

# LOOKING FOR SUPERMAN

Submission to the  
Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission  
Discussion Paper 2005:

*'Striking the Balance', Women, Men, Work and Family*

by

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## Contents

Executive Summary .....	3
1. Introduction .....	5
2. Literature Review .....	7
3. Methodology .....	18
4. Focus Group Evidence.....	20
5. Discussion.....	48
6. Recommendations .....	52
References.....	53
Appendix .....	54

## **Executive Summary**

### **Introduction**

This submission is a response to the HREOC discussion paper ‘Striking the Balance’. Our objectives were to examine the attitudes of male, undergraduate university students with respect to the issue of work and family, to identify their perceptions of the impact of this on their own future work and family life, and to investigate if perceived constraints upon future work and family choices are referenced from personal family experience, workplace and business pressures, the policies of the state or its institutions.

### **Literature**

The extant literature does not focus on this group of future employees. Yet as young, female researchers, with career and family aspirations and who will be entering the workforce at the same time as our male colleagues, we were very interested to discover if these young men will become the new breed of ‘supermen’ – balancing work and family - as we are expected to do.

### **Methodology**

Seven focus groups including a total of forty young male students currently studying at the University of Sydney were conducted across the academic faculties of Education, Engineering, Economics and Business, Architecture, Arts and Science. The participants were asked a series of questions relating to their career and family plans following university, their expectations of family-work responsibilities as well their own family experiences.

### **Findings**

The research findings revealed a conflict between the expectations and attitudes that the participants were articulating and the attitudes that, on deeper probing, they actually held. That is, there was evidence of a transitional phase whereby the young males were wavering between expressed new values and past personal experiences.

An obvious inconsistency in the ‘new man’ rhetoric appeared in the participants’ responses. The term ‘breadwinner’ was consigned to having significantly diminished relevance in today’s social framework, however the young males exhibited views consistent with the more traditional model of work and family. This was consistent with their desire to partially imitate their own family experiences.

The majority of young males considered family-friendly workplace policies an ‘extra’ that would be determined principally by institutional and employer constraints. They saw such policies as of secondary concern to themselves, and of primary concern for their future partner. For instance, maternity leave was highlighted as essential in comparison to paternity leave, which was considered as ‘ideal’ but not an essential work entitlement. There was, however, a common desire to take short-term leave at the time of birth.

Of note, the participants who were enrolled in the more vocational degrees had lower expectations with respect to the availability of family-friendly policies and were more reluctant to act as agents for change in the quest for reform.

### **Conclusion**

Whilst our research set about looking for ‘superman’, what we found was ideological and institutional ‘kryptonite’, weakening our potential supermen’s attempts to be ‘new men’ and subverting their own ambitions towards the equality that was evident in the language that they utilised.

### **Recommendations**

Based on our research findings, we make five recommendations:

1. A short ‘employment matters’ course be integrated into the undergraduate university curriculum. This would address the lack of knowledge about workplace policies and employee bargaining rights at a critical point in the life and career-cycle stage – that is, immediately prior to entering the workforce.
2. The establishment of a ‘Work-Life Adviser’ role to be introduced into Careers departments of tertiary institutions.
3. Legislative and institutional policy changes to enable young men and women to balance the interactions of work and family.
4. An active media campaign in the Australian community as a vehicle for attitudinal and behavioural change.
5. The need for further research within the following three areas: young men who do not attend university, the bargaining power of new entrants to the labour market relating to family-friendly arrangements and men who have adopted non-traditional roles such as primary carer.

## Part 1. Introduction

With female participation in the labour force increasing to 57.4 percent (ABS, 2004) - a significant jump from rates twenty years ago - the flexibility of employers to respond to women's needs has become a focus of recent work and employment relations debates. Yet, as more women need to balance work and family and attempt to seek such flexible circumstances, we suggest that the ability for women to make further progress lies with a shift in men's attitudes and actions in relation to their multiple roles and responsibilities as fathers, employees and, in some cases, employers. What should then follow is an obligation on organisations and governments to take a more active role in initiating and promoting policies that accommodate the double burden that both genders will experience.

In the discussion paper 'Striking the Balance' the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (HREOC) recognised the need to engage men in discussion and consultation on this topic (HREOC 2005, p. ix). As young, female researchers we too believe this to be an extremely significant area needing further analysis and we welcome the opportunity to respond to the HREOC on this issue. The discussion paper raised a number of questions - all of which are relevant to the issue - but of most interest to us was the attitude of young men towards their participation in the workforce. We believe that the tension between young men's and young women's aspirations and wishes will become more evident as we move from our studies to the next stage of our lives and into the workplace. It is for this reason that young men must not be ignored and should be studied alongside their female peers.

Consequently, it is the views of young men - and our interpretation of them as peers and future work and life partners - that is the central concern of this submission. We seek to understand young men's current attitudes to the work/family balance and how they view the future interaction of their career and personal lives. As such the aims of this research were to:

- \* Find existing relevant research on the attitudes and expectations of young men towards flexible and family-friendly work practices;
- \* Discover the expectations of future male employees regarding family friendly policies from current undergraduate university students aged 18-24;
- \* Determine the impact of personal childhood experience on such expectations;
- \* Uncover underlying 'modes of thinking' regarding issues such as being the 'primary breadwinner', 'dual income relationships' and notions of traditional male and female roles; and
- \* Compare opinions between those students undertaking vocational versus non-vocational studies to determine any differences.

In order to achieve this, we firstly review the relevant literature to appreciate current research findings. We then present the results from a series of seven focus group interviews with male, undergraduate students from the University of Sydney. These students came from a range of faculties selected to represent the views across a broad range of disciplinary interests and potential careers. The results add to our understanding of the thoughts of future male workers/fathers and how they perceive the future intersection of their lives at work and at home. We discuss and evaluate these in the context of further industrial relations change and individualisation of the employment relationship. Finally, based on our findings, we make a number of recommendations that we believe will assist young men and women to better 'strike the balance'.

## Part 2. Literature Review

In any piece of research it is important to understand the context within which it will be conducted, and how this contributes to contemporary debate about the topic in question. A literature review provides an analytical foundation from which the research can be formulated, executed and evaluated. The review also allows the researcher to identify existing knowledge on the topic and gaps in the knowledge that still exist. To provide a framework for our research on young men's attitudes towards the work/family balance and to identify potential gaps in knowledge and research about the topic an analysis of four academic studies has been completed. A comprehensive literature review of these four articles has enabled us, as researchers, to identify the strengths and limitations of certain methodologies, as well as, ascertaining the key arguments and findings of previous studies and incorporating these ideas and tools into our own research methods.

The four academic studies reviewed in this section are referenced with a short annotation below. In the subsequent section, each article has been independently reviewed through a comprehensive analysis of its main arguments and findings, methodology and context.

**McMahon, A. (1998) 'Blokus domesticus: the sensitive new age guy in Australia' in *Journal of Australian Studies*, March, no. 56, 1998, p147.**

*This article explores the contradictions surrounding the problematic issue of the 'New Man' using discourse analysis and a review of statistical data. It promotes a similar argument to 'Striking the Balance' about men's lack of participation in domestic responsibility. The fact that the study was located in Australia makes it particularly useful and relevant to our research.*

**Pocock, B. (2005) 'Youthful aspirations meet unbending cultures?: how young Australians plan to organise their jobs, care and housework' in *Australian Feminist Studies*, v.20, no.46, Mar 2005: (91)-108**

*Pocock examines the tensions between work and family life, and the preferences of young Australians relating to their work and domestic responsibilities in the future using small focus groups with participants from diverse backgrounds. The study identified a clash between work and family life, similar to 'Striking the Balance,' and promotes the need for reconciliation between the two through workplace policy.*

**Kirkpatrick Johnson, M. (2005) 'Family Roles and Work Values: Processes of Selection and Change' in *Journal of Marriage and Family* 67 (May 2005): 352–369**

*Kirkpatrick Johnson uses a survey conducted over a long period of time with a large sample to investigate the influence of marriage and parenthood on work values, and whether this relationship changes over time. The study is relevant to 'Striking the Balance' as it highlights gender differences in work and family roles and provides discussion of the way in which men perceive fatherhood and associated responsibilities.*

**Thorn, B. and Gilbert, L. (1998) 'Antecedents of Work and Family Role Expectations of College Men [Family Roles and Family Systems]' in *Journal of Family Psychology*, Volume 12(2), June 1998, p 259-267**

*This article examines the changing masculinity ideology and the impact of personal experience on gender ideology and expectations using a self-report questionnaire. Despite the inconclusive nature of the quantitative findings, this study is useful for our research related to 'Striking the Balance' as it emphasises the complexity of the issue and suggests the need to conduct qualitative research.*

**Preston, A. (2004) 'Prospects for a Prosperous and Equitable Australia,' Paper presented to the *Future of Work 2nd International Colloquium Oulton Hall, Leeds, 9th/10th September 2004***

*Through a random mail survey, Preston concludes that traditional gender ideologies, that have dominated the Australian landscape over the past two decades, remain firmly embedded amongst 1<sup>st</sup> year university students in Australia. There is hope that young Australians may be able to negotiate a new gender equality regime and engage in employment patterns substantially different from those of the past. However, evidence in this paper cautions against any expectation of a significant generational shift away from the traditional male breadwinner model.*

Although these five articles are significantly different in their approach, methodology and focus issues, they all provide a solid framework from which we are able to conduct our own research. By identifying the key issues and arguments and reviewing the various approaches and methodologies, we were able to construct our study to ensure it is relevant, useful and effective. This has allowed us to make a significant contribution to contemporary debate surrounding 'men and the work/family balance.'

## **LITERATURE REVIEWS**

**Article 1: McMahon, A. (1998) 'Blokus domesticus: the sensitive new age guy in Australia' in *Journal of Australian Studies*, March, no. 56, p147.**

The article by McMahon (1998) entitled 'Blokus domesticus: the sensitive new age guy in Australia', explores the contradictions surrounding the image of the 'New Man' and its actual presence in Australian households. McMahon firstly highlights the increasing incidence of the 'New Man' in discourse, where there has been a redirection of the roles of the male from a 'breadwinner' to roles which include routine child care and domestic work. This discourse comes in a variety of forms from mass media publications to statements from political leaders. This is then compared with statistical data, showing that despite the growing rhetoric, there is little evidence to suggest that males have actually moved into these roles. It is this disparity between rhetoric and reality which is particular concern to McMahon, who suggests that the optimistic New Man image has worked to 'mystify' and 'comfort' the lack of social change.



McMahon uses a mix of qualitative and quantitative sources in this article. He relies predominantly on qualitative analysis to explore the nature of the New Man rhetoric, and then supplements his argument with the use of statistical data sourced from the ABS and previous quantitative studies.

Firstly, McMahon highlights that in recent years, there has been a significant change in the portrayal of the ideal husband or father. This portrayal comes from popular media, including, magazines such as *People* and newspapers such as *The Age*, and also from statements made by political leaders and social scientists. McMahon recognises that these portrayals have illustrated a change in values where male involvement in domestic and child-rearing activities has become widely praised and is seen as more valuable. McMahon does not confine his analysis to a snapshot of the present day, rather he looks at the historical progression of the New Man rhetoric, highlighting its evolution since the 1970s.

More importantly, however, this article goes beyond citing journalist's claims of Sensitive New Age Guys (SNAGs) by analysing the social characteristics of the text and looking at the meaning which is attached through the language. In this way, McMahon clearly employs a discourse analysis in his research. This can be seen where McMahon analyses the notion of 'sharing' of domestic work, concluding that beliefs in sharing are less egalitarian than thought, sitting far from the notion of equity. He does this by looking at how 'sharing' has been represented in television interviews and interviews in previous studies. This method of analysis is successful in highlighting that the increasing incidence of the New Man rhetoric is changing the perception of the traditional male role to one where domestic responsibility is valued.

Through statistical data McMahon completes an analysis which questions the practical existence of the New Man. He draws on data from previous studies and the ABS, bringing forward statistics such as male and female hours of employment, hours of domestic work and the incidence of fathers giving up paid work for child care. The use of quantitative data is successful exploring whether there has been an actual shift in domestic work as it is considered a more objective rather than interpretive method of analysis. By drawing on sources such as these McMahon concludes that men have not assumed domestic responsibilities at a rate proportionate with women's entry into the paid workforce, and that a social transition has not occurred despite what the rhetoric suggests. Further, McMahon questions the reliability of the data by emphasising that some studies exaggerated the findings through highly selective sampling and that the use of time-use data does not allow full exploration of the rhetoric in practice.

This article draws attention to the disparity between the theory and practice of the New Man rhetoric. By looking at the meaning attached to the notions of terms such as ‘sharing’ and ‘negotiation’, McMahon shows that within the context of the New Man discourse, these notions do not necessarily imply equity. Despite the increasing publicity of the New Man in the public sphere, in practice, there is no indication that men have assumed domestic roles aligned with the perception of social change. Therefore McMahon recognises the rhetoric as ‘qualified optimism’, suggesting that it acts to disguise the continuity of highly gendered domestic roles in household. Although written in 1998, McMahon appears to be making a similar argument to HREOC – that men are not really sharing in domestic responsibility, despite women’s entrance into the paid workforce. More importantly, this article highlights the significance of examining McMahon’s assertion of the mystification of the ‘new man’ through rhetoric through our own research and exploring the relevance of such claims in our study.

**Article 2: Pocock, B. (2005) ‘Youthful aspirations meet unbending cultures?: how young Australians plan to organise their jobs, care and housework’, *Australian Feminist Studies*, v.20, no.46, Mar 2005: 91-108**

‘Youthful Aspirations Meet Unbending Cultures? How Young Australians Plan to Organise Their Jobs, Care and Housework,’ written by Barbara Pocock, signifies the gender dichotomy and tension extant between work and family life, “...*arising from a clash between established work and care cultures and institutions, and new patterns of households and work.*” (Pocock, 2005: 91). This “clash” (2005: 91) in work and family balance challenges issues of workplace flexibility and the traditions of the “flexible care deficit” (2005: 106) that are indicative of this emergent and continuing trend. The article examines young Australian’s preferences for their future work and household arrangements, which endeavours to epitomise the convergence and divergence of male and female work and domestic roles. Current work and care patterns are adamant for the “*continuity and intensity of this clash*” (2005: 91) in Australia.

Pocock’s analysis is based on a study that involved the conduction of 21 small focus groups in 2003, involving 93 young Australians, aged between 10-12, and 16-18 years of age. All groups were age specific, only five of them were mixed sex, and they ran between 60-90 minutes.

On the choice of focus groups, Pocock noted their ability to facilitate deep analysis by “*exposing ambivalence, and permitting an exchange of views*” (2005: 91). Participants were also selected randomly from schools representing a spread of diverse socio-economic groups. This allowed the study to be conducted directly within the contextual construct of the child’s household, income and location. Furthermore, an extensive range of family types were reflected in the study, including two-parent and single parent families, and dual-earner and traditional breadwinner households.

The findings of the study revealed that all young men and women participants premeditated employment upon the completion of school, and further studies; none directed a breadwinning partner as opposed to having a job themselves; most specified an occupation they were interested in; and most envisaged a partner and long-term relationship. Three primary trends were found. Firstly, the gap between “predicted” and “preferred” fertility is significant (2005: 106). Uncertainties in security, financial stability and the quality of life were indicative of the insecurity of such choices which forecast the decline in fertility rates in Australia. Secondly, there is a turn away from the traditional male breadwinner role, to a “new Australian wife” (2005: 106) which suggests further growth in dual-earner households, or at least a step away from the sole male breadwinner role. This exemplified the decreasing tension between work and family adaptation. Thirdly, the analysis dictated the preference for young people to combine jobs and parental care for children, reliant upon workplace flexibility. The childcare preference was found to be extended family. However, the current low proportion of Australian men who do take extended leave to be active fathers, suggests the inflexibility of institutions and cultures, which creates a ‘flexible care deficit’. This advocates the extent to which male preferences are inundated by institutional arrangements that do not support the choice for parental care.

Importantly, 70% of the children living in two-parent households lived in dual-earner households, whilst only 28% lived in single-earner households, which was usually the father. Pocock’s article substantiates the necessity for a “reconciliation” (2005: 91) of work and household life. The emergent patterns of work and family conflict, is perceived through the current choices of young Australians, as brought to fruition by this article.

**Article 3: Kirkpatrick Johnson, M. (2005) ‘Family Roles and Work Values: Processes of Selection and Change’, *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 67 (May 2005): 352–369**

Monica Kirkpatrick Johnson’s study; ‘Family roles and work values: processes of selection and change’, examines whether marriage and parenthood influence work values, taking consideration of the impact that work values have on the formation of family.

The findings are based on a survey conducted over a 12 year period of 1000 ninth-grade students in the US regarding their work expectations and how these evolved as they became adults, entered the workforce and founded families. Kirkpatrick Johnson researches these hypotheses by tracking the respondents into adulthood and obtaining data annually about changes in their life situation. The initial data was collected through written and mailed questionnaires and the progressive data was obtained through mailed responses.

The article examines the dynamic interplay between these family roles and work values in a two-fold manner. The study explores the theoretical base for why marriage and parenthood could potentially initialise change in male and female work values, and assesses the empirical evidence supporting such relationships. Drawing on the existing base of literature Kirkpatrick Johnson constructs inferences about extrinsic/intrinsic work values and marriage and parenthood. Kirkpatrick Johnson argues that while there are theoretical reasons to expect that marriage and parenthood impact upon work values, ultimately the empirical support for such a relationship is weak (Johnson 2001; Mortimer et al. 1986). Secondly, the study uses data from a group of young adults to empirically assess whether family roles influence work values. Kirkpatrick Johnson's study differs from past research by exploring marriage and parenthood as well as combinations of the two. It does this by considering whether cohabitation 'moderates the relation between parenthood and work values among the unmarried' and examines gender differences in connections between family roles and work values.

Kirkpatrick Johnson develops six hypotheses which aim to establish how the importance placed on work values is related to family formation and vice versa. It goes beyond previous studies by analysing how adolescent work values influence family formation and how family status in turn influences work values. It is limited though by its narrow focus on the interrelation between work values and marriage & parenthood. This leads to potential weaknesses, since changes in the importance associated with work values could also originate from disillusionment at work or a certain degree of success having been achieved in the workplace. Therefore, the study serves as a useful starting point for considering family roles and work values, however it has numerous limitations. The lack of ethnic and racial variation in the cohort prevented the analysing/assessing the potential impact of ethnic and racial differences. It is likely that there would be variation in family formation across race. The study also only considers one social class, thus limiting the ability to consider differences on the basis of educational attainment and work opportunities.

By comparing the collected data to the individual hypotheses, the author finds that weaker intrinsic work values and stronger extrinsic values during adolescence lead to earlier marriage and child creation.<sup>1</sup> Hypothesis three confirms that marriage reduces the importance of extrinsic work rewards for women, but not for men, which is likely to be caused by women's role in the household.<sup>2</sup> Intrinsic work values are found to increase with parenthood and to decrease with marriage.<sup>3</sup> This can be seen to relate to the dependency of unmarried parents on work and the increased emphasis of married couples on family.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hypothesis One: Greater Emphasis on extrinsic work values in adolescence is positively associated with marrying and becoming a parent in early adulthood.

<sup>2</sup> Hypothesis Two: Greater emphasis on intrinsic work values in adolescence is negatively associated with marrying and becoming a parent in early adulthood.

<sup>3</sup> Hypothesis Three: Marriage raises the importance of extrinsic rewards for men and women.  
Hypothesis Four: Parenthood raises the importance of extrinsic work rewards for men.

The findings in this research allow the article to state that men's and women's values are affected by parenthood, which provides an insight in the way men perceive fatherhood and its associated responsibilities. By introducing various feedback loops, work and family is linked in a dynamic manner. Work values and family behaviour form one such feedback loop, while family behaviour and job conditions form another. This leads the author to suggest further studies that include more specific family behaviour.

**Article 4: Thorn, B. and Gilbert, L. (1998) 'Antecedents of Work and Family Role Expectations of College Men [Family Roles and Family Systems]' in *Journal of Family Psychology*, Volume 12(2), June 1998, p 259-267**

Thorn and Gilbert's (1998) study entitled 'Antecedents of Work and Family Role Expectations of College Men' attempts to develop an 'understanding of changing masculinity ideology' in the context of a changing social and economic environment. Thorn and Gilbert examine the link between parental role models and family structures, and young men's expectations of their working and family life. A social constructivist understanding of gender relations (Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1990) forms the basis for the study, whilst social learning theory (Bandura 1977, Huston et al. 1983) informs the hypothesis and methodology. This area of the literature review will examine the methodology in Thorn and Gilbert's study and critique the relevance of its argument and results in terms of work and family balance.

Thorn & Gilbert's study is premised on the argument of the social learning theory, which asserts that gender ideology and expectations regarding role sharing is modelled on parental and peer influences. Accordingly, Thorn & Gilbert hypothesise that when sons observed their fathers 'behaving in non traditional ways within the family, they would be more likely as young adults to have non-traditional expectations for their own family and work roles' (1998, p3).

Data was collected via a self-report questionnaire, administered to 190 junior and senior male students at an American university. Future work and family expectations were assessed, as well as instrumentality and expressiveness, self esteem, vocational identity, and 'perceptions of one's parents' involvement in household work and parenting' during childhood. A five-point Likert scale was the predominant form of measurement, allowing for less reliable, subjective responses. The results of the study were tested for correlation in order to gain an understanding of the links, if any, between various individual attributes and upbringing, and future work-family expectations.

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Hypothesis Five: Parenthood raises the importance of extrinsic rewards for unmarried women more so than for married women.

<sup>4</sup> Hypothesis Six: Parenthood lowers the importance of intrinsic work rewards for women.

The outcome of the study showed an inconclusive correlation between parental behaviour and their male child's work/family expectations. For instance; while Thorn and Gilbert state that the results of their study show "modelling of non-traditional or role sharing behaviour by the parents *may* influence the development of sons' attitudes and expectations of a marital relationship with a more egalitarian role structure" (1996 p.5); they acknowledge that numerous other factors influence males' decisions regarding work and family life. This lack of decisive correlation is a common problem in regression analysis which attempts to extrapolate simple numerical trends from highly complicated, qualitative explanations. In addition, the Likert scale, implemented to capture the variability and strength of values, is open to varying interpretation by participants, which can distort data results. Nevertheless, the most important limitation of this paper was that it tended towards a two dimensional analysis of domestic work participation: traditional or non-traditional role-sharing. The 'type of family' categorisation ignored the growing phenomenon of full-time working women who also fulfil traditional domestic roles. Furthermore, this sociological study ignored economic factors that influence the ability of parents to engage equitably in family and work activities.

The key strength of this study was in its thorough attempt to determine the antecedents of future work/life expectations of American college men. While the results raised awareness towards the varied and contentious nature of antecedents to work and family expectations, the inconclusive nature of the quantitative study meant that our understanding of the area was not significantly increased. Nevertheless, the study is a good precursor on which to develop future analytical tools. A more qualitative methodology, such as a focus group, can be used to capture the complexity of the topic. Although the research conducted in this submission, is based on a cross-sectional analysis that does not thoroughly consider the antecedents to our participant's expectations, the strength of our methodology is that it intends to further Thorn and Gilbert's study by capturing the deeply multifaceted nature of young men's attitudes.

**Article 5: Preston, A. (2004) 'Prospects for a Prosperous and Equitable Australia,' Paper presented to the *Future of Work 2nd International Colloquium Oulton Hall, Leeds, 9th/10th September 2004***

Preston's enquiry into first year university student's attitudes toward future work, career and gender roles argues that Australia will remain characterized as a 'low gender equality regime' (2004: p.9). Through a feminist analysis, Preston's research aims to further Lansbury's concept of a new 'three pillar' social contract<sup>5</sup> to ensure that '... Australia remains both a prosperous and equitable society' (2004:1). The article claims that how the Australian welfare system regards women has ramifications for the development of household systems. By regarding women primarily as mothers, traditional breadwinner principles are reinforced across Australia society, including the organisation of labour.

By conducting a random mail survey as part of a broader inquiry into occupational choice, Preston examines the attitudes of first year university students towards future work, gender roles and family aspirations. Initially, 4500 surveys were mailed to a random sample of students across a wide range of courses. This sample was reduced to 1402 (920 young women, 482 young men) following a 34% response rate and the exclusion of people that didn't meet research criteria. It should be noted that the study is of university students, that is, it is limited to those likely to work in professional careers. The author notes, however, that other research shows that socioeconomic backgrounds would further influence values regarding gender roles. Preston draws on numerous surveys throughout her analysis, claiming that 'quantitative and qualitative data suggest that on-going occupational segregation is reflective of culture and institutional forces affecting the gender stereotyping of career choices and employment patterns and preferences once in the workforce' (2004:6).

The study concludes that the vast majority of young professional women in Australia will, at least initially, expect to become the primary care giver should they have children. They similarly expect to have lengthy periods of time out of the workforce. Whether these women see themselves making this decision by 'choice' or because of prevailing ideologies and social norms surrounding motherhood is unclear. Around two-fifths (39.7 and 41.1 per cent of young women and men, respectively) of those surveyed, imagined their parental partnership to follow traditional gender divisions of responsibility; ie. father engaged in full-time work and mother engaged in part-time work. Preston identifies current social structures as a barrier to changing current gender divisions: 'Whilst participants recognised that career opportunities and choices open to young women today are vastly different from those in the past, they nevertheless were

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<sup>5</sup> The three essential pillars, as identified by Lansbury, would consist of : (a) access to employment for all those able and willing to seek work and the adoption of active labour market policies; (b) increased investment in education and training programs; and (c) economic security in retirement (2004:1).

of the opinion that women and men faced different work structures. The average young person in the study, for example, was of the view that contemporary workplaces allow mothers *but not fathers* to tend to family responsibilities' (2004:22).

From her study, Preston concludes that

'Australia is not yet an equitable society. It remains strongly wedded to the male breadwinner ideology. Although women's participation in paid employment has significantly increased in recent years much of this employment is in the part-time (low waged, low skilled) sector and often of a casual nature. Men remain the primary breadwinners... Most balancing is achieved by one partner (typically the woman) engaging in reduced hours (part-time) work' (2004:26).



## SETTING THE CONTEXT

### **Situating the academic literature and previous studies into current work/life/family debates raised by HREOC (2005) ‘Striking The Balance,’ *Discussion Paper*.**

The context within which our research is based is varied and covers a lot of issues within the work/family balance debate. Much of the literature was consistent with the findings of the ‘Striking the Balance’ paper. McMahon’s concerns with disparity between theory and reality of the ‘new man’ rhetoric echoes the attitudes reflected in Pocock’s article. The ‘Striking the Balance’ paper recognises that attitudes and behaviour are not consistent when it comes to work done in the home and childcare (2005: 53-54). The ‘new man’ rhetoric (not specifically that of McMahon’s) is recognised in ‘Striking the Balance’ but can be seen as something that has resisted a barrier to change, that of ‘socialisation’, as described in ‘Striking the Balance’ (2005: 116-117). Workplace attitudes are recognised throughout the literature (Kirkpatrick Johnson, Pocock, and Thorn & Gilbert) with ‘men’s strong identification with work and career building’ (2005: 119). Pocock in particular identifies with these barriers to change as institutional problems with a ‘flexible care deficit’.

All the literature seems to suggest that change needs to come from all aspects of society. HREOC supports this notion in ‘Striking the Balance’ that ‘...paid and unpaid work issues need to be seen as reflecting legislative, workplace and cultural conditions if change is to be lasting, sensible and useful.’ (2005: 126)

The research conducted for this submission aims to address the main ideas raised in the literature that has been reviewed and engage in the issues that we found not to be adequately resolved in previous studies. The studies reviewed in the preceding section leave current gaps in the debate. Issues of significance include:

- the ‘New Man’ rhetoric versus the traditional male breadwinner role
- male expectations and desire for family friendly work policies
- the correlation between parental behaviour and young adult males work/family expectations

Our research attempts to explore these issues further in order to enhance understanding and gain insight into the complexities surrounding the debate.

### **Part 3. Methodology**

As an Honours class in Work and Organisational Studies, we collected the attitudes, views and future expectations about work and family of forty (40) young male students at the University of Sydney. The 'Striking the Balance' paper raises a concern that paid work and family imbalances are seen as 'women's issues' (2005: 119) and men are excluded in any developments to address this imbalance. Our research addresses the concern identified by HREOC by exploring young university men's attitudes towards work and family life balance.

The focus groups were conducted through the months of September and October 2005. We obtained the data by way of seven small focus groups conducted across several different Faculties: namely the Education, Engineering, Economics and Business, Architecture, Arts and Science Faculties. These particular Faculties were chosen because they represented a mix of both vocational and non-vocational areas of study. Participants ranged in age from 19 - 22. Each focus group ran for between 30-45 minutes. Discussions followed a prepared question schedule and the responses were transcribed. The identities of the respondents were concealed and therefore no answers are attributed to them personally. The focus groups represented a mix of young males with different family backgrounds. As the literature review shows, little research has been conducted on the views of young Australian men in regards to work and family and consequently research of this kind is justified.

Focus group methodology is frequently used in the social sciences. In a similar style of study, Pocock (2005) employed the use of the focus group methodology to analyse the work and family relationship as viewed by young, school-age Australians. The questionnaires and surveys studied in the literature did not show conclusive evidence and did not explore the issues concerned in depth. As with Thorn & Gilbert's study, we acknowledge that we have taken a narrow research focus of only young males from university and not others involved in TAFE or full-time work. Yet by using focus groups we have attempted to explore in detail the attitudes of these young men to work and family balance and the possible barriers they perceive.

The methodology allows the moderator(s) to obtain fast results and furthermore, through the process of social interaction a diverse and profound range of views on the subject matter can be elicited. Focus groups can provide rich, subjective data that draw on participants' experiences and reactions in ways that would not be feasible using other methods simply because they can extract a multiplicity of views in a social context. Indeed it is this process of social interaction that distinguishes the focus group method from any other. The 'synergistic effect' of focus group research can be more insightful than the sum of individual interviews (Hartman: 2004). A limitation of our methodology, however, is that often dominant voices can overshadow minority views in the group context. Furthermore, participants sometimes exhibit the tendency to respond in normative discourses. Consequently, minority views are not always nurtured as much as is desirable.

In an effort to minimise any misrepresentation and to make our study representative of the wider young male student population, we conducted seven different focus groups across several different Faculties within the university. Each focus group came prepared with the same guide for the moderators to follow including thematic issues and probe questions. In one case, participants were randomly selected; however participants in the groups were mostly recruited by way of a snowballing technique.

This recruitment method meant that many group members had a prior affinity with one another thus potentially affecting the group dynamics. It was beneficial in so far that it eliminated the need for some group members to get to know one another and establish their role in the group. However some researchers have suggested that the anonymity of a group might make candid responses more likely (Hollander: 2004). Despite all this, active discussion was facilitated by similarities that united the participants such as age, gender and area of study. In order to encourage participants to divulge their thoughts and experiences on work and family, each group moderator read out a set of opening instructions emphasising that we wanted participants to answer openly and freely. Finally, in an attempt minimise any bias we as moderators brought to the group, we tried to avoid using heterosexist language and stated our assumptions clearly.

Three important aspects of future work and family life were discussed:

1. Their ideas about what they will do once they leave university;
2. Their expectations of actual work experience; and
3. Their perceptions of their parents' involvement in the work/ family balance.

It is paramount to consider the data at best as a qualitative enlightenment to the diverse range of views that educated young Sydney males hold in regard to work and family. We believe that the focus groups are particularly useful as an early stage of research and may provide a useful foundation to inform larger studies on the work/ family balance.

## **Part 4. Focus Group Evidence**

### **Focus Group 1 – Students from the Faculty of Arts (1)**

Our focus group consisted of five young males (ranging in age from 19-22) currently studying a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Sydney

#### ***Full time Work***

The majority of respondents said they would work full time after finishing university. However, working full time did not appear to be connected to saving money to support a future family in the majority of cases. One exception was the respondent who said: 'I'd start working straight away. Yeah in a full-time job absolutely, so I can make some money, buy a car, buy a house, save, become a breadwinner.' Responses indicated that at this stage in their lives the young men were not focused on the responsibilities involved with raising a family, but were more interested with enjoying life. Part time work was not a serious consideration for any of the respondents.

#### ***Breadwinner***

The term breadwinner prompted varied responses, ranging from 'I'll hopefully (become a breadwinner) yeah,' to 'I'm actually reasonably keen on not becoming a breadwinner'. It seemed to be a very loaded term and most participants seemed to associate the term with high income and a successful career: 'I'd hopefully [become a breadwinner] and become successful'; 'I'm not looking at going into a high income sort of area anyway and I wouldn't expect someone to work and the other to look after the chores'. Other respondents found the term to be very dated and out of touch with the times 'I think it's sexist and disgusting, like, why do we even need the term?'

The focus group discussion illustrated that while the term 'breadwinner' still has a stigma attached to it, (the traditional male breadwinner model of providing for a wife and children), the varied answers from the respondents seemed to indicate that the traditional model is no longer seen as the dominant norm in society, and that it has become dated.

#### ***Househusband***

Initially, the majority of respondents had a positive attitude to being a stay at home dad: 'I love that idea. When they are young I think it'd be good;' 'I think in theory it's a good thing to do for at least a couple of years.' However, as the discussion continued toward the practical considerations of being a primary carer the attitudes of participants changed: 'I think with the practicality of it I wouldn't be very good at it and the kids are probably better off with someone else looking after them;' 'I wouldn't really like it but if I were married I wouldn't want my spouse to stay at home either,' '...it's also an advantage for women to spend some time with the kids to share the experience.'

The central issue raised by most participants was ‘fairness’ and the majority of participants agreed that children should be a shared experience between partners. One respondent stated, ‘I wouldn’t expect my partner to look after them (the children) any more than I’d be willing to do it myself.’ Despite, overall attitudes pointing toward a more equal model of child sharing, one respondent exhibited a very traditional outlook illustrated by his own upbringing ‘I don’t think I could really respect myself. The traditional role of man is to go out and be the breadwinner, make the money, and the wife stay at home and look after the kids.’ This point of view questions whether the term ‘breadwinner’ is out dated since it is still valued by some in today’s society, even though they may not be the majority.

### ***Wife being the dominant breadwinner***

All respondents were accepting of this idea: ‘I’m pretty sure I’d be fine with that,’ ‘Yeah, doesn’t bother me’, ‘I can probably see that happening’. One participant (more traditional) found the question amusing: ‘Yeah that’d be good [laughs]. I could have some time to go golfing and surf.’ While, there were no real objections from any of the respondents to the female being the highest income earner, one participant questioned why one person would be required to stay at home again bringing up the idea of fairness in a relationship: ‘I don’t think one person has to stay at home and look after the kids. Like what about childcare? Depends on your finances and how affordable it is but I wouldn’t have any objection to that.’

### ***Family-friendly work policies***

Respondents had never considered family-friendly work policies before (some participants were even unsure as to what such policies were) so this was not something that many expected from future employers and resulted in many ambiguous responses: ‘I really haven’t thought about it;’ ‘I think there should be;’ ‘I guess it depends on what industry you’re in’. However, family-friendly work policies were predominately associated with women ‘I’m sure that if I worked in a place with females then I’m sure they’d have [family-friendly work policies].’ This seemed to be indicative of the assumption that it is women who require family friendly work practices.

When asked if they would specifically seek employment with good family-friendly work policies for men, all participants expressed that this was not of huge significance: ‘No that wouldn’t be a consideration;’ ‘Not immediately. That wouldn’t be the first priority’. The fact that most respondents did not place any emphasis of these policies when looking for employment may suggest that they do not think they will be the primary carer, or perhaps again, that it is an issue that will be addressed as it happens. In this case, respondents saw work-family policies as a bonus rather than a requirement.

Despite such comments, participants still viewed these policies as important and valued them. Respondents saw family friendly policies as a positive step but not an expectation or requirement: 'I think parental leave is important, I think it's a great thing...Leave when your kids are sick would be great too;' 'It's also nice to be there for your kids if they need you... it's a great thing to have;' 'It'd be more of a bonus but it wouldn't be something I'd consider in having to decide to take the job or not.'

Despite not having thought about these issues the respondents recognised that if their circumstances changed then so would their priorities 'If I had kids then it would be a different matter'. These attitudes may simply be a case of these young men not planning ahead. The issue of raising children is not a priority for the respondents at the moment so it has been approached as an issue that will be addressed when it happens.

Not one respondent stated they would expect family friendly work policies, but the majority did acknowledge it would be good if there was. Parental leave and childcare, were mentioned as examples by the interviewer, however, flexible hours was seen as most useful, but only by one respondent. This may indicate a subconscious belief that these men will not be the ones using these policies, despite the fact further into the interview all respondents said they would take time off when their child was born.

### *Time off for parental leave*

All respondents said they would take parental leave, but there was a mixed response to whether this leave would be at the time of birth only or for a longer period. This demonstrates that the respondents were keen to be active participants in the birth process and in the life of their newborn. Interestingly however, those who said they most likely would only take a shorter period off work did not mention what would happen to the child after that. Again, this appears to be an issue they will address as it arises. There were no hesitations to answering this question: 'Definitely at the time of birth and then it'd be dependent on how long you're allowed.'

Financial concerns were raised as to whether parental leave was paid or unpaid. If unpaid then 'I probably couldn't afford to take longer time off'. When faced with the prospect that time off would harm their career many of the respondents were more hesitant 'Yeah that's tough probably not;' 'With the first born yeah but then by the second you'd get a bit over it' yet one respondent believed that 'in most cases I think it would harm your career. But yeah, there is no reason not to [take time off for parental leave]'. Although the respondents were informed it would not harm their career, they still identified other obstacles that they would need to consider, such as their ability to look after a child, what their employer allowed and their financial status at the time. Also, there was discussion about the idea of masculinity related to taking time off for family. Responses did indicate that it may be becoming more acceptable for men to take time off: 'it's pretty commendable in this day and age,' and 'there might be a bit of stigma but that doesn't really matter.' This demonstrates that young males identify with the 'traditional' burden of providing financial stability, while the traditional stigma attached to males who take parental leave (less masculine, cop out etc) is less common and also less of an issue for this generation.

Working hours and flexible hours were identified as the most prominent issue: 'Flexible hours would be good so you could take time off, it'd be convenient;' The first few weeks would be important [of parental leave] and after that then flexible hours would be good.' The absence of paid parental leave and childcare here is significant. This may indicate that the respondents did not see themselves as the primary carer and that they did not believe they would be the ones to actually use the parental leave and extended time off to care for children. Again, these issues have not been given much thought by the respondents and thus are likely to come from a subconscious level.

When asked if they would take parental leave if it harmed their career the response here was a resounding '**no**'. Only one respondent said they still would, but only then with the first born. This demonstrates that the respondents were not willing to sacrifice their career for the sake of their children.

### ***Partner's time off for parental leave***

All participants expected their partners to take time off for parental leave, recognising the obvious biological factors that would come into play. The majority of respondents said they would expect their partner to take time off regardless of whether or not it would harm their career. Only one said maybe, on the condition that she earned more money than him: '...If she makes more money than me, then your screwed [laughs]. For the sake of her career then I'd take time off'. This response introduces an interesting question: perhaps the traditional male breadwinner model is not as redundant as indicated in the first stages of this focus group. Why would these men refuse to take time off it will harm their career, but expect women to take time off regardless? Perhaps this aspect needs further exploration.

Further, one participant raised the question of why either parent would need to take a considerable amount of time off work: 'with the average mortgage at seven times the annual income, I don't see how anyone can afford to take time off..' He viewed childcare as the most viable option for the future.

### ***Extra Responsibilities at work***

The results from the respondents were extremely mixed which reflected their personalities and values 'No I'm too cowardly, I'd want to but I wouldn't'. When posed with the question as to whether these extra responsibilities would lead to higher pay and promotion the respondents view was confirmed more so, for example the above response changed to a 'no definitely not'. Despite this, financial and career prospects were a major concern among the respondents and the point was raised that there must still be a balance between work and family 'You've got to balance it up. If it's worthwhile in the long term then I would sacrifice the time' whereas another respondent believed that despite harming his career 'I'd still confront them. I'd have some diplomatic words'. Such responses raise the issue of priorities. Generally, a successful career is a top priority for the respondents, at the expense of quality time with their family. However, some did consider the benefit in being able to offer their family a better life (through higher income etc). This is not to say that once the respondents are in the situation and actually have a family, they would still feel the same way.

***Own experiences and doing it differently***

Respondents had a mixture of experiences growing up, ranging from both parents working, to one parent working full time and then other part time, to one parent not in the labour force. This would seem to account for the varied responses to previous questions, as most participants responses had been clearly influenced by the values instilled in them by their parents.

In most cases, the father worked full time and undertook less of the household chores. It is interesting to note that two of the respondents who said they would do it the same as their parents, openly acknowledged that fact that their father undertook very little of the household chores. Most respondents acknowledged that although they would not do it differently than their parents, their ultimate decision would have to be based on financial considerations and the cost of childcare: 'I would definitely want to share the responsibilities with the kids so that one person's career isn't sacrificed;' 'It depends on how much you're earning. If you can afford to have child minders then I'd have them, they know how to do the job better than I would...so why not? If there were financial constraints then I'd have to look after them.' With only one exception, whose parents were divorced, all respondents believed they would do it similar to how their parents did it. This raises the issue of men's perception of women in the home. Only one respondent said household chores should be equal if both people work full time: 'Maybe I'd do it a bit different with housework with me and my partner sharing the housework. It should be equal.' This demonstrates that the traditional breadwinner model may, again, not be as redundant as the opening stages of the focus group indicated. Although the respondents say they are happy to have their partner work full time and would not mind if their partner earned more than them, they still say they would undertake less of the chores!

***Influences to changing men's access to family friendly work policies***

Most respondents agreed that change needs to come from society. However, some did acknowledge, indirectly, that personal experience does have a large impact and this would be more difficult to change. Participants also reiterated that at this stage of their lives they hadn't thought about these issues and most thought their attitude would change in the future as they enter the 'family' stage of their lives.



## **Focus Group 2 – Students from the Faculty of Arts (2)**

The focus group study consisted of six young males (ages ranging from 20-23) currently studying a Bachelor of Arts at the University of Sydney. The participants were asked a series of questions relating to their career and family plans after university, their expectations of family-work responsibilities as well reflecting upon their own upbringing. Their responses to the seven questions asked during the session are summarised below.

### **Plans after university**

Most participants intended to work full-time and embark upon a career once leaving university. Two respondents would like to travel before entering the workforce. When asked whether they plan to become a 'breadwinner' in the future there were mixed responses. Half the participants felt that their immediate future concern was their ability to support themselves. This response appeared to be a function of the current life-cycle stage of respondents. One respondent said that he would "actively dislike being the breadwinner" as it implied responsibility and a considerable "burden". In contrast, one participant perceived the role as a necessity for him "... because I think it is my responsibility as a father, husband and son to do so."

Many viewed the term 'breadwinner' as old fashioned and outdated in the modern family structure. They agreed that in reality most households today have two income-earners. One participant referred to the high costs of living in Sydney and many families struggling to survive on only one person's income. Some participants suggested that alternative terms to 'breadwinner' could be "main wage-earner" or "dual income-earner".

### **Attitudes towards being a house husband/stay-at-home dad**

Some participants expressed a willingness to assume the role on a shared, alternating basis with their spouse. There was a general desire to spend time with their children and not be an "absent dad". In contrast, many agreed that career will have a dominating effect on their decision - "I have career ambitions that would preclude me from being a stay-at-home dad".

Several highlighted that their attitude towards this role is dependent on the circumstances and timing of their fatherhood. They believe that having children required careful planning especially in regards to career paths. One participant stated that "I don't feel I would make a decision to be a father unless I wasn't prepared to sacrifice enough of any career aspirations I might have to be with the family."

Two participants thought it was a practical idea to be a stay-at-home dad if their wives were earning significantly more than them. Other participants stated that they would be prepared to stay at home for a brief period but would not want to permanently discard their career ambitions.

### **Expectations of family-friendly policies at work**

All participants expected some degree of flexibility from employers with regards to hours of work, especially provision of sick leave or carer's leave for emergency purposes. Some stated that it would be a necessity to have flexible hours especially if their partners also work.

One participant noted that his expectations will depend on the level of bargaining power he possesses. He expects himself to be at the higher end of the labour market and believes it would be easier for him to negotiate better family-friendly policies than someone who has less bargaining power.

Most participants said they would possibly seek employment in organisations with good work and family policies for men but didn't think such an option would be available. They viewed policies such as paid parental leave or on-site childcare facilities as a luxury and didn't expect their employer to provide them. This is consistent with the belief that a flexible-care deficit will arguably continue to exist when the participants have children. One participant suggested working from home as a possible solution.

### **Attitudes towards parental leave**

All participants were in agreement to parental leave if it did not harm their future career. One participant believed that "its in business's interest" to provide this policy. When asked to estimate a possible duration, all participants expected it to be shorter in length at the beginning of a child's life due to the expectation that the mother would initially be the stay-at-home carer. Most participants said they would prefer parental leave when the child was older (over two years of age).

The six participants had concern for the impact of leave on their partner's career – "I would care about her having a career" and "It would harm the female's career more". Three participants referred to making the decision together. One participant believed it to be an economic decision as well, with all agreeing.

### **Attitudes towards extra work responsibilities**

All participants indicated that they would not proactively seek out, but rather, expected they would undertake extra work responsibilities external to their job description. This is consistent with organisational commitment behaviour. Three participants agreed that they "...wouldn't mind if it was periodic but wouldn't want work to consume my life if I had kids." There was a strong correlation amongst participants between the trade-off of monetary incentive ("Definitely, if I was paid extra. If it falls outside my job description,

I guess I would want to") and the possible infringement of extra work on family time. No participant explicitly stated that they would confront their employer about the issue.

### **Description of own up-bringing**

Five out of six participants' mothers were the stay-at-home parent from approximately zero to two years of age however this arrangement did not remain constant for each participants' school years. For three participants, their own experience consisted of their parents alternating the roles of 'breadwinner' and stay-at-home carer. One such participant commented that "in my house, it was a little bit reversed" and considered it "really progressive" that his father stayed at home for some time periods to care for him and his siblings, whilst alternatively another such participant replied that "it had been very balanced".

Majority of participants' mothers re-entered the workforce in a part-time capacity when the respective participant was in high school.

Most participants described the stay-at-home parent as assuming responsibility for majority of housework, especially cooking, transportation of children to activities and most cleaning duties. Yet, some still described evidence of a segregation of duties – the mother assuming responsibility of "internal housework" and the father taking care of "the male jobs – lawnmowing and home improvement."

Majority of participants said they did not expect a difference in the experiences of their own up-bringing versus their own future family arrangements. Also, each hoped to try to resolve the conflict they perceived that exists between work and family so as not to be an "absent dad".

The findings of this study indicate that there is a willingness amongst students to deviate from the traditional male-breadwinner model. There was an evident desire to 'share the load' with respect to family commitments however the respondents perceived a shortcoming in their ability to do so due to perceived societal, economic and organisational constraints. Similarly, when discussing the issue of family-friendly policies in the workplace, the respondents did not appear to be reticent to use such benefits if they existed due to the fear of adverse career consequences but rather, they did not expect such policies to be made available.

Thus, there appeared to be a conflict between changing aspirations and peripheral pressures.

### **Focus Group 3 – Students from the Faculties of Arts, Engineering and Economics**

We conducted a focus group to investigate the research topic of “The Ideas of Young Male University Students on Work and Family balance.” The group consisted of 8 young male students, aged between 18-24 years from various faculties within The University of Sydney. The degrees included: Liberal Studies, Arts/Engineering, Computer Science and Arts. Most of the participants are in their second and third year of their courses. The following summarises focus group results; each paragraph addressing the different issues discussed in the group.

#### ***Young men becoming the ultimate “Bread-winner” ...***

The first two questions related to the participants idea of what their family and work plans are once they graduate. Firstly, the idea of assuming a ‘breadwinner’ role seemed alien to all of the respondents, and produced interesting responses. Most of the students envisaged working *full time* but not having the responsibility of becoming a “bread-winner”. The basic conception of this term for our group was of someone who held the duty of financially supporting a *whole household*. The young men did not envisage themselves as adopting this role immediately upon leaving University. As one participant expressed:

*“I just can’t imagine being married and what have you in a year and half’s time basically.”*

Hence, when weighing-up work and family aspirations, young men are predominately more focused on their career goals at this stage. Most seemed very eager to complete their studies, commence their career and start earning an income for themselves. The term bread-winner appears to be out-dated in this generation when describing work and family roles.

#### ***The young man as a House-husband...***

Stemming from the notion of a ‘breadwinner,’ the second question focused on ideas of marriage, children and becoming ‘house-husbands’. The hypothetical questioning of their views of being in a relationship where their partner/wife earned the higher income generated significant reactions and initiated further debates.

The initial responses to the notion of becoming a ‘house husband’ or ‘stay at home dad’ were overly positive:

*“it would be great...golf 2-3 times a week, surfing...awesome!”*

However, after further discussion and presenting a more pragmatic view on such circumstances, answers began to evolve and change. Generally, the views expressed that a compromise would need to occur between the husband and wife, with serious consideration as to the current and potential contributions of either partners’ careers to the well-being of the family.

‘Family-time’ and ‘work-time’ needed to be balanced equally and this was an important aspect for all respondents. However, the women’s role as a ‘mother’ was also perceived to be extremely significant in the upbringing and care of the family. As one participant strongly expressed:

*“I think a women’s primary role in life is to have children and bring them up and that’s what’s most important in life...I’m happy with them to work and make money but children and the family must come first!”.*

The perception of the mother as the ultimate caretaker of the family was very much emphasised. Thus whilst the men were aiming for a solid balance between work and family, they covertly expected their wives to give up their career’s (at least for a period) to raise their children.

On the other hand, some of the other participants also acknowledged the reality that women are succeeding in the workforce and accepted the reality that their future wives may be the one earning a greater income:

*“I think of it more pragmatically... what gives my family the best at the end of the day. Looking at it coldly who’s going to make us more and provide us with the best standard of living.”*

Thus, overall, the attitudes on this issue were overtly balanced. That is on one hand there was the idea of women as the ultimate caring ‘mother’ and the husband as naturally taking the role of providing the financial support. And on the other hand, the students were aware that this generation consisted of many educated women who would *equally* succeed in the workforce as men, so they had the potential of benefiting the financial well-being of the family.

### ***Choice of future employer: Family Friendly Work Policies...***

The next four questions related to the men’s expectations of their future employer and of their actual working experience. Discussion relating to family friendly work policies did not raise as definite reactions as some of the previous questions. This was due to that fact that most participants were uneducated about the access to and range of policies available.

The policy which did emerge as most necessary was the access to ‘flexible working hours.’ However, as noted, it was unclear as to whether the men focused on this issue due to a lack of knowledge about other policies. One other significant factor addressed, was the issue of affordability of child care facilities. As one of the young man argued:

*“...Can everyone afford childcare? I spent the first 2 years of life at my aunty, uncle’s and grandparent’s because we couldn’t afford it...”*

Thus, family-friendly work policies may theoretically benefit workers, but in reality not be overly practical for some families; this is a significant area for further investigation.

***...what about family-friendly policies designed specific to Men?***

This issue highlighted that policies specifically tailored to fathers were not a high priority factor that young men would consider when choosing which organisation to work for. As one Engineering student stated:

*“I’d take one [job] that offered job security any day over one that offers paternal leave and family-flexibility.”*

Overall, job security was perceived to be far more important than family policies, and furthermore these men tended to view ‘flexible policies’ as possible threats to the success of their long-term careers. That is, how committed to the organisation would they appear if they desired hours or work arrangements that fit around personal and family commitments. It is evident that at this stage young men are more focused on their *individual* career aspirations, than concerns regarding family commitments. They acknowledged that when their circumstances changed in the future they would probably be more welcoming to such policies; however the idea of women as being associated with family-care was still present throughout the discussion. On the whole, it was clear that family responsibilities are not of great concern for men when making future career decisions at this stage.

***The notion of Parental-Leave for both Men and Women...***

This next question focused more on ‘parental-leave’ for both men and women. That is, attitudes on ways to balance family responsibilities between the husband and wife, in accordance with their conflicting work commitments. Generally a man taking parental leave at the time of birth was seen as a period of relief for the mother to recover, and most young men were enthusiastic about the idea of sharing this special time. On the other hand, they again suggested this may not always be possible for financial reasons. If it was possible it would only be limited however, the basic argument was that women are more responsible for the care of the child.

*“Women need that time off because it’s pretty hard...she can’t pop out the baby on Saturday and be back in to work on Monday...”*

Maternity leave was emphasised as essential, whereas paternity leave was seen as ideal. Taking leave (for men) was seen as a threat to their career and most were not prepared to take the risk in order to become the ideal new ‘caring, loving stay-at-home dad.’

A particularly interesting view was that women staying at home would not do great damage to the future development of their career, as women were perceived to generally have a limit as to how high they can climb the corporate ladder:

*“realistically women don’t have job security...the glass ceiling issue will always be there...a 25 year old women just married will be passed over for promotion because the employer will believe she’ll be having a baby in the near future.”*

### ***Organisational commitment versus Family commitments...***

In order to actually assess the level of commitment towards outside paid-work, the young men were asked whether they would take on extra responsibilities at work that were outside their job-description. Young men agreed that taking on extra responsibilities at work were definitely significant if it meant gaining promotions and other incentives for their *career*, even though they would lose time to spend at home with their *families*. As one respondent clearly summed up:

*“a business is not a breeding-system... at this stage I have more career aspirations than family aspirations...you need to be there in order to contribute to the bottom-line of the company and enhance one’s career.”*

Thus, the notion of commitment towards the employer outweighing family obligations was evidently displayed.

### ***Personal family lifestyles and young men’s choices on Work and Family Balance...***

Finally, the last question moved on to find out the family background and up-bringing of each of the men allowing us to observe the way personal experiences shape the decisions of young men in relation to this research topic. Generally, most were happy with the way their families had functioned, which they admitted meant that they would probably operate the same way when they start their own family. Most of the participants came from nuclear families with both mother and father working.

*“Mum made the sacrifice and Dad couldn’t have gone as far as in his career and money without her doing that.”*

Their fathers generally had extra-long hours outside of home, while their mothers were more committed to the household. Yet once again, the industry, career and income of each parent restricted and/or determined the choices on how individuals balanced between family and work commitments. The perceptions expressed earlier in the discussion directly related to the personal family arrangements and the work-family values the young men had been brought up around in their childhood.

### ***Discussion...***

There were many interesting attitudes expressed in this discussion. There were particular views that were more strongly emphasised and remained a constant theme throughout the debate. One of these issues is that the young men are all more concerned about their independent career lives at present rather than family-care duties. Some envisage a *future* role as traditional breadwinner rather than ‘caring, loving stay-at-home father’, and stemming from this they generally do not anticipate a need for ‘family friendly polices’. Hence, they believe this would be the most beneficial contribution they can make to their households.

Some of the respondents are open to the idea of being ‘stay at home fathers’, but only on the grounds that the wife worked to provided better financial well-being. However, they were not prepared to pursue this as a full-time role. Even though a women’s income may equal the husbands or be higher, the men expressed that a woman’s primary role is to be the ‘family-carer’ or mother, as this would naturally attend to the child’s needs. Family friendly policies were perceived as necessary in order to balance work and family obligations, however, they were not as vital to men as it was for women. Again, family-care is directly associated with women and paid-work is viewed as the man’s duty.

The views expressed by these young men were on the whole very traditional which suggests that the state and workplace rhetoric of ‘equal opportunity’ for men and women is not penetrating as deeply as initially perceived. Whilst people may acknowledge notions such as ‘house husbands’ and the need for further career opportunities for women, their behaviours and actions have not shifted all that dramatically. There is definite need for more revolutionary change in order to eliminate gender inequality in the realm of work and family arrangements.



## **Focus Group 4 - Students from the Faculty of Science**

### **Introduction**

These findings reflect the observations of a focus group held with 5 young men aged between 20 years and 22 years, studying in the field of science at the University of Sydney, as part of a wider study about young men's views on work/family balance. A number of interesting points were raised, with the findings summarised below.

### **Main Findings**

#### **1. Outdated concept of “the breadwinner”**

When questioned about becoming “the breadwinner” upon graduating, the respondents at first seemed confused. The question “is there really such a thing as a main breadwinner these days?” seemed to reflect the views of all respondents, however they seemed to agree that the “breadwinner” is the main income earner in the household. One respondent pointed out that it’s “not really what it’s about for me” as such responsibility seemed a long way off after graduation, however all agreed that “today, both partners tend to work so I don’t think there really is a breadwinner; you can’t really define that any more”.

#### **2. Limitations in field of science, due to extreme specialisation**

Amongst all participants, there was a consensus that post-graduate studies were essential for occupational success and job security. These qualifications would ultimately lead to highly specialised professions, which would be undertaken as full-time roles (40 hours per week) as opposed to part-time or casual work. While each respondent ultimately aimed for specialisation in the field, it was recognised that, by this very nature, there would be less flexibility in seeking employment and ultimately, in spending time with their families. The point was also made that because science is a rapidly changing field of work, taking time off could severely restrict their future career opportunities by putting them “behind” in their knowledge.

#### **3. Constraints in Industrial Relations policy**

While respondents all indicated that they expected paternity leave to be available within industrial relations law by the time they were working, there was an overwhelming sense that “it’s different for females”. When asked about what they expected from their future employers in regards to parental leave, one participant mentioned that, “females get a lot more because that’s the norm”.

The respondents had conflicting views on equality in parental leave and industrial relations law; on the one hand, there was a belief that women were more entitled to family-friendly policies because “biologically you would expect that they would get more”. However, the young men desired more choice and greater equality in the law, mentioning that “if her career was more important to her, I’d be willing to stay at home, but the current workplace environment allows more for her”. When asked straight out whether they would take time off upon the birth of a child, this issue seemed to come to the surface, as “there is no safety net for guys, but for women there is”. But there was agreement that “if my wife could not get time off then I would”. At the same time, when further questioned about this, the participants felt that “ultimately, it depends”, and were not really willing to commit to a solid response.

**4. Could not see themselves as long-term primary carer**

Initially, when the participants were asked about becoming a full-time “house husband” or “stay-at-home dad”, all respondents believed that a parent should be home full-time with the child for at least the first year of the child’s life, and were insistent that it would not matter whether this was the male or the female. However, upon thinking, one respondent pointed out that there are biological factors, and “there must be some ongoing role for females after the birth”. Beyond the first year, the respondents gave an impression that their role as a full-time parent would be limited to “maximum 3 or 4 years” because “once they go to school they’re fine”. Conversely, they saw the female role as “optional” in regards to short-term or long-term care. These decisions would be dependent on variables such as income, career development and options for work flexibility available to each partner.

**5. Family-friendly policies not a priority in selecting work**

The specialised nature of the young men’s desired professions (discussed above) was perceived as limiting their ability to “shop around for family-friendly policies”. One respondent juxtaposed the field of neurology with accounting. He noted that “there are restrictions in [science] which mean that we don’t have as much choice” in places of work and subsequent contract choices (as opposed to accounting, where there are many more options available). There was a consensual view that “there are a lot more things that are important” in selecting an organisation for which to work, and that they could “work around the problems” of balancing their work with their family life. They saw an ability to negotiate family-friendly policies as a later benefit of career development.

## **Discussion**

The young men that were involved in the focus group all indicated that they would value spending a significant amount of time at home with their family on a regular basis and taking an active part in their children's upbringing. They all felt that a parent should be at home with children as a full-time occupation in the first years of the child's life, however beyond this, time away from work may harm their career, due to the dynamic nature of the field of science. Also, due to the nature of the field, family-friendly policies were not seen as a priority in organisational or employer selection, as the respondents felt that it was too specialised a discipline for this to play highly in their decisions. The current workplace, it was felt, is more favourable towards women's flexibility, and the respondents indicated hope that the policies would become more equally weighed for males and females in the future. However, they did not seem to be actively pushing for change themselves.

## Focus Group 5 – Students from the Faculty of Economics

A focus group was conducted for students of the Economics and Business Faculty, involving six male participants aged between 20 – 22 years of age. Indicative of the specificity of their degree, all participants premeditated an eventual participation within either the finance or law profession. The results of the focus group were subjective to their prospective industries of choice, and varied fervently in relation to family background and individual characteristics. Thus, in examination of such results, they must be considered within the contextual mechanisms of their external construct. The following results have been compiled from the significant and noteworthy responses to the questions asked during the focus groups, which on occasion proved to substantiate the paradox of the individual mind within their societal construct.

The discussion initially exemplified the conceptual notion of whether the participants would search for full time work immediately after completing their degree. A polarisation emerged between those eager to enter the paid workforce immediately;

*“I want to get straight into the workforce, start earning some financial backing, while I have no financial commitment or responsibility.”*

And those who desired to take time off:

*“I will be finishing in 2007, it’s the year of the world cup. I plan to travel before settling into a career.”*

The consequential outcome here is that students who desired entrance into the workforce immediately, were actively conscious of the issues constraining career and its impending stability. This advocates the extent to which not all students have uniform, or rather fully formed opinions on the issue of career, let alone the work/life/family nexus.

The preceding discussion was directly related to the concept of inheriting the term ‘breadwinner’, since all participants desired to enter the workforce at some stage. It was noted that the participants verbalised the term as almost a reference to the ‘dominant role’; one participant signifying specifically, its connotation to a role of pride, and the supporting system to both their potential wife and family:

*“I’d be more proud to be the supporter for the family, but if it was taken away from me I wouldn’t see it as a problem. If I’m incapable, my wife can take the role, but I would think everyone would want to be the breadwinner.”*

All agreed that the term was outdated and questioned its relevance to their generation:

*“Things have changed so much since my parents generation, today you have both parents working, one parent working, split families - I know one guy who doesn’t even have to work, he can just live off his families inheritance.”*

This may conceivably draw attention to the incongruence in the terminology with changing patterns of family structures. Nevertheless, a conclusion was reached that the term breadwinner could equate to the translation of the “*principal income earner*”, which they agreed was inextricably linked to having a family.

At the current stage of their lives, five of the six participants agreed that the ‘breadwinner’ concept was not a driving force behind starting their initial work, since they were not considering starting a family:

*“Who would I be breadwinning for?”*

They identified rationales for working which included to be more self sufficient and,

*“To have fun, meet new people, have new experiences.”*

The sixth student assumed a longer term perspective, believing that the establishment of a career was necessary to be in a position to provide for his family:

*“Who else is going to pay for it?”*

Regardless of whether or not they were the *primary* income earner, they considered this to be a distinctive issue. Thus, it is apparent that a self-serving attitude exists among these young men, at least at this age as they do not readily conceptualise their life in terms of the family structure.

The discussion shifted to an assumption of a longer-term perspective, and the group was asked to consider whether or not they planned to have a family, and if so, their role in the family structure. All six identified their desire to start a family but did not envisage this in the near future. Interestingly enough, this was extensively associated to financial stability:

*“I want to make sure I’m in a good position with my career, I want to be financially stable and be able to support my family and to some extent my existing lifestyle before I have a kids.....but I still want to have [a family] within the next ten years or so.”*

The participants firstly analysed their job prospects in terms of their personal direction, and then subsequently linked this to family. The correlation between financial earnings and family was absent at first and tenuous at best. One participant went as far as to entirely detach their career path from their future family exemplifying that ones individual career path is distinct from family:

*“My career path is exactly that – my career path. If it happens to coincide with my family life, fine, but they are two individual directions that may happen to be going at the same time. I don’t necessarily have to reach the peak of my career before marriage and family, because they are separate – by career path will still be going, regardless.”*

They eventually reconciled the discrepancy noting that in their immediate future, family was not a consideration, but expectations of the future surrounded the family nucleus, although this had not been considered in detail.

After applicants were asked to consider this long-term perspective, they were able to revisit the concept of the breadwinner, traditional family structures, and their specific role in the family. When questioned about who in the family would occupy the breadwinner position, at first, all adhered to the traditional family structure and identified themselves. They were adamant, and almost assumed a phallic approach through a total dismissing of the entire issue. When asked about their thoughts on assuming a 'stay-at-home day' role, one stated:

*"We haven't been at university for four years to stay at home with the kids."*

This inextricably initiated the dichotomy of the gender role debate and the paradoxical nature of the responses clearly came to fruition. Although some participants had previously stated that they had not yet assumed roles for their future wives,

*"She can do whatever she wants."*

Here, their failure to have fully contemplated the reality of the work/life/family nexus was starkly apparent. One participant offered a response when confronted with the idea of adopting a 'stay-at-home' role, whether for themselves or their partner:

*"Well we both went to uni, I assume, so both of us should be doing something, so both should work. Maybe later the guy can only work. I just don't see the point of one sitting at home waiting for the other to come home from work...she wasn't just staying at school...she would have had her own goals too, so why just have a family and then that all stops?"*

When probed further as to the adoption of the 'stay-at-home' dad, most participants replied:

*"That'd be too easy. What would I do all day?"*

Or,

*"I still have to do something even if I work from home."*

This revealed the readiness of the participants to assume their wife's role as a 'stay-at-home', however when they had to place themselves in that position, they arguably found numerous complexities to the 'reality' of the situation. This may adhere to the inherent stereotypical nature of young men, or to a further degree could it suggest something about the embedded morals of society which has thus impinged on the young male's mind?

However upon probing, other possibilities were eventually considered. They reluctantly acknowledged the possibility that their wife/partner could earn more than them, although this possibility did not sit favourably. When asked hypothetically if their wife/partner was to earn “considerably” more, they contemplated the concept of taking on the role of a stay-at-home dad. Two participants responded with “maybe” but after continuation of the issue, they reversed to their initial responses – they could not envisage such a scenario. This indicated that these young men had not actually given much thought to such a situation as they verbalised their thought processes, deciphering their own opinions as they spoke. Perhaps this alludes to herd mentality and peer pressure of discussing such a personal issue in a group of boys, of which they were friends. Nevertheless, all six expressed their desire to have work and provide for their families. The notion of the sole income earner or breadwinner was not applicable:

*“I want to work. If she earns more, it’s just an added bonus.”*

They did not envisage occupying the stay-at-home role.

Participants were also largely ambivalent towards the role of the wife, and whether staying at home and looking after the children belonged to the domain of the female. Only one of the six voiced his opinion that he would like his wife to stay at home with the children, since he did not envisage a situation where he was not financially viable to do so, and because,

*“...women are better at that sort of thing. Men go out and work to support their family, and the women raise the children.”*

Two participants noted that it was situationally contingent upon their financial stability and their wife’s personal choice:

*“Hopefully we are in a position where she doesn’t have to work, but can if she wants to.”*

However, all four noted this sort of work extended only to,

*“...perhaps a small business on the side like owning a shop, or a business from home, or being involved in a committee of some sort.”*

Three others were still unsure, and noted that it was too circumstantial to reach a conclusion at this present stage.

In relation to workplace policies of paternity leave and flexible working conditions, our six participants stated that the careers they wished to pursue (finance and law), had long hours and traditionally inflexible working environments. All participants agreed they would not *specifically* seek employment in organisations that fostered good family policies for men. It was more important to seek a company that had a good reputation, “paid well” and had opportunities for career development. For example, one participant noted:

*“I want to be an investment banker, I don’t expect flexible family policies for men, it’s a tough and highly competitive industry, and I will have to work long and hard to get to the top.”*

It was this competitive nature of the industry, and their own competitive attentions that fostered an approach that avowed them to “*overlook such domestic things as family-friendly policies*”. In considering these responses, it is apparent that participants appeared to be very accepting of current inflexible working arrangements and the long-hour culture in law and finance, and are not preoccupied by seeking to challenge it. This may be indicative, perhaps of gender discrimination traditions embedded in societal and therefore individual thinking, or that they simply have not given the issue much thought:

*“No I wouldn’t ask [whether family friendly policies were in place] – when the time comes the time comes, I’d think I could work out an agreement, but nowadays I just don’t think many places offer that sort of thing.”*

In relation to paternity leave around the birth of a child, five participants stressed they would want time off. However due to the competitive industries in which they wished to enter, they were conscious that this could only be for a short period of time:

*“I don’t expect months and months off, once my wife and baby have been given the all clear, I’ll probably be back to work, wouldn’t that be pretty standard?”*

One participant noted it would be dependant on the necessities of his work:

*“Obviously I would want some time off, at least a week or too, but I imagine that the role I’m in would require me to be at work, or at least have contact with my work pretty much constantly.”*

The most interesting results that arose from the focus groups were in relation to the participant’s family backgrounds and subsequently the way this provided the mechanism that constructed their perception of future careers and family life. Those that came from traditional family structures, that is, a working husband and the traditional ‘housewife’, also looked for similar roles in their own family life in the future. One participant noted:

*“My mum was a stay-at-home mum, and that’s what I want my wife to be, I think I turned out alright.”*

Contrastingly, those who had grown up with a non-traditional family structure with either two parents working or split families, which required both parents to work, did not foresee any problems posed by the continuation of such a structure into their families:

*“Both my parents worked, so if my wife wants to, ok, I’m not going to stop her...I’d prefer her working than cleaning if that’s what she wants to do.”*



This signifies the influence of the immediate family structure, and that the issues of work/life balance must be analysed within the context of existing family structures and influences.

Thus, it is evident from our results that several factors influence the thought processes and expectations of participants surrounding the work/family/life balance. Both the competitive nature of the industries they wished to enter, and the family structure in which they grew up, were seen to be important factors. Specifically, it was seen that flexible work and family policies were not a priority when deciding upon employment, and they did not seek to challenge the status quo. Earning financial stability was the salient priority, and as such, many of the participants saw their role in the family as largely 'external', with regard to issues of childcare relative to their spouses. Additionally, it was found that participants envisaged their own and their spouses family life similar to their parents. Only one boy was adamant a traditional family structure was appropriate, the other five were more relaxed, and pointed to issues of a circumstantial nature. Importantly, these discrepancies highlight the dynamic nature of the issue. Perceptions and the resulting patterns of family/work will continue to evolve as this group of young men face the challenges the work/family/life nexus present. In turn, it can be hypothesised that their children's perceptions, expectations, and desires will also be influenced by their parents' roles, the industries they wish to enter, and the prevailing norms existing at the time.

## Focus Group 6 – Students from the Faculty of Engineering

We collected the attitudes and future expectations about work and family of 9 young males from the Engineering faculty at the University of Sydney. Of these, seven students were completing a Bachelor of Civil Engineering, one student was doing a Bachelor of Mechanical Engineering and one student was doing a Bachelor of Civil Engineering/ Law. The group fostered an environment for some very interesting points of view to transpire and we have thus made some findings on these results. It became clear that: the term ‘breadwinner’ had assumed different meaning amongst some of our participants, some young men proposed that men and women fulfil ‘complementary roles’, there was a lack of awareness in regard to family friendly policies and finally that there was a strong correlation between the family backgrounds and future expectations of these young men. Each of these lines of reasoning will be considered in turn.

In trying to understand what roles these young men would assume upon leaving university, participants were probed about their thoughts on becoming the ‘breadwinner’ of any family they might start of their own. There appeared to be an acknowledgment that the term ‘breadwinner’ had become outdated with one respondent stating:

*“You can’t apply the term breadwinner as it has been traditionally. It has become a dual role between partners...”*

As such, it appeared that this young man held the belief that the dual income model of family is becoming a more widely accepted family arrangement. In another instance, one student referred to the possibility that he might not be the primary income earner:

*“If my wife were the breadwinner I would be ok with it, but I would feel threatened an uneasy about it.”*

Here we can see the student reproducing a normative discourse but clearly coming into internal conflict with himself in doing so. So whilst young men concede that the traditional model of the man being the ‘breadwinner’ is transforming, there is a sense of anxiety at the thought they might not assume the traditional model. This demonstrates the pervasiveness of the historical work and family roles of men and women

An issue which constantly surfaced in the group discussion was how to define men and women’s roles in terms of work and family. There was a great deal of disparity between responses on the issue. One dominant voice expressed the view that:

*“...men and women complement one another with the different roles they must fulfil.”*

This student forcefully disagreed that an effort must be mounted to entitle men with the same access to family friendly policies as women. His conception of self was strongly linked to the traditional model of the male breadwinner. Without explicitly stating so, this student hinted toward the fact that he considers the burden of childcare falls with the woman. One group of participants did fervently dispute this conception of 'complementary roles' claiming that the divide between work and family responsibilities has to be split "50:50" between partners. Furthermore one student responded by saying:

*"I would like to think that people are not of the opinion that the man must be the breadwinner."*

Yet the hesitation in this statement suggests that there is a distinct gap between rhetoric and reality. Despite the fact that many 'overt' opinions are promising for women in the workforce, the covert 'expectations' of women and the social stigma associated with the 'stay at home dad' are a real impediment to a women's career. Consequently and much to the detriment of women, the suggestion that men and women fulfil 'complementary roles' holds some validity.

The majority of young men in the group were planning to have children sometime in the future. However when asked what they would expect of their employer in terms of family friendly policies it appeared that they had a very limited understanding of the issue. A few number of participants glossed over the topic at a superficial level but they generally did not provide specific examples of family friendly policies they might pursue.

One participant hinted that the direction of his career might be contingent on what prospective employers would be able to offer him in terms of an ongoing family friendly arrangement:

*"I would definitely look for a job that could afford to grant me flexible working hours. I wouldn't want to be missing out on special days with my kids, like 'bring along your Dad Day' at school."*

He also hinted at his desire to be supported by his employer through the provision of parental leave:

*"I would love to take the maximum allowable amount of parental leave. If I could, I would take time off from work until my kids reached school."*

There is an overwhelming sense of doubt however in this young man's statements that his hopes will ever be realised. The preferences and desires of these young men are contingent on what their employers will offer them. Even though these young men may endeavour to come into family friendly workplaces, their intentions may be overshadowed by these institutions (Pocock: 2005). It is likely that we can partly attribute this uncertainty to a lack of education on the part of these young men in regard to family friendly policies. Their lack of awareness would seem to put them at an immediate disadvantage before even having negotiated an arrangement with their employer.

Looking overall at the group discussions on family and work, there was seen to be a correlation between home life and the future expectations of family roles. When discussing the prospect of being a stay at home dad, or not being the primary "breadwinner" of the family, those who came from the more traditionally structured families responded negatively to the idea of being in a less dominant, or even an equal domestic position to their wife/partner:

*"My Dad worked enormous hours, he was overseas a lot. My Mum stayed at home and did all the housework...I don't feel very cool about being a stay at home dad..."*

Here these participants described their households as having specific gender divides in paid and domestic work, where their father worked full-time and their mother stayed at home and cared for the children and house. When debating the negatives of working long hours to achieve financial stability, it was argued that:

*"You may have made a decision to place work over family, but with the thought in mind that you are doing it to sustain and provide for your family."*

Contrastingly, there were participants who discussed the domestic and paid roles of their parents as relatively equal. Here, although few made the distinction between paid and unpaid work roles, the idea of 50:50 divisions of work and family responsibilities was perceived as the desired or expected prospect for these respondents:

*"Ideally I would like to think we could share both the house and workloads equally."*

Yet as we have noted before, this statement is marred with self-doubt. "Ideally" these participants would like to come to an equal division of responsibilities but realistically they acknowledge that it might not unfold this way.

## **Focus Group 7 – Students from the Faculty of Architecture**

The participants of this study were four male university students, all in their third year of an architecture degree. In general, the interview revealed that the candidates expect to perpetuate a predominantly traditional career and family life, with some notable exceptions based upon differences in factors such as sexuality, career goals and personal experiences. It is important to note however that rigid views towards certain family structures were absent; the participants showed a degree of flexibility by admitting that any future decisions regarding their family-work lives would be highly dependent on the surrounding circumstances. One candidate identified himself as homosexual and as such does not see his future lifestyle reflecting that of a 'typical nuclear family'. It must also be acknowledged that, prior to the investigation, candidates claimed that they had not given the subject of work and family balance considerable thought.

The candidates' expectations about home and family life followed largely traditional patterns. No candidate expressed any intention to be dependent on a partner or spouse where a shared income may exist; instead they envisaged themselves as primary income earners. Candidates indicated that being a 'house-husband' or 'stay-at-home dad' would only be considered 'if such circumstances were unavoidable', and only if this situation was temporary. Three out of the four candidates stated that they could not anticipate being the primary care giver if there was 'no urgent need to do so'. Therefore, despite a tendency towards the traditional male-breadwinner model, breaks from tradition were circumstantially foreseeable. These expectations somewhat replicated most of the candidate's own family experiences.

In most of the candidates' backgrounds, the mother was seen to have adopted traditional housewife roles and was identified as the primary care giver, though not in the strictest sense. In some cases, the mother was found to have a dual role: part-time career responsibilities as well as maintaining family and house responsibly, however 'always did more [housework] than my dad'. One candidate's family background stood out from the rest and seemed to influence his own expectations for the future. During his upbringing his mother was the primary income earner while his father stayed at home and cared for the family, with both parents also working on a joint family business as a 'side' option. In this case, there were seen to be a number of house/family responsibilities that were 'shared' or 'divided' between the two. Apart from this case there were no other significantly non-traditional role models in any of the candidates' homes and, similarly, there were no significantly non-traditional expectations in their own futures after university.

After graduation all candidates expected to either enter the paid workforce to gain experience and build their career, or combine both travelling and work experience overseas. One candidate expressed the desire not to build a 'career' in the typical sense, instead desiring to 'travel and work enough to live off'. All responses reflected individualistic and self-providing attitudes.

While most interviewees acknowledged that the architecture industry allowed a certain amount of flexibility (such as working from home or taking contract or project work), there was great concern that re-entering the industry after a break of any longer than a few years would negatively affect employment opportunities. One candidate believed that

[It would be] harder to get back into it. People aren't willing to take risks on you like they were when you were younger...[it would be difficult] unless you're driven enough to claw your way back at the end of it'

Candidates agreed that withdrawing from the labour market would be a serious hurdle to becoming the primary care giver in a family situation.

There was a strong view amongst all candidates that during their earlier years of employment it would be necessary to work longer hours and take up work that was outside their job description. Following this belief, participants' answers were based on the assumption that they would only have a family when their career was developed. As one respondent stated 'I don't think if you were setting out to have kids you would do that while [you were setting up your career]'. One participant stated that the amount of sacrifices made 'depends on what point on your career you are...if you were just starting out, you are more willing to make the sacrifices to get ahead...once you've got a family [your career] becomes less of a priority'.

All candidates concurred that the degree and type of family friendly policies an employee could receive depended heavily on the size of business they were employed by. Most candidates assumed that employers in small workplaces would be more likely to be compassionate towards family commitments, however financial benefits such as paid paternity leave, or provisions for day care would not be expected in such businesses, as 'small workplaces couldn't really afford it'. Additionally, it was agreed that as an employee of a smaller firm 'you'd have the opportunity to bring [children] to work' due to the 'relaxed environment'. At larger firms however, financial benefits would be more readily available. One candidate indicated that there was very little information about such benefits and they were not educated on such arrangements throughout their degree or at their workplace.

There was a shared view amongst all candidates that the subject matter of the focus group had not been greatly considered. Many admitted that they had not paid much consideration to their future family-work life, as they did not foresee this to be an issue at their age: 'it's something we'll think about in 10 years or so'. Participants agreed that their focus after graduation would be placed on the development of their careers as well as travelling overseas, rather than establishing a family. One candidate commented that thinking of a work family balance at this stage in his life was 'creepy'.

Our interview demonstrates that this particular group of students believe they are willing to digress from the traditional male-breadwinner model of work-family life. It seemed that as none of the candidates' upbringing followed a traditional pattern in the strictest sense of the concept, each possessed an understanding of, and tolerance towards alternatives to this structure. Whether the traditional family model was perpetuated by the candidates or not seemed to depend heavily on their future personal circumstances as well as the level of flexibility and entitlements allowed at the workplace level. All candidates confessed to a lack of knowledge in the area of family friendly policies at the workplace, and expressed an interest in learning about such issues at school or university.

## Part 5. Discussion

### Salient Results and Agents for Change

Our research sought to determine the future work-life expectations of young men at university in Australia. Our most remarkable finding was that the participants themselves seemed conflicted about what they expected of their future work and family lives. As each focus group probed deeper into the participants' beliefs and ideologies, it became apparent that in the majority of cases a variance existed between the expectations vocalised in early discussion, and the beliefs and expectations that became evident in subsequent questioning. What contributed most obviously to this trend was the participant's self-confessed lack of consideration in regards to their future family – and work - situation. From the focus group results, four themes have been identified that explore the dissonance between the expectations that the participants were articulating, and those expectations that they actually held. These themes address the term 'breadwinner', the family friendly workplace and the partial replication of family experiences. Another finding of our research was the discovery of a reticence among young males towards valuing family-friendly policies for themselves, which appeared to stem from a mixture of personal ideology, in addition to institutional and vocational rigidities. This finding leads us to question who will be the future agents of potential change for a more balanced relationship between work and life: the workplace, the state, its institutions, or individuals?

#### **'Breadwinner': Rejecting the Term, Perpetuating the Notion.**

*"I think it's sexist and disgusting..."*

The term 'breadwinner' was largely rejected for being outdated and irrelevant to contemporary families and society in Australia. This was firstly due to the negative connotations that were associated with the term, and secondly because a 'breadwinner' was seen to be an individual who held the duty of financially supporting the whole household, and was not applicable to the circumstances that the young men saw themselves in when married or with a partner. This reasoning seemed to follow the assumption that the participants' respective partners would be engaged in full time work, earning a similar amount. Some participants suggested that alternative terms to 'breadwinner' could be 'main wage-earner' or 'dual income-earner'. These new terms appeared to be representative of the 'new man' vocabulary that conformed to contemporary ideals of equality.

Despite the assurance that the term was not applicable to modern day Australian society, later discussions revealed that in reality the participants did expect to perpetuate notions associated with the term 'bread winner'. The paradoxical nature of the responses became obvious during discussions regarding child-rearing and childcare.



### **Caring for the family – ‘Mystifying Reality’**

*“We haven’t been at university for four years to stay at home with the kids.”*

The ‘new man’ rhetoric utilised by the participants in response to initial questioning was undermined in the majority of cases by later responses in regard to child care, and becoming a ‘stay-at-home-dad’. In many cases there were unspoken assumptions that their partner would bear the greater responsibility for child care. Thus whilst the men utilised language that emphasised equality, it seemed that in reality they expected their wives to relinquish their careers (at least for a period) to raise their children.

This trend can be exemplified by one participant’s response to questions regarding his partner and child care. This participant assured questioners that his future partner had a right to a career that he would not hold her back from, however also saw importance in having a parent at home full time for the first two years after his children’s birth and did not see himself playing this role. So despite his previous assurance that he did not expect to be the ‘breadwinner’, nor saw his partner playing the part of a ‘housewife’, in reality no alternative was envisaged. The majority of participant’s responses followed this pattern, voicing objections to taking extended time off work for fear of their career, yet expecting women to take time off regardless. Taking leave (for men) was seen as a threat to their career and most participants were not prepared to take this risk, except in exceptional circumstances, in order to become the ideal new ‘caring, loving stay-at-home dad.’

Following these findings, the traditional male breadwinner model did not seem as redundant as indicated in the first stages of the focus groups. Despite vocalising ‘new man’ rhetoric, the underlying expectations appeared to be that the participants’ future partner would continue to fulfil a more traditional model of family and work. The views expressed by these young men suggest that the state and workplace rhetoric of ‘equal opportunity’ for men and women has not penetrated as deeply as initially perceived. Consequently, our findings concur with McMahan’s (1998) study, suggesting that this disparity between rhetoric and reality reveals unfounded optimism that the ‘new man’ image has worked to ‘mystify’ and ‘comfort’ the lack of significant social change.

### **Replicating personal family experiences**

*“My mum was a stay-at-home mum, and that’s what I want my wife to be, I think I turned out alright.”*

There was a tendency for participants’ expectations to be a reflection of their own personal experiences. In most of the participants’ backgrounds, the mother was seen to have adopted traditional housewife roles, identified as the primary care giver, or having a dual role: part-time career responsibilities as well as maintaining family and house responsibly. These experiences were somewhat replicated most of the participant’s own family expectations, as hypothesised by Thorn and Gilbert (1998).

Our research reveals a potential transitional stage in the majority of our participant's ideology, who seem to be torn between perpetuating the comfort of their own experiences, and the values of the 'new man'. However in aspiring, at least in rhetoric, towards becoming more equitable partners, a confessed lack of knowledge regarding men's entitlements and opportunities at the workplace constrains the full evolution of 'superman'.

**Family-Friendly-Policies: Friendly for whom?**

*"I'm sure that if I worked in a place with females then I'm sure they'd have [family-friendly work policies]."*

Most participants expressed a lack of knowledge about workplace entitlements and the labour market. Family friendly entitlements were seen to be, in the majority of cases, an 'extra' that only certain employers would be able to give, in certain industries. In addition, they were viewed as an option that predominantly women would need to utilise. This seemed to be indicative of either the assumption that it is only women who require family friendly work practices, or only women that would be granted them. For example in many cases maternity leave was emphasised as essential, whereas paternity leave was seen as ideal – but was not an entitlement they would necessarily bargain for. Despite the fact that many respondents said they would take time off when their child was born, extended leave was viewed predominantly as an option that would be taken in only extraneous circumstances. The participants expected their family and work life to be determined principally by the restrictions placed on them by the institutions they were employed by, and the generosity of their employer.

**Ideological and Institutional Kryptonite**

While our research set about looking for 'superman', what we found was ideological and institutional 'kryptonite', weakening our supermen's attempts to be 'new men' and subverting their own ambitions towards the equality that was evident in the language that they utilised.

To 'strike a balance' between work and family, change is essential, yet who will be the agents of this change? University men expressed reluctance to push for reform at the workplace towards family-friendly policies, afraid predominantly of the negative consequences this may have on their career. Male students from more vocationally orientated disciplines (Science, Engineering, Economics, and Architecture) tended to have more rigid expectations about how their careers would evolve and the steps they needed to take to achieve certain career goals. However, this may be due to the nature of students who pursue these subjects rather than due to their vocational orientation – further research in regards to the direction of causality between degree choices and career expectations is required. Nonetheless, more students in vocational degrees expected less family friendly policies and were also less willing to push for them. Most notable were Science students, who argued that "there are restrictions in [Science] which mean that we don't have as much choice", despite believing in the importance of family friendly policies. Individuals' reluctance to drive change stems, in part, from

institutional rigidities that have not evolved in line with men's expectations. The power of workplace institutions to prescribe participants' expectations is evident when, for example, one participant mentioned that "females get a lot more (parental leave) because that's the norm". Such findings confirm that a "flexible care deficit" (Pocock 2005:106) exists, as a result of a 'clash' (op cit.) between work and family responsibilities, subverting participants potentially equitable aspirations.

We predict that the *WorkChoices* (Howard 2005) deregulation reforms have the potential to exacerbate the institutional deficit that currently exists, as the onus of negotiating family-friendly provisions falls to the individual. While a general lack of understanding in regards to the difference between legislated and bargained entitlements existed, one participant noted that his future work-family expectations depended on the level of bargaining power he possessed. He expected himself to be at the higher end of the labour market and therefore believed it would be easier for him to negotiate for family-friendly entitlements. We can only hope that our respondents' ambivalence to the need for change is a result of little industry experience, knowledge about bargaining rights at work, and a confessed minor consideration about all of these issues.

If these skilled university students are to overcome current rigidities and advocate family-friendly policies themselves, in their individualised contractual arrangements, changes to their own work-family ideologies are essential. Otherwise, a divergence between female and male expectations about what their future holds will certainly come into conflict. Therefore, on the basis of previous research and our own findings and interpretations, we make a number of recommendations to assist in overcoming the institutional and ideological resistance to change.

## Part 6. Recommendations

1. That the existing deficit of knowledge about workplace policies amongst young men (and women) at university should be addressed by introducing a short course on these topics into the undergraduate curriculum. The course should address the processes by which terms and conditions of employment are established. The intention is to inform students about rights at work and encourage students to consider the impact their choices and working arrangements will have on their own lives, their partners and their families. Further, we recommend that this course should be supported by, and have input from, relevant stakeholders, such as professional associations, employer associations, trade unions and government departments.
2. That the position of a ‘Work-Life Adviser’, with a similar role to a career counsellor, be introduced into the Careers departments of universities to assist final year students with balancing decisions about their future jobs with other commitments in their lives.
3. That policy changes within the legislative and institutional framework be made to enable young men and women to balance their work and family responsibilities. One obvious and important policy change is paid parental leave with job protection, to be equally available and accessible to both men and women.
4. That the issue of work and family be widely publicised in the Australian community as a pressing public policy issue. This could be achieved through an active media campaign, which aims to achieve attitudinal and behavioural change amongst men and women so that both may be able to bargain more effectively for family-friendly working arrangements.
5. That further research be conducted on:
  - a) young men who are not currently attending university and are working, unemployed or undertaking other vocational forms of education. The purpose would be to ascertain the effect of different occupational and socio-economic factors on their attitudes and expectations towards work and family;
  - b) the ability of young men and women and new entrants to the labour market to bargain for family-friendly arrangements; and
  - c) men who have adopted non-traditional roles and evaluate their experiences and attitudes, for example, those who have been or who are the “stay-at-home-dad”.

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## **Appendix 1 Focus group Question Schedule**

### **What Do Men Want?**

Male University Undergraduates and Their Ideas About Work and Family  
September, 2005

Tasks – beforehand - allocate someone to lead the questions, someone to provide support and follow up in asking the questions and one or two people to specifically take notes.

### **Beginning: (about 5 mins)**

#### **Introduce yourselves and the purpose of the focus group:**

- We are research students in work and organisational studies
- our assignment is to write a submission to the Human Rights and equal Opportunity Commission's enquiry into 'men, women, work and family'
- to do this we have to undertake our own research
- we are exploring young men's views about work and family – and we are most interested in the work and workplace of side the equation
- very little research has been done on this in Australia (or overseas) and so we appreciate your time and your serious contribution!

#### **Introduce the structure of the session:**

- We will ask about 7 questions
- We encourage you to answer freely and openly
- Nothing you say will be held against you and comments will not be attributed to you personally
- We will write up our results and put them on the WOS website – you are welcome to read our submission
- We should take about 40 minutes

### **Questions: (make sure you allow enough time for the questions)**

#### **Let's begin with your ideas about what you will do once you graduate:**

1. Do you plan to look for fulltime work (ie 35-40 hrs per week or more) and become a 'bread winner' when you leave university? If not, when do you think you will do this? *PROBE: what do you think of the term breadwinner? Is there a better, alternative term?*
2. Assuming you marry (or settle in a long-term relationship) and have children, how would you feel about being a house husband/stay at home dad? *PROBE: What if your wife was the dominant breadwinner, ie earned the most money?*

**Let's talk about what your expectations of your actual work experience:**

3. What do you expect from your (future) employer in terms of family-friendly work policies? *PROBE: Provide some examples: paid parental leave; on site child care facilities, flexible working hours etc.*
4. Would you specifically seek employment in organisations that have good work and family policies for men? What sort of work-family policies do you think you would want? *PROBE: Can you name or identify particular work and family policies you would like?*
5. If it did not harm your career, would you take time off for parental leave? At the time of birth only? Or for a longer period? *PROBE: What if it did harm your career? What about your partner? Would you expect them to take parental leave if it did not harm their career? What if it did?*
6. If you were given extra responsibilities at work, that were clearly outside your job description, and these responsibilities significantly infringed on the time you were able to spend with your family, would you confront your employer? *PROBE: What if these extra responsibilities may lead to higher pay or promotion in the future?*

**Lets' finish with your own up-bringing:**

7. In your own experiences growing up, did both your parents work full time? Who did the housework? Do you think you will do it differently? *NOTE: Be aware that participants may come from a single parent, divorced or step family.*

*Thank you all very much for participating.*