complicated picture with respect to movement toward gender parity or equality. In particular, the increase in women's share of college degrees in industrialized countries has been accompanied by a robust pattern of gender segregation by field of study (Charles and Bradley 2009). Paula England (2010) found a similar type of pattern when she looked at trends in doctoral degree attainment. Women's share of doctoral degrees went up fairly steadily over the last several decades (since the 1970s), but there has not been much change in the relative femaleness of different fields. Fields of study that were more female relative to others in the 1970s remain more female than others; fields of study that were less female than others 40 years ago remain less female than others today (England 2010).

Compared with data on employment and education, the evidence with respect to gender attitudes is more equivocal, especially with respect to recent trends. David A. Cotter et al. (2011) show that support for more egalitarian views leveled off somewhat in the mid-1990s, and this leveling occurred among both women and men, of all ethnicities (except Asians) and across all levels of income and education. They found a small "rebound" in more egalitarian attitudes since 2000, but note "a growing but decelerating social liberalism among recent generations" (Cotter et al. 2011:282). However, in more recent analyses, these authors suggest that this rebound has been more robust, as indicated by steady increases since 2006 in popular support for gender equality and women's labor force participation (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2014).

The Rise of Egalitarian Essentialism

Although many forces have contributed to the "stalled revolution," the role of cultural factors has received particular attention. Central to these arguments is the claim that a new frame or narrative about gender has gained prominence in politics and popular culture. Sociologists refer to this cultural frame as "egalitarian essentialism" (Cotter et al. 2011:261; see also Charles and Grusky 2004). This frame is distinct from traditional notions of "separate spheres," a dominant perspective in the first half of the twentieth century. It is also distinct from feminist egalitarianism, a frame that emerged from and helped to fuel the feminist movements of the 1960s and 1970s. Egalitarian essentialism is a hybrid, containing an endorsement of the principle of gender equality, while defining equality as the right of individual women to choose what is best for them.

This emphasis on choice aligns with other efforts to describe new "post-feminist" standpoints. The most prominent is "choice feminism," a position described as being "concerned with increasing the number of choices open to women and with decreasing judgments about the choices individual women make" (Kirkpatrick 2010:241). When combined with a belief in essential gender differences, an emphasis on the value of individual choice tends to reinforce the status quo. Maria Charles and Karen Bradley (2009) show how this cultural frame has helped to perpetuate gender segregation in higher education, especially in industrial societies where beliefs in individual self-expression and choice are deeply entrenched. In addition to reinforcing the status quo, these narratives have been critiqued for their political implications. Choice feminism, in particular, has been described as an attempt to represent feminism as non-threatening and "seem appealing to the broadest constituency possible" (Ferguson 2010:248).

In sum, recent history reminds us that that social reproduction and social transformation are inextricably linked. The steady and mostly broad-based progress toward gender equality that marked the last half of the twentieth century has been disrupted or slowed. However, change and stability are relative concepts, and there is room for debate about whether and to what degree gender inequality has increased in recent years. Whether egalitarian essentialism, choice feminism, or similar cultural logics have contributed to this pattern is also in need of further study. Nevertheless, these gender narratives remain alive and well in popular debates about professional women "opting out" of the workforce and have become deeply embedded in work-family debates more generally (Kirkpatrick 2010; Stephens and Levine 2011).

Societal forces, including cultural logics and ideologies, also penetrate organizations, where they are expressed in the perspectives and practices of workers and employers. Organizations have their own change dynamics, however, which shape how cultural narratives are deployed.

Organizational Change and Changing Organizations

Organizational change receives a tremendous amount of attention from researchers. Perhaps one reason for this is that so much of what we understand to be true about organizations emphasizes their immobility or immovability. Rules, routines, and hierarchy are defining features of bureaucratic organizations and help to explain the tremendous inertia (and dysfunction) that is often associated with them (Perrow 1986). Organizations also act to prevent or deflect change. For example, loose coupling is a means by which organization can create a firewall between outside demands and their normal operations and ways of doing business. Organizations portray themselves to outside constituencies in ways that signal movement, while leaving existing practices and routines untouched (Meyer and Rowan 1977).

The case of work–family policies provides a good example of this process. Many organizations have adopted formal work–family policies around flexibility, parental leaves, and so forth, but implementation often lags (Williams, Blair-Loy, and Berdahl 2013). The policies themselves face resistance or indifference among key organizational gatekeepers, such as managers or supervisors. Meanwhile, workers who may want to use these policies avoid doing so, as they recognize that their employer’s commitment is more symbolic than real (Blair-Loy and Wharton 2002; Jacobs and Gerson 2004). The gendered culture of work and its ideal worker norms persist despite even well-intentioned efforts to make work accommodating to parents.

Organizations can face pressures to change from the outside, yet the external environment is more often a source of organizational continuity rather than disruption. Imitation is a major principle of human *and* organizational action (March 1996). Whether seeking solutions to immediate problems, or attempting to chart aspirations for the future, organizations (as well individuals) look not only to their own past performance but also to the past performance of relevant others (March 1996). Imitation contributes to the diffusion of ideas, knowledge, policies, or practice. It not only helps to increase predictability and continuity but also constrains large-scale change and transformation. Thus, when considering some of the basic principles that drive organizations, continuity often wins.

The continuity–change tradeoff is not always resolved in favor of continuity, however. Organizations do change and sometimes change in the direction of greater gender equality. When we look sociologically at these cases, however, the prime movers are often “behind our backs”—unexpected, unanticipated, and difficult to explain. In their study of work on offshore oil rigs, Robin J. Ely and Debra E. Meyerson (2010) identified an unforeseen effect of organizational efforts to enhance safety and performance. Expressions of hegemonic masculinity most often associated with dangerous, predominately male, jobs were significantly reduced. New workplace practices around safety ushered in new kinds of masculine identities and behaviors. In this way, the organization inadvertently “disrupt[ed] the gender status quo through practices that encourage[d] men to let go of conventional masculine scripts” (Ely and Meyerson 2010:28).

In contrast to unplanned or inadvertent transformation, organizations sometimes intentionally seek change. Yet, these experiences sometimes end up validating the most change averse among us. This is because a planned organizational change often goes badly awry (Hannan, Polos, and Carroll 2003). Organizational actors may miscalculate the risks and rewards of change; leaders underestimate how long a change will take and its costs, both monetary and in human terms. Furthermore, as sociologists, we are only too familiar with the unintended consequences of changes, whether planned or unplanned, and sometimes the failure of what seem like self-evident fixes.

Cautionary tales abound. Research by Dobbin and colleagues (Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006), for example, shows that one of the most ubiquitous approaches to increasing diversity in the workplace—diversity training—has been among the least effective in increasing the racial and gender diversity of managers in U.S. firms. Emilio J. Castilla and Stephan Benard's (2010) study of merit-based reward systems finds that these practices, which are enthusiastically embraced as a means to insure that pay is based on performance—not gender, race, or other considerations—may not be doing what many hoped. Instead, Castilla and Benard have uncovered what they call “the paradox of meritocracy.” Organizations that emphasize meritocracy can (under some conditions) unintentionally create conditions that lead to more bias not less in the evaluative process.

Another example of well-intentioned organizational change that produces unintended negative consequences derives from the work–family literature. In their 20-nation, cross-national study of the effects of family-friendly policies on women's wages, Hadas Mandel and Moshe Semyonov (2005) found that these policies were associated with a larger gender earning gap, not a more egalitarian earning distribution. The reasons for this are complex, but these researchers suggest that it can be partly attributed to the fact that mothers more so than fathers are likely to take advantage of policies that facilitate work–family integration. This leaves mothers (and women in general) subject to discrimination by employers who penalize them for their work interruptions (such as long maternity leave).

This is not an argument against change efforts or work–family policies but rather another reminder that organizational changes—in the form of practices aimed at reducing inequality and discrimination or to increase work–family flexibility—are much more complicated than they seem. The mechanisms that facilitate change, like those that undermine it, operate at more than one level and sometimes work at cross purposes. For example, formalization is encouraged as a way to reduce bias and discrimination (such as the case of pay for performance or other mechanisms), yet while this may help mitigate the effects of cognitive bias, formalization can introduce biases of its own. Well-intentioned and planned organizational change can be resisted, deflected, or transformed in ways that undermine rather than facilitate desired outcomes.

Continuity and Change in the Academic Workplace

The academic workplace is a useful site for examining the dueling forces of continuity and change and understanding the role that gender narratives play in these dynamics. While bureaucratic organizations of all types may resist change, academic institutions are perceived as especially resistant (Lane 2007; Lucas 2000). Yet, as we have seen, higher education has not been immune from the broader set of forces reshaping gender, work, and family over the last several decades. One particular way these forces have affected the academic workplace is through federally funded initiatives designed to increase the gender diversity of the faculty. Much of this interest derives from concerns about the future of STEM disciplines (i.e., science, technology, engineering, and math) in the academy and the barriers faced by women and underrepresented minorities in these fields (Committee on Women in Science and Engineering 2006).

In 2001, the National Science Foundation created its ADVANCE Program to address these issues. The goals of ADVANCE are to increase the representation of women in academic science and engineering careers, develop ways to promote gender equity in STEM, and increase the diversity of the STEM workforce. This program has not been modest about its investments or intentions. Since 2001, ADVANCE has spent over 130 million dollars to support ADVANCE projects at over 100 colleges and universities (and some non-profits; National Science Foundation 2014). The most visible and well-funded ADVANCE award is its Institutional Transformation award. Averaging about 3.5 million dollars, these institutional grants are intended to transform universities in ways that make academe and STEM in particular more accommodating to women and other underrepresented groups.

ADVANCE-funded institutions have pursued many strategies to accomplish this goal (Bilimoria and Liang 2012; Bystydzienski and Bird 2006; Laursen and Rocque 2009). In general, ADVANCE initiatives fall into three broad categories, including those focused on policy reform and creation, departmental or institutional climate, and training of faculty and administrators (Stewart, Malley, and LaVaque-Manty 2007). This investment in institutional change has been fueled by and helped foster an outpouring of sociological research on gender, work, and family in the academe, both within and outside of STEM. This research has included studies of work–family issues in the academy (e.g., Fox, Fonseca, and Bao 2011; King 2008; Mason and Goulden 2004; Misra, Lundquist, and Templer 2012), as well as research on gender inequality in academic life (e.g., Bird 2011; Ecklund, Lincoln, and Tansey 2012; Jacobs and Winslow 2004; Misra et al. 2011; Roos and Gatta 2009; Winslow 2010). Climate, especially departmental climate, has also received significant attention in ADVANCE institutions, and climate studies have become useful diagnostic tools for universities trying to understand the experiences of women and other underrepresented groups (Callister 2006; Maranto and Griffin 2011; Settles et al. 2006).

Leadership and Organizational Change

These studies have helped to explain women’s underrepresentation in STEM fields and the barriers that remain to be overcome. Less attention, however, has been paid to the organizational change process itself and particularly the forces that derail or deflect change efforts. My own research examines this issue with a focus on departmental leaders.

Leaders are vitally important to the change process. Frank Dobbin and Alexandra Kalev (2007:280) argue that “In the corporate world, as in academia, programs that establish clear leadership and responsibility for change have produced the greatest gains in diversity.” Similarly, Sara I. McClelland and Kathryn J. Holland (2014:3) suggest that leaders’ sense of accountability and personal responsibility for diversity initiatives are critical to the success of these efforts. Michael Schwalbe et al. (2000:435) highlight leaders’ role in “regulating discourse” through formal or informal mechanisms. By filtering and framing information, leaders shape perceptions of their subordinates (Dragoni 2005). Leaders’ beliefs about gender may be especially powerful, given the role of these beliefs in reproducing gender inequality (Ridgeway 2011).

Leadership in academe is multi-layered, but for faculty, the departmental leader is most critical. That institutional transformation in academe requires attention to departmental processes is widely acknowledged, making departmental practices, policies, routines, relationships, and dynamics important topics. Chairs influence all these aspects of departmental life (Bilimoria et al. 2006). In this way, they also shape faculty’s satisfaction with their careers, colleagues, and work environment (Bensimon, Ward, and Sanders 2000). Chairs seem to have a particularly important influence on women’s work lives in the academy (Settles et al. 2006). Recognition of their role has made departmental leaders a key audience for various types of training opportunities, and climate surveys typically ask faculty about their perceptions of their chair and other leaders. Ironically, however, while we know much about faculty perceptions, chairs’ own beliefs are less well understood.

In 2010, I was part of a four-person research team at an ADVANCE institution that set out to investigate departmental leaders’ perspectives on their own roles and responsibilities with respect to diversity and organizational change. During the course of this project, graduate student Mychel Estevez and I became attuned to the ways that chairs framed issues of gender and gender inequality, especially as these topics were invoked in the context of the university’s broader efforts at improving gender equity and increasing women’s representation in STEM fields (see Wharton and Estevez 2014, for a full discussion of this research.) Some data from this project, in addition to more recently published research by other scholars, have revealed how leaders’ narratives about gender, work, and family can slow or undermine change efforts.

Leaders may deflect responsibility for change by emphasizing the choices of others, particularly female faculty, and many fail to act out of a belief that gender change is inevitable and progressive. Two examples, drawn from Amy S. Wharton and Mychel Estevez's (2014) work, illustrate this process.

Choice, Autonomy, and Faculty Work

Egalitarian essentialism is alive and well in the academy. Recall that this cultural frame combines support for the idea of gender equality with a belief in women's right to choose what is best for them. Many department chairs in our study held beliefs consistent with this perspective. They were broadly supportive of institutional efforts to make the university more accommodating to women (and other underrepresented groups). They were familiar with and approved of policies designed to facilitate work–family integration (such as stopping the tenure clock, partner accommodation, modified duties, etc.), and they gave credit to the administration for actively promoting these policies. Nevertheless, approval of policies and the broader aim of increasing women's representation on the faculty were accompanied by a strong belief in individual choice and responsibility. As Wharton and Estevez (2014:139) explain,

When asked whether it was possible for faculty to have a life outside academia, another (male) chair said: "That's up to you. I can't tell you what to do. What I say is you have to decide. . . . You are the only one that knows. That is what I try to say to my faculty . . . [So, the answer to your question is] Yes, it depends on what you want to do. You have to figure out how to balance it. But I can't tell you how to do it." Another chair stated, "Tenure-track positions are killers for everybody. In our society, if you have to make a choice and only one individual can do the killer job, it's usually the female who chooses to stay home or the couple chooses that it's the female that stays home."

Policies such as modified duties and temporary stoppage of the tenure clock are by definition designed to provide individual solutions to specific situations. This reinforces chairs' inclination to treat work–family issues as an issue for individual women (or men) at particular times. Wharton and Estevez (2014:141) quote these chairs, who said,

"I think everybody is aware that you can stop the tenure clock. We've had people use that, including probably the only male faculty member at the university request and be granted an extra year toward tenure. And we have folks that know about it and will opt not to use it." Another said: "I think people individually make these choices, knowing what their prospects are and what this would mean or not. Even if institutionally the policy is there, people opt not to take it."

This emphasis on choice and individual responsibility has even more traction in academe due to specific features of academic work and values. In the academy, faculty autonomy is prized, celebrated, and protected. Although academic jobs require long hours, they also provide some flexibility with respect to how time is allocated (Misra et al. 2012). The assumption that faculty control their work hours reinforces the idea that their success is determined by their own efforts and choices. Most chairs in our study regarded faculty work as demanding and labor intensive, but believed that individual faculty members were ultimately responsible for how they allocated their time (Wharton and Estevez 2014). Chairs believed it was their responsibility to protect faculty autonomy by buffering them from external demands or other distractions. As this chair (quoted in Wharton and Estevez 2014:139) explained,

In the end, most faculty that are good do it on their own. They are people who would be successful anywhere they went and who drive their own program. I just have to get out of their way and let them be as good as they can be.

In their study of university leaders, McClelland and Holland (2014) examined differences between high- and low-responsibility attributions related to gender diversity. Low-responsibility leaders tended to assign responsibility for diversity to others, rather than themselves. In our study, chairs who embraced narratives about faculty autonomy and choice, especially with respect to work–family matters, could also be characterized this way. One meaningful consequence of this viewpoint is that it absolved chairs of taking much personal responsibility for facilitating work–life integration or change more generally in their departments. Although sympathetic to faculty efforts to integrate their work and family lives, chairs believed that this was an issue for individuals or couples to resolve. Although supportive of university policies, it was up to each faculty member to decide whether or how these policies might be useful. Chairs’ “hands-off” approach thus let them off the hook.

The Nature of Change

Despite having a low sense of personal responsibility, most departmental leaders we studied were optimistic about future prospects for achieving greater gender equity in STEM (Wharton and Estevez 2014). This optimism seemed to be fueled by several factors. Chairs’ own personal knowledge of gender progress over the last several decades created a sense that change was inevitable. More important, some felt that, while barriers existed, these were not due to any systemic or ingrained organizational factors, but rather were the result of individual attitudes and behaviors. A predominant view was the belief that individual change would occur naturally over time through the process of generational replacement. As these chairs (cited in Wharton and Estevez 2014:143) explain,

“I don’t know of anybody who is opposed to advancing diversity. I don’t get comments from any faculty member about that. I get comments from retired faculty about that, but not from any current faculty.” Another said: “Things are going to change, and they are going to change whether you want them to or not. . . . The younger faculty all know that. They come in with that idea. But with a lot of the older faculty, it is hard to get those changes across, but it is getting better.” Another chair said he was “confident” that the junior faculty women in his department would be successful professionally, noting that it was “a generational issue.” He went on to say “Come back in ten years, I hope that I’m right and we have a lot of full professors who are female.”

Chairs’ faith in evolutionary progress toward gender equity engendered optimism at the same time as it fostered passivity and deflected personal responsibility. Hence, although chairs were generally supportive of change, they did not feel that large-scale organizational or structural correctives were needed, nor did change require significant actions on their part. This stance represents what McClelland and Holland (2014:12) label “passive responsibility.” This position combines outward support for change with ambivalence about the need to “challeng[e] existing structures and stereotypes” and a belief that responsibility for change belongs to others rather than oneself.

Choice and Change

Choice is personally empowering, connoting independence, freedom, and autonomy. It has many positive consequences for those who have choices or believe themselves to have them (Savani, Stephens, and Markus 2011; Stephens and Levine 2011). This is especially true in American society and, as we have seen, in academe, where the ability to control the conditions of one’s work is highly valued. Although having the ability to choose is personally beneficial, it is socially disadvantageous. Experimental research shows that exposure to a choice perspective weakens support for policies designed to advance collectivities or society as a whole (Savani et al. 2011).

As Nicole M. Stephens and Cynthia S. Levine (2011:1235) note, Americans' strong embrace of a choice framework helps explain why they "readily dismiss gender barriers as a vestige of the past in the face of evidence to the contrary." Choice fortifies notions of personal responsibility and thereby assigns blame to others for their disadvantages, while minimizing the role of external forces or constraints.

Marieke van den Brink and Yvonne Benschop (2012:89) argue that change in the academy is slow because practices and beliefs that perpetuate inequality "may hinder, alter, or transform equality measures." This summarizes the story told here, as good faith and intentional efforts to make change are deflected, rearticulated, and transformed. Leaders perceive work–family issues through the lens of choice, treating these matters as the responsibility of individual (women) faculty members, not the institution. This belief in choice also shapes chairs' perceptions of gender inequality more generally. They do not necessarily believe that gender inequality has been eliminated, yet are reluctant to view problems as structural or systemic. The need for change is depoliticized and viewed as inevitable, incremental, and "naturally" occurring over time through generational replacement. Most important, by assigning responsibility for change to others, chairs' willingness, capacity, and resolve to act are substantially weakened.

Conclusion

The passage of the Civil Rights Act and the pursuit of equal opportunity it endorsed were about improving the chances for women and other underrepresented groups to compete in an essentially unchanged workplace. Burstein and colleagues (Burstein and Bricher 1997; Burstein et al. 1995; Burstein and Wierzbicki 2000) note that what they call the "work–family accommodation" frame was more far reaching politically. This frame contained an implicit critique of the organization of work and drew attention to its impact on women's and men's family responsibilities and commitments. This broader vision of gender equality has yet to gain popular support or a foothold in the political arena. The resurgence of a choice framework—in the form of egalitarian essentialism or choice feminism—has likely played a role in depoliticizing the work–family agenda and undermining the case for change. It has also served as a reminder that narratives about gender are a central ingredient in the broader system of practices that reproduce inequality.

The strong forces of change in the gender system that occurred during the twentieth century were set into motion by numerous forces—including by conscious, political efforts to reduce gender inequality. These changes were not inevitable, nor can they be assumed to be permanent and ongoing. This makes it all the more important that we return our attention to the ways of change. These include the recognition that the forces of continuity and change are simultaneously present in society and the organizations that comprise it, that beliefs and practices that maintain continuity or the status quo restrain and circumvent those that promote equality practices and beliefs, and that many forces tip the balance in favor of continuity.

It is impossible to predict the twists and turns that are in our future. The past decade years may look like a small blip 20 years out or may in fact represent a major turning point of some kind. Most of us here are not waiting to see how things turn out or believe (naively) that evolution or generational replacement will by itself pave a way toward greater gender equality. Instead, we seek change—to transform the workplace, to eliminate discrimination and reduce inequality, and to restart the stalled gender revolution. Fulfilling these goals requires us to look carefully at the ways in which inequality practices and beliefs may be undermining our efforts.

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