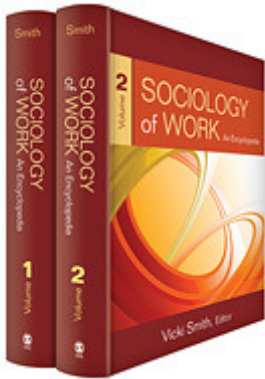


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The Male Model of the Career

Overview

The Male Model of the Career in the United States has deep cultural and historical roots in the ideal of the self-made man. The self-made man is a cultural ideal of manhood in which an individual's hard work leads to wealth, status, power, autonomy, and upward mobility. The Male Model of the Career is the culturally dominant career model, which means that most employed members of American society—male or female—are expected to enact some version of it and are penalized when they do not. However, many men from lower- and working-class backgrounds and ethnic and racial minority groups face enduring disadvantages and biases that reduce their likelihood of fulfilling the Male Model of the Career. Further, in many occupations, the Male Model of the Career has been institutionalized in employer expectations for "devotion to work" and the minimizing of family caregiving. These expectations help create a sense of work-family conflict for many Americans, especially for those who are involved parents or family caregivers. Despite these challenges, the majority of Americans continue to believe that it is possible for everyone to rise to the top of the job ladder if he (or she) works hard enough. This continuing belief shows the importance of the self-made man ideal to the Male Model of the Career.

Historical Roots

The self-made man ideal has persisted, in somewhat altered forms, throughout changes in the American economic, social, and political context. In the early to mid-nineteenth century, small-scale entrepreneurs dominated the economic landscape. The prevalence of entrepreneurial careers introduced the ideal of the self-made man because successful entrepreneurs would have started businesses from scratch, invested their own work and money, and eventually would have become wealthy, powerful within their local communities, and autonomous in the sense that they

would have been “their own boss.” In this period, another idealized cultural model of the self-made man was what Michael Kimmel calls “heroic artisans” (craftsmen), who were autonomous, creative, hardworking, and economically successful. Economic success was valued for both groups because it allowed men to provide for their families.

As discussed by Alfred Chandler and C. Wright Mills, large corporations spread quickly in the last few decades of the nineteenth century. This changing economic environment decimated the ranks of the self-employed entrepreneurs and heroic artisans and introduced the corporate career model. The corporate economy forced most men to be someone else’s employee. By working for someone else, men lost the valued traits of independence, autonomy, and self-sufficiency that came from being self-employed entrepreneurs. The ideal of self-advancement and upward mobility survived, although middle-class men now achieved this by climbing the corporate management ladder rather than by independent entrepreneurship. Working-class men were also hired by corporations, but they had even less autonomy than managers and fewer chances to use hard work to climb the corporate ladder. Despite the decreasing chances of many Americans to fulfill it, prominent self-made men like Andrew Carnegie kept the belief in the ideal career path alive in the public imagination.

As corporations grew more powerful, historian Roland Marchand explains that much of society viewed corporations as greedily pursuing profit at the expense of working-class and broader public interests. As business professor Rakesh Khurana documents, early twentieth century corporate managers attempted improve the public’s opinion of corporations and justify their own power by establishing the new institution of university business schools. These business schools defined managerial work as a profession that created jobs. The schools also directed companies toward profitable yet socially responsible business decisions. Therefore, from the early to mid-twentieth century, the corporate career model involved the idea that hard work led to individual wealth and social mobility while also encouraging widespread social betterment.

From the 1970s to the early twenty-first century, owners of corporations (including large shareholders) wrested more control of their companies and reduced managers’ autonomy. Owners forced managers to focus on company profits and increasing shareholder value. Rakesh Khurana claims that the earlier motivations of social responsibility and sustainable business models fell by the wayside as managers’ income became linked to corporate profits and shareholder value. Thus, the corporate career model evolved into one that highlighted two main facets of the self-made man ideal: the individual pursuit of wealth and ever-higher upward mobility. In contrast, sociologists Mary Blair-Loy and Stacy J. Williams argue that many contemporary executive men continue to believe they are fulfilling the early twentieth century ideal of social responsibility and betterment while also amassing personal wealth and providing for their families. Meanwhile, the self-made man ideal of autonomy has become more difficult than ever for most men to achieve.

Throughout its evolution, the Male Career Model became linked to masculine identity. The characteristics of autonomy, toughness, competitiveness, and breadwinning for one’s family help men try to live up to the culturally most honored version of masculinity, which scholars call “hegemonic masculinity.” Sociologists Raewyn Connell and James Messerschmidt explain that hegemonic masculinity provides the cultural understandings about men in a particular time and

place, which support men's continuing social domination over women. Enacting the Male Model of the Career and the ideal of the self-made man help men in their efforts to prove themselves as hegemonic masculine men.

Challenges to Fulfilling the Male Model of the Career

The Male Model of the Career is institutionalized in many occupations and firms, such that many employers penalize all employees—male or female—for not living up to these expectations. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild has described the “clockwork of the male career” and Phyllis Moen has discussed the “career mystique” as an inflexible template that severely penalizes anyone who reduces their work effort during certain life stages due to family caregiving or other non-work endeavors. Mary Blair-Loy writes that many employers assume workers will conform to the “work devotion schema,” a cultural model of work as demanding and deserving single-minded allegiance and intensive effort. The work devotion schema is often taken for granted by both employees and employers as cognitively acceptable and morally justifiable. This cultural schema allows organizations to assume that the “ideal worker,” discussed by sociologist Joan Acker, is a male without caregiving responsibilities. Thus, this Male Model of the Career helps create a sense of conflict between work and non-work responsibilities for many Americans.

The late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have brought additional challenges to those striving for the self-made man goals of increasing wealth and upward mobility. A United States Census Report shows that, controlling for inflation, men's median earnings in 2010 were about 3% less than men's median earnings in 1973. Further, as reported by Catherine Rampell for *The New York Times*, the layoffs in the 2008-09 Great Recession have affected men far more than women because men predominate in the occupations most shaken up by the economy.

The Male Model of the Career is culturally dominant for most employed Americans. At the same time that families are increasingly reliant on female breadwinners, women and other caregivers continue to face stigmas and pay penalties for appearing not to fulfill the Male Model of the Career. For example, as documented by the Institute for Women's Policy Research (IWPR), among full-time workers in the United States in 2010, women earn only 77 cents to every dollar men earn. Further, employed mothers suffer a pay penalty compared to women without children. Sociologists Michelle Budig and Paula England estimate this motherhood pay penalty to be about 7 percent per child.

Conclusion

Social and economic changes over the past two centuries have made the self-made man ideal less attainable for entrepreneurial and working-class men and to many women. Even economically successful corporate managers do not fulfill the true ideal of the self-made man, since they fall short of the ideal of autonomy. However, despite the decreasing reality of the self-made man, this dream is still the ideal Model of the Male Career in the United States.

Policy groups are challenging this model. The IWPR report by Cynthia Negrey argues for a new career norm of a shorter full-time day. Similarly, Joan Williams and colleagues at the Center for WorkLife Law (UC Hastings College of the Law) are striving to identify and overcome the

“flexibility stigma” against men and women workers who violate the near-constant availability and “work devotion” that many employers expect.

Mary Blair-Loy (Department of Sociology, UC San Diego) and Stacy J. Williams (Department of Sociology, UC San Diego)

See Also: Career Mystique; Family-Responsive Corporations; Gendered Organizations; Good Employment Model, Rise and Erosion of; Ideal Worker; Motherhood Penalty; Organization Man; Work/life Balance.

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