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CHAPTER ONE | The Shaping of a New Generation

IT IS A COOL, clear morning in Oceanside Terrace, a working-class suburb where American flags are almost as plentiful as family pets. As Josh answers the doorbell, I anticipate the story he will tell. His brief answers to a telephone survey tell a straightforward tale of growing up in a stable, two-parent home of the kind Americans like to call "traditional." He reported, for instance, that his dad worked as a carpenter throughout his childhood, his mom stayed home during most of his preschool years, and his parents raised three sons and were still married after thirty years.

After we settle into overstuffed chairs in his parents' cozy living room, where he is home for a brief visit, the more complete life story Josh tells belies this simple image of family life. Despite the apparent stability and continuity conveyed in the telephone survey, Josh actually felt he lived in three different families, one after the other. Anchored by a breadwinning father and a home-centered mother, the first did indeed take a traditional form. Yet this outward appearance mattered less to him than his parents' constant fighting over money, housework, and the drug and alcohol habit his father developed in the army. As Josh put it, "All I remember is just being real upset, not being able to look at the benefits if it would remain like that, having all the fighting and that element in the house."

As Josh reached school age, his home life changed dramatically. His mother took a job as an administrator in a local business and, feeling more secure about her ability to support the family, asked her husband to move out and "either get straight or don't come back." Even though his father's departure was painful and fairly unusual in this family-oriented neighborhood, relief tempered Josh's sense of loss. He certainly did not miss his parents'

constant fighting, his father's surly demeanor, or the embarrassment he felt whenever he dared to bring a friend home. His parents' separation also provided space for his mother to renew her self-esteem through her work outside the home. Josh missed his father, but he also knew a distance had always existed between them, even if it now took a physical as well as an emotional form. He came to accept this new situation as the better of two less-than-ideal alternatives.

Yet Josh's family life took a third turn a year later. Just as he had adjusted to a new routine, Josh's father "got clean" and returned. Although his parents reunited, they hardly seemed the same couple. The separation had triggered a remarkable change in both. Being away had given his father a new appreciation for his family and a deepening desire to be a "real family man." Now drug-free, he resolved to become thoroughly involved in his children's lives. Josh's mother displayed equally dramatic changes, for taking a job had given her a newfound pride in knowing she could stand on her own. As his father became more involved and his mother more self-confident, it lifted the family's spirits and fortunes. In Josh's words, "that changed the whole family dynamic. We got extremely close."

In the years that followed, Josh watched his parents forge a new partnership quite different from the conflict-ridden one he remembered. "A whole new relationship" developed with his father, whom he came to see as "one of my best friends." He also valued his mother's strengthening ties to work, which not only nourished her sense of self but also provided enough additional income for him to attend college.

Now twenty-four, Josh has left home to begin his own adult journey. As he looks back over the full sweep of his childhood, he sees that, while the actors did not change, the play did. In fact, at some point in this series of events, he lived in all three types of households—traditional, single-parent, and dual-earner—now dominating the debate about family change. To Josh, however, these pictures of discrete family types do not do justice to the flow of his family experiences. Not only did Josh live in each of these family forms, but the static nature of these categories misses the importance of the turning points when his parents faced difficulties and fashioned new ways of connecting to each other, their children, and the wider world. For Josh, these transitions produced "three different childhoods, really."

As Josh considers his options for the future, he draws inspiration from the flexibility his parents were able to muster in the face of enormous personal and social challenges. He hopes to avoid the problems of his parents' early marriage, but he admires their efforts to fashion more personally satisfying and mutually supportive bonds. He, too, wants to build a marriage that is flexible enough to weather the difficulties that will surely come, even if he cannot foresee what exactly they will be. Yet his highest hopes are colliding with his greatest fears. The few close relationships he has had with young women have underscored his desire to build the flexible, egalitarian, and sharing partnership his parents finally created. After a series of dissatisfying construction jobs, he now plans to become a teacher and hopes this occupational choice will allow him to integrate satisfying work with ample time for children and family.

Yet Josh's early forays into the worlds of work and dating have also left him worried about the obstacles looming on the horizon. On the one hand, the pressure to put in long workweeks just to earn a decent living seems to leave little time for life beyond the world of work. On the other, the chance of finding a fulfilling relationship that is intimate, enduring, and equal seems "iffy" at best. Although he wants to "have it all" and plans to "reach for these golden rings," he fears that building a happy marriage and striking a good balance between work and home will remain just beyond his grasp.

Josh's story exemplifies how the tumultuous changes of the last several decades require us to think in new ways about families, work, and gender. Josh recounts how a family pathway unfolded as his parents developed new responses to a set of unanticipated crises. In a rapidly changing world, their efforts to let go of rigid, fixed roles—and replace them with more flexible forms of providing emotional and financial support—made the crucial difference.[1] Yet Josh also recognizes that his parents' "happy ending" was not inevitable and their lives could have followed a less uplifting path. These experiences have given him high hopes for his future, but also left him with nagging doubts about his own ability to overcome the barriers likely to block the way.

Josh and his peers are children of the gender revolution.[2] They watched their mothers go to work and their parents invent a mosaic of new family forms. As they embark on their own journeys through adulthood, they take for granted options their parents barely imagined and their grandparents could not envision, but they also face dilemmas that decades of prior change have not resolved. Shifts in women's place and new forms of adult partnerships have created more options, but they also pose unprecedented conflicts and challenges. Is it possible to meld a lasting, egalitarian intimate bond with a satisfying work life, or will gender conflicts, fragile relationships, and uncertain job prospects overwhelm such possibilities? Like Josh, all of the young women and men who came of age during this period of tumultuous change must make sense of their experiences growing up and build their own

adult paths amid new options and old constraints; their strategies will shape the course of work, family, and gender change for decades to come.

Growing Up in Changing Families

Whether they are judged as liberating or disastrous, the closing decades of the twentieth century witnessed revolutionary shifts in the ways new generations grow to adulthood. The march of mothers into the workplace, combined with the rise of alternatives to lifelong marriage, created a patchwork of domestic arrangements that bears little resemblance to the 1950s Ozzie and Harriet world of American nostalgia.[3] By 2000, 60 percent of all married couples had two earners, while only 26 percent depended solely on a husband's income, down from 51 percent in 1970. In fact, in 2006, two-paycheck couples were more numerous than male-breadwinner households had been in 1970. During this same period, single-parent homes, overwhelmingly headed by women, claimed a growing proportion of American households.[4] To put this in perspective, not all female-headed households consist of a mother only, since many parents cohabit but do not marry. Nevertheless, in 2007, 33 percent of non-Hispanic white children and 60 percent of black children lived with one parent (up from 10 percent and 41 percent in 1970).[5] As today's young women and men have reached adulthood, two-income and single-parent homes outnumber married couples with sole (male) breadwinners by a substantial margin.

Equally significant, members of this new generation lived in families far more likely to change shape over time. While families have always faced predictable turning points as children are born, grow up, and leave home, today's young adults were reared in households where volatile changes occurred when parents altered their ties to each other or to the wider world of work. These young women and men grew up in a period when divorce rates were increasing and a rising proportion of children were born into homes anchored either by a single mother or cohabiting but unmarried parents.[6] Lifelong marriage, once the only socially acceptable option for bearing and rearing children, became one of several alternatives that now include staying single, breaking up, or remarrying.[7]

This generation also came of age just as women's entry into the paid labor force began to challenge the once ascendant pattern of home-centered motherhood. In 1975, only 34 percent of mothers with children under the age of three held a paid job, but this number rose to 61 percent by 2000. This peak subsided slightly, with 57 percent of such mothers at work in 2004, but even this figure represents an enormous shift from earlier patterns. More telling, among mothers with children under eighteen, a full 71 percent are now employed.[8]

In fact, the recent ebbs and flows among working mothers with young children point to the competing pushes and pulls women continue to confront in balancing the needs of children and the demands of jobs. Even as women have strengthened their commitment to paid work, they have had to cope with unforeseen work-family conflicts. Growing up in this period, children observed women's massive shift from home to work, but they also watched their mothers move back and forth between full-time work, part-time work, and no job at all.[9]

Finally, the rising uncertainty in men's economic fortunes has also reverberated in their children's lives. During the closing decades of the twentieth century, the "family wage," which once made it possible for most men (though certainly not all) to support nonworking wives, became a quaint relic of an earlier time.[10] Whether at the factory or the office, a growing number of men faced unpredictable prospects as secure, well-paid careers offering the promise of upward mobility became an increasingly endangered species.[11] Fathers who expected to be sole breadwinners found they needed their wives' earnings to survive. Like a life raft in choppy seas, second incomes helped keep a growing number of families afloat and allowed some fathers to change jobs if they hit a sudden dead end on a once promising career path. As more fathers could not live up to the "good provider" ethic, however, many left their families or were dismissed by mothers who saw little reason to care for a man who could not keep himself afloat. The changes in men's lives and economic fortunes provide another reason why many members of this generation experienced unpredictable ups and downs.

Coming of age in an era of more fluid marriages, less stable work careers, and profound shifts in mothers' ties to the workplace shaped the experiences of a new generation. Compared to their parents or grandparents, they are more likely to have lived in a home containing either one parent or a cohabiting but unmarried couple and to have seen married parents break up or single parents remarry. They are more likely to have watched a stay-at-home mother join the workplace or an employed mother pull back from work when the balancing act got too difficult. And they are more likely to have seen their financial stability rise or fall as a household's composition changed or parents encountered unexpected shifts in their job situations.

These intertwined changes in intimate relationships, work trajectories, and gender arrangements have created new patterns of living, working, and family-building that amount to no less than a social revolution. Yet this

revolution also faces great resistance from institutions rooted in earlier eras. On the job, workers continue to experience enormous pressures to give uninterrupted full-time, and often overtime, commitment not just to move up but even stay in place. In the home, privatized caretaking leaves parents, especially mothers, coping with seemingly endless demands and unattainable standards. And the entrenched conflicts between work and family life place mounting strains on adult partnerships. The tensions between changing lives and resistant institutions have created dilemmas for everyone.

In all of these ways, the children of the gender revolution grew to adulthood amid unprecedented, unpredictable, and uneven changes. They now must build their lives in an irrevocably but uncertainly altered world.

The Voices of a New Generation

What are the consequences of this widespread, but partial, social revolution? Where some see a generation shortchanged by working mothers and fragmenting households, others see one that can draw on more diverse and egalitarian models of family life. Where some see a resurgence of tradition, especially among those young women who want to leave the workplace, others see a deepening decline of commitment in the rising number of young adults living on their own. Whether judged to be worrisome or welcome, these contradictory views point to the continuing puzzles of the family and gender revolution. Has the rise of two-earner and single-parent households left children feeling neglected and insecure, or has it given them hope for the possibility of more diverse and flexible relationships? Will the young women and men reared in these changing circumstances turn back toward older patterns or seek new ways of building their families and integrating family and work?

To resolve these puzzles, we need to take a close look at the young women and men who came of age in this turbulent period. Through no choice of their own, they grew up in rapidly changing times, and their experiences are crucial to deciphering the contours and unexpected consequences of gender, work, and family change. Their lives also provide an opportunity to view the inner workings of diverse family forms, including two-income partnerships and single-parent homes as well as homemaker-breadwinner households, from the vantage point of the young people most directly affected. This generation lived through a natural social experiment, and their biographies make it possible to illuminate processes of social change and human development that remain hidden during more stable historical periods.

Poised between the dependency of childhood and the irrevocable investments of later life, young adulthood is a crucial phase in the human life course that represents both a time of individual transition and a potential engine for social change.[12] Old enough to look back over the full sweep of their childhoods and forward to their own futures, today's young adults are uniquely positioned to help us see beneath the surface of popular debate to deeper truths. Their childhood experiences can tell us how family, work, and gender arrangements shape life chances, and their young adult strategies can, in turn, reveal how people use their experiences to craft new life paths and redefine the contours of change.

Regardless of their own family experiences, today's young women and men have grown up in revolutionary times. For better or worse, they have inherited new options and questions about women's and men's proper places.[13] Now making the transition to adulthood, they have no well-worn paths to follow. Marriage no longer offers the promise of permanence, nor is it the only option for bearing and rearing children, but there is no clear route to building and maintaining an intimate bond. Most women no longer assume they can or will want to stay home with young children, but there is no clear model for how children should now be raised. Most men can no longer assume they can or will want to support a family on their own, but there is no clear path to manhood. Work and family shifts have created an ambiguous mix of new options *and* new insecurities, with growing conflicts between work and parenting, autonomy and commitment, time and money. Amid these social conflicts and contradictions, young women and men must search for new answers and develop innovative responses.

The Lives of Young Women and Men

Each generation's experiences are both a judgment about the past and a statement about the future. To understand the sources of these outlooks and actions, we need to examine what C. Wright Mills argued is the core focus of "the sociological imagination"—the intersection of biography, history, and social structure.[14] This approach calls on us to investigate how specific social and historical contexts give shape to the transhistorical links between social arrangements and human lives, paying special attention to how societies and individuals develop. Such an approach is especially needed when social shifts erode earlier ways of life, reveal the tenuous nature of certainties once taken for granted, and create new social conditions and possibilities.

Following in this tradition, I examine the lives of a strategically situated group to ask and answer broad questions. How, why, and under what conditions does large-scale social change take place? What are its limits, and what shapes its trajectories? How do social arrangements affect individual lives, and how, in turn, does the cumulative influence of individual responses give unexpected shape to the course of change?

Using this pivotal generation as a window on change, I interviewed 120 young women and men between the ages of eighteen and thirty-two. As a whole, they lived through the full range of changes taking place in family life. Most lived in some form of nontraditional home before reaching eighteen. Forty percent had some experience growing up with a single parent, and another 7 percent saw their parents separate or divorce after they left home. About a third had two parents who held full-time jobs for a significant portion of their childhood, while 27 percent grew up in homes where fathers were consistent primary breadwinners and mothers worked intermittently or not at all. Yet even many of these traditional households underwent significant shifts as parents changed their work situation or marriages faced a crisis.

With an average age of twenty-four at the time of the interview, they are evenly divided between women and men, and about 5 percent (also evenly divided between women and men) openly identified as either lesbian or gay. Randomly chosen from a broad range of city and suburban neighborhoods dispersed widely throughout the New York metropolitan area, the group includes people from a broad range of racial, ethnic, and class backgrounds who were reared in all regions of the country, including the South, West, and Midwest as well as throughout the East.

About 46 percent had a middle-class or upper-middle-class background, while another 38 percent described a working-class upbringing and 16 percent lived in or on the edge of poverty (including 10 percent whose families received public assistance during some portion of their childhood).[15] The group contained a similar level of racial and ethnic diversity. In all, 55 percent identified as non-Hispanic white, 22 percent as African-American, 17 percent as Latino or Latina, and 6 percent as Asian.[16] As a group, they reflect the demographic contours of young adults throughout metropolitan America.[17]

Everyone participated in a lengthy, in-depth life history interview in which they described their experiences growing up, reflected on the significance of these experiences, and considered their hopes and plans for the future. Focusing on processes of stability and change, the interview sought to uncover critical turning points in the lives of families and individuals, to discover the social contexts and events triggering these changes, and to explore how people imparted meaning and adopted coping strategies in response. Their life stories provide a surprising view on the social revolution this generation has inherited and whose future course it will shape.

The View from Below

What have young women and men concluded about their experiences in changing families? In contrast to the popular claim that this generation feels neglected by working mothers, unsettled by parental breakups, and wary of equality, they express strong support for working mothers and much greater concern with the quality of the relationship between parents than whether parents stayed together or separated.[18] Almost four out of five of those who had work-committed mothers believe this was the best option, while half of those whose mothers did not have sustained work lives wish they had.[19] On the controversial matters of divorce and single parenthood, a slight majority of those who lived in a single-parent home wish their biological parents had stayed together, but almost half believe it was better, if not ideal, for their parents to separate than to live in a conflict-ridden or silently unhappy home. Even more surprising, while a majority of children from intact homes think this was best, two out of five feel their parents might have been better off splitting up.

The following pages reveal a generation more focused on *how well* parents met the challenges of providing economic and emotional support than on *what form* their families took. They care about how their families unfolded, not what they looked like at any one point in time. Their narratives show that family life is a film, not a snapshot. Families are not a stable set of relationships frozen in time but a dynamic process that changes daily, monthly, and yearly as children grow. In fact, all families experience change, and even the happiest ones must adapt to changing contingencies—both in their midst and in the wider world—if they are to remain happy. No outcome is guaranteed. Stable, supportive families can become insecure and riven with conflict, while unstable families can develop supportive patterns and bonds.

Young women and men recount *family pathways* that moved in different directions as some homes became more supportive and others less so. These pathways undermine the usefulness of conceiving of families as types. Not only do many contemporary families change their form as time passes, but even those retaining a stable outward form can change in subtle but important ways as interpersonal dynamics shift.

By changing the focus from family types to family pathways, we can transcend the seemingly intractable debate pitting "traditional" homes against

other family forms. The lives of these young women and men call into question a number of strongly held beliefs about the primacy of family structure and the supremacy of one household type. Their experiences point instead to the importance of processes of family change, the ways that social contexts shape a family's trajectory, and people's active efforts to cope with and draw meaning from their changing circumstances.

What explains why some family pathways remain stable or improve, while others stay mired in difficulty or take a downward course? *Gender flexibility* in breadwinning and caretaking provides a key to answering this question. In the place of fixed, rigid behavioral strategies and mental categories demarcating separate spheres for women and men, gender flexibility involves more equal sharing and more fluid boundaries for organizing and apportioning emotional, social, and economic care. Flexible strategies can take different forms, including sharing, taking turns, and expanding beyond narrowly defined roles, in addition to more straightforward definitions of equality, but they all transgress the once rigidly drawn boundaries between women as caretakers and men as breadwinners.[20]

In a world where men may not be able or willing to support wives and children and women may need and want to pursue sustained work ties, parents (and other caretakers) could only overcome such family crises as the loss of a father's income or the decline of a mother's morale by letting go of rigid gender boundaries. As families faced a father's departure, a mother's frustration at staying home, or the loss of a parent's job, the ability of parents and other caretakers to respond flexibly to new family needs helped parents create more financially stable and emotionally supportive homes. Flexible approaches to earning and caring helped families adapt, while inflexible outlooks on women's and men's proper places left them ill prepared to cope with new economic and social realities. Although it may not be welcomed by those who prefer a clearer gender order, gender flexibility in earning and caring provided the most effective way for families to transcend the economic challenges and marital conundrums that imperiled their children's well-being.

Facing the Future

What, then, do young women and men hope and plan to do in their own lives? My interviews subvert the conventional wisdom here as well, whether it stresses the rise of "opt-out" mothers or the decline of commitment.[21] Most of my interviewees hope to create lasting, egalitarian partnerships, but they are also doubtful about their chances of reaching this goal. Whether or not their parents stayed together, more than nine out of ten hope to rear children in the context of a satisfying lifelong bond. Far from rejecting the value of commitment, almost everyone wants to create a lasting marriage or marriage-like relationship.

Their affirmation of the value of commitment does not, however, reflect a desire for a relationship based on clear, fixed separate spheres for mothers and fathers. Instead, most want to create a flexible, egalitarian partnership with considerable room for personal autonomy. Whether reared by homemaker-breadwinning, dual-earner, or single parents, most women *and* men want a committed bond where they share both paid work and family caretaking. Three-fourths of those reared in dual-earner homes want their spouses to share breadwinning and caretaking, but so do more than two-thirds of those from traditional homes and close to nine-tenths of those with single parents. Four-fifths of the women want egalitarian relationships, but so do over two-thirds of the men.

Yet young women and men also fear it may not be possible to forge an enduring, egalitarian relationship or integrate committed careers with devoted parenting. Skeptical about whether they can find the right partner and worried about balancing family and work amid mounting job demands and a lack of caretaking supports, they are developing second-best fallback strategies as insurance against their worst-case fears. In contrast to their ideals, women's and men's fallback strategies diverge sharply.

Hoping to avoid being trapped in an unhappy marriage or deserted by an unfaithful spouse, most women see work as essential to their survival. If a supportive partner cannot be found, they prefer self-reliance over economic dependence within a traditional marriage. Most men, however, worry more about the costs equal sharing might exact on their careers. If time-greedy workplaces make it difficult to strike an equal balance between work and parenting, men prefer a neotraditional arrangement that allows them to put work first and rely on a partner for the lion's share of caregiving. As they prepare to settle for second best, women and men both emphasize the importance of work as a central source of personal identity and financial survival, but this stance leads them to pursue different strategies. Reversing the argument that women are returning to tradition, men are more likely to want to count on a partner at home. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to see paid work as essential to providing for themselves and their children in a world where they may not be able to count on a man.

The rise of self-reliant women, who stress emotional and economic autonomy, and neotraditional men, who grant women's choice to work but also want to maintain their position as the breadwinning specialist, portends

a new work-family divide. But this division does not reflect the highest aspirations of most women or men. The debate about whether a new generation is rejecting commitment or embracing tradition does not capture the full story, because it does not distinguish between *ideals* and *fallback positions*. Young adults overwhelmingly hope to forge a lasting marriage or marriage-like relationship, to create a flexible and egalitarian bond with their intimate partner, and to blend home and work in their own lives. When it comes to their aspirations, women and men share many hopes and dreams. But fears that time-demanding workplaces, unreliable partners, and a dearth of caretaking supports will place these ideals out of reach propel them down different paths.

Drawing a distinction between ideals and enacted strategies resolves the ambiguity about the shape and direction of generational change. One-dimensional images—whether they depict resurgent traditionalism or family decline—cannot capture the complex, ambiguous experiences of today's young women and men. New generations *neither* wish to turn back to earlier gender patterns *nor* to create a brave new world of disconnected individuals. Most prefer instead to build a life that balances autonomy and commitment in the context of satisfying work and an egalitarian partnership.

Yet changing lives are colliding with resistant institutions, leaving new generations facing alternatives that are far less appealing. While institutional shifts such as the erosion of single-earner paychecks, the fragility of modern marriage, and the expanding options and pressures for women to work have made gender flexibility both desirable and necessary, demanding workplaces and privatized child rearing make work-family integration and egalitarian commitment difficult to achieve. Young women and men must reshape family, work, and gender amid an unfinished revolution. Whether they are able to create the world they want or will have to fall back on less desirable options remains an open question. Their struggles point to the social roots of these conflicts. They also make it clear that nothing less than the restructuring of work and caretaking will allow new generations to achieve the ideals they seek and provide the supports their own children will need.

PART ONE | Growing Up in Changing Families