MANAGING TIME IN DOMESTIC SPACE
Home-Based Contractors and Household Work

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Much research shows that paid work performed at home supports a gendered division of household labor, leaving women disproportionately responsible for unpaid domestic work. For contract professionals, however, the flexibility to manage working time outside the constraints of a standard job allows both men and women to meld paid employment with household responsibilities. Interspersing paid and unpaid work, home-based contractors—both women and men—accommodate family needs. They arrange daily schedules to be available parents and household managers, and they develop longer-term career trajectories that allow adjustment over time. For women, however, long-standing notions of domesticity make such accommodation invisible, normative, and unremarkable. For men, in contrast, home-based contracting can create the space with which to challenge gender norms. For these home workers, therefore, the same arrangement simultaneously reinforces and resists conventional constructions of gender.

Keywords: flexibility; gender; gender salience; home-based work; household division of labor; nonstandard work; working time; family

Paid work performed at home has long presented contradictions. Historical and contemporary accounts document the marginality of home workers worldwide, yet for some, work at home offers respite from the inflexibility of a work-site job (Apgar 1998; Bailyn 1993; Daniels 1989; Prugl 1999). Such divergent views of home working indicate variation across social class and social location (Felstead and Jewson 2000; Jurik 1998). All home workers, however, share a historically constructed legacy of gender that renders women responsible for household

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maintenance. For women, paid work at home has long appeared gender-appropriate. For men, in contrast, the predominance of paid employment has long eclipsed household responsibility, so that men’s domestic involvement represents a relatively recent shift in the gendered expectations of work and family life.

This study of home working analyzes work practices and household strategies among two groups of contract professionals: writers and editors, engaged in print and Web communications, and programmers and engineers, engaged in software development and applications. \(^1\) Contractors in these occupations, both men and women, participate in one form of nonstandard, “contingent” employment, in which they procure, carry out, and deliver assignments, for which they receive an hourly wage or project fee. Working autonomously, contractors are individually responsible for managing their working time and space to meet deadlines and produce as promised for clients with whom they have contractual agreements.

The contractor’s deliverable product—lines of code, system specifications, edited copy, a compiled index—invariably requires concentration, necessitating periods of quiet, uninterrupted time and dedicated work space in home offices equipped with essential technology. In this regard, these home-based professionals resemble office “teleworkers,” or “telecommuters,” who spend some part of a standard workweek at home, connected to the office through e-mail, fax, and phone. Unlike telecommuting employees, however, contractors are only marginal members of the organization, with no formal status in an office hierarchy and no expectation of long-term careers with a single employer. Although they may occasionally arrive on-site and meet with clients, they need not maintain standard hours or regular availability unless contract projects require their presence. Instead, their time is a more flexible arrangement through which they must meet both clients’ expectations and personal needs.

Working at home, contractors must accommodate paid work and household obligations in a space long associated with a gendered division of household labor and typified by women’s unpaid care and maintenance. Lodged in private space, home-based work becomes embedded in domestic relations, with different normative expectations well established for women and men. The experiences of both men and women in these two occupational groups, therefore, provide an opportunity to consider whether the flexibility that contracting allows can contribute to reconfiguring gender distinctions in the household. As paid work at home blurs the dichotomy between public and private life, does contract employment provide a means for challenging normative notions of gender?

**GENDER, TIME, AND WORK AT HOME**

Both proponents and critics of home work acknowledge that women in the workforce typically remain responsible for two sets of tasks, one subject to organizational control, the other to family obligations. Accommodating both, home workers can find their choices shaped by geographic isolation, inflexible work-site schedules, or limited family support (Dangler 1994; Gringeri 1994). Among
professionals, work at home may signal a lack of commitment and so cost upward mobility in an organization (Bailyn 1993; Mirchandani 1999). For professional women, the blurred boundaries between work and family can create a crisis of legitimacy as occupational identities disappear behind the threshold of the home (Christensen 1988; Mirchandani 1998).

Research further suggests that men and women arrange home working differently. Men more often segregate work from home, sometimes by adhering to schedules that reflect temporal patterns of standard work-site employment (Heck, Owen, and Rowe 1995; Salmi 1997). Women, in contrast, tend to arrange schedules to meet domestic needs, often by working at all hours to meet employers’ demands (Fagan 2001; Hessing 1994). For women, therefore, work at home requires operating within two temporal orders, one regulated by measurable productivity, the other by expectations for availability and care (Glucksmann 1998). At home, women’s time becomes fragmented, whereas men’s use of time remains focused, approximating a standard workday (Daly 1996; Sullivan 1997). The social organization of time among home workers thus reflects long-standing gender inequalities in which women perform a disproportionate share of household labor.

Studies of men’s involvement in family life, however, now document variation in household participation (Dowd 2000; Gerson 1993). Some studies find men’s share of household work to be slowly increasing, with fathers increasingly engaged in child care (Coltrane 1996; Townsend 2002). Others find that immersion in domestic life still violates a normative masculinity that requires a visible commitment to a job (Cooper 2000; Pleck 1993). For men with professional jobs, work at home may even enhance a gendered division of household labor, as men demonstrate the primacy of paid employment by subordinating domestic needs (Heck, Owen, and Rowe 1995).

To date, however, most research on professional work at home has considered only standard, organization-based jobs. Workers in standard employment, these studies conclude, draw clear boundaries between their households and their paid work (Mirchandani 1999; Sullivan and Lewis 2001). Contracting, however, removes the worker from accountability to organizational norms and work-site culture and so allows both men and women greater flexibility in allocating their time. Outside the structures of a standard job, therefore, home-based contracting is distinct in both work-site and employment status. How, then, does contract employment affect home workers’ use of time? What can these home-working contractors reveal about the prospects for challenging gendered household practices?

DATA AND METHOD

The contract professionals who participated in this study work at home. As contractors, they typically take multiple assignments from several clients, either sequentially or simultaneously, so that the terms and tasks of their work vary over time. Although some informants occasionally work at client sites, all maintain home offices. Of the 50 home-based contractors who comprise this sample, 28 are
TABLE 1: Sample Characteristics: Writers and Editors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Household Composition</th>
<th>Time as Contractor</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Income$^a$</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bernice</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>4 years</td>
<td>MA, MS</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bill</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>6 years$^b$</td>
<td>MS</td>
<td>$60,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Spouse, one child in infancy</td>
<td>4 years$^b$</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>$80,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darla</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Roommate</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>$25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donald</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>$45,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ellie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>4 years$^b$</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>$55,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gary</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Spouse, two children, one in preschool, one in infancy</td>
<td>9 years$^b$</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>$45,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grant$^c$</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>8 years$^b$</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>$45,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>20 years</td>
<td>EdD</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holly</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>One school-age child</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>$60,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janice</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Spouse, one preschool child</td>
<td>4 years$^b$</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jon</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Roommate</td>
<td>10 months</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>$48,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kevin</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>5 years$^b$</td>
<td>Courses</td>
<td>$40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>6 months</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maxine</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Spouse, two teenage children</td>
<td>12 years</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melanie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Two school-age children</td>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>$35,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael$^d$</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>Spouse, two children, one grown</td>
<td>25 years$^b$</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>$45,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Myra$^e$</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Spouse, two school-age children</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age</td>
<td>Status</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Years</td>
<td>Degree</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------</td>
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<td>--------</td>
<td>-----------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>--------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noreen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Spouse, two teenage children</td>
<td>4 years&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pat&lt;sup&gt;e&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Spouse, one school-age child</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>$25,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phil</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>8 years&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>$90,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam&lt;sup&gt;e&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seth</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>3 years&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>AA</td>
<td>$70,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sherry</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>2 years&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>$45,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sylvia&lt;sup&gt;e&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Spouse, two school-age children</td>
<td>11 years</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ted</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>MFA</td>
<td>$30,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Spouse, two teenage children</td>
<td>6 years&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Courses</td>
<td>$70,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todd</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Spouse, two school-age children</td>
<td>10 years</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valerie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>5 years&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>$48,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yolanda</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>6 years</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>$45,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NOTE:** N/A indicates that informant chose not to report income.

a. Incomes are self-reports only and do not distinguish between gross and net income.

b. Most recent period of contracting.

c. Partner in gay or lesbian household.

d. Also worked at home while children were young.

e. Informant noted part-time hours.
TABLE 2: Sample Characteristics: Programmers and Engineers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Household Composition</th>
<th>Time as Contractor</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Income(^a)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ben</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>Spouse, two school-age children</td>
<td>6 years(^b)</td>
<td>MS</td>
<td>$125,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brent</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>2 years</td>
<td>MS</td>
<td>$60,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Partner, two school-age children</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>MS</td>
<td>$120,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrell(^c)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>Spouse, five grown children</td>
<td>10 years(^b)</td>
<td>BS</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ezra</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>8 years</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>$70,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Spouse, one child in infancy</td>
<td>3 years(^b)</td>
<td>BS</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jeffrey(^c)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>Spouse, two grown children</td>
<td>30 years</td>
<td>BS</td>
<td>$125,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph(^c)</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>Spouse, two grown children</td>
<td>22 years(^b)</td>
<td>MS</td>
<td>$80,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>1 year(^b)</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>$70,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katherine</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Spouse, one school-age child</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>$48,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Linda</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Spouse, two school-age children</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>MS</td>
<td>$120,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marta</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Spouse, one preschool child</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>MS</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Spouse</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>$50,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melinda</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>One teenage child</td>
<td>15 years</td>
<td>MBA</td>
<td>$90,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meredith(^d)</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Partner, two school-age children</td>
<td>5 years</td>
<td>MS</td>
<td>$70,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patrick</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Spouse, two school-age children, one child in infancy</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>$120,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pete</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Spouse, two school-age children</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>$100,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>8 months</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>$40,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rita</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Spouse, two teenage children</td>
<td>4 years(^b)</td>
<td>MA</td>
<td>$90,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roland</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>2.5 years</td>
<td>BA</td>
<td>$80,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NOTE: N/A indicates that the informant chose not to disclose income.

a. Incomes are self-reports only and do not distinguish between gross and net income.
b. Most recent period of contracting.
c. Also worked at home while children were young.
d. Partner in gay or lesbian household.
men, and 22 are women (Tables 1 and 2). 2 Half live in households with children; 3 are single parents. Although most were living with spouses or partners, 3 were living alone and 1 with a roommate at the time of the interview. Three informants self-identified as partners in gay or lesbian households. All informants’ spouses and partners held standard full-time jobs and were rarely at home during the day.

Seeking a diverse sample in each occupation, I used personal contacts and Internet postings to find contractors with different sets of skills, and I then asked for referrals to others who could provide both demographic diversity and experience in a variety of industries and regions. In both occupations, practitioners described finding most of their work in industries that employ them in large numbers, usually in or near urban centers, where almost all had been employed in staff positions at some point in their careers. Telecommunications, however, can expand a contractor’s reach, and some informants had found accessible clients all over the globe.

Informants reported that, over time, they had developed a range of skills and services that spanned several specialized areas. Writers and editors, therefore, also include those who translate texts and index documents; programmers and engineers include those who design system architecture and test applications. Most of these contractors were engaged by their clients as individual practitioners, usually for the duration of a specific project. Three informants, however, had become recruiters in their respective fields, subcontracting assignments to other contractors and operating small subcontracting firms from their homes.

Each of these occupations has long been gender typed, with men predominating among programmers and engineers and women among writers and editors, who in some industries are almost always home based when working on contract (Osnowitz 2000; Perlow 1997; Reskin 1990). Yet, despite these gendered distinctions, occupational structures are remarkably similar. In both occupations, contracting is an institutionalized practice in which contractors augment staffs of employees who do much the same work. Contractors consider themselves colleagues, not subordinates, of employees, and some informants had assumed supervisory authority, as contractors, over schedules, budgets, and project teams. Both men and women in each group also described considerable mobility back and forth between contracting and standard employment. Seeking to identify gendered processes, I asked informants to refer me to contractors from the “minority” gender in each occupation. Of the 19 programmers and engineers, 6 are women; of the 31 writers and editors, 14 are men.

Contractors in both occupational groups are mostly white, educated, and broadly middle class, demographically similar to their counterparts on staff, as earlier studies and my own observation have indicated (Kunda 1992; Meiksins and Whalley 2002; Osnowitz 2000). Most informants reported pay rates that netted incomes comparable to their salaries in standard jobs, ranging from approximately $25,000 to $125,000, with a median of $90,000 for programmers and engineers and $45,000 for writers and editors. The disparity is attributable, at least in part, to a history of gender typification and the lower status and pay correlated with feminized occupations (Reskin 1990). All informants had attended college, and
some had advanced degrees. Almost all were experienced practitioners, well established in their occupations, with networks of colleagues. Their ages ranged from 23 to 67. Many noted that they had known few, if any, colleagues—as either contractors or staff employees—who were members of racial minority groups. The racial homogeneity of these occupations may have many causes. Lack of educational opportunities may limit access for minorities, contributing to the white cast of these occupations. Hiring practices that depend on collegial networks may also reproduce racial characteristics as workers disproportionately recruit those similar to themselves (Grieco 1987; Marsden and Gorman 2001).

Semistructured interviews, conducted from 2000 to 2002, averaged close to two hours. Although a few took place in public places and one by telephone, I interviewed most informants in their homes. Questions covered work histories, daily routines, work-family strategies, and perspectives on contracting and home-based work. All informants emphasized the flexibility of contracting and described their allocation of time at home. Almost all related experiences illustrating time management, daily household practices, and career decisions. Interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded for emerging themes as the research progressed, so that comparisons between women’s and men’s accounts could be investigated as fieldwork continued.

The analysis that follows compares the practices and perceptions of the women and men who participated in this study. The first two sections consider their allocation of time as they establish boundaries between paid and unpaid work and manage the demands of these dual domains in a single space. The third section considers their allocation of time over a career spent, at least in part, outside the boundaries of an employing organization and a standard organization-based job. Where men work as home-based contractors, I argue, the temporal flexibility of their work arrangement promotes a distribution of household responsibility that challenges gender norms. Home-based contracting may, therefore, diminish the salience of gender in the household as men and women engage in comparable practices and redraw household boundaries that have long marked gender difference. The final section considers the cultural constructions of home and work that perpetuate gender difference and so inform and distinguish men’s and women’s experiences of work at home.

**CROSSING AND MONITORING BOUNDARIES**

Patterns of transition into contract work confirm a common process documented in earlier research on each occupation: Organizational obstacles limit advancement or undermine security in standard employment, and the employee decides to try contracting (Granger, Stanworth, and Stanworth 1995; Kunda, Barley, and Evans 2002). Most informants described leaving standard, on-site jobs after episodes of workplace restructuring. Most further described jobs that had become unpredictable, and many had experienced layoffs or anticipated that reductions in staff would eventually necessitate change. Only 4 of 50 informants—one man and three
women—described choosing contract employment specifically to accommodate household responsibilities. Contracting, therefore, is not necessarily a choice driven by a gender-related rationale. Rather, it provides an alternative opportunity structure, outside organizational boundaries, available to both men and women for some portion of a career.

Contracting from home also allows workers to arrange their time without having to adhere to a standard workday schedule. Yolanda, a writer and project manager, described her sense of autonomy: “I don’t have to be at my desk between 8:00 and 5:00. It means I can take a whole day off. Since I’m in sort of a remote area, a little bit isolated from town, it means I can take half a day off and drive into town and run errands and work late into the night or spread the rest out across several days.” Like Yolanda, all but four of my informants reported “billable time” and related tasks—project seeking, office maintenance, administration—that demanded full-time attention. Although work flow and project demands can cause working hours to vary, most averaged 30 to 45 working hours a week, which for many was less than the 50- to 70-hour weeks they had experienced on staff. Many, therefore, preferred contract work to the time demands of standard employment, which they had found unrelenting.

As they log “billable time,” home-based contractors must also manage the proximity of paid to unpaid work by maintaining boundaries that distinguish segments of their time. Both the men and the women I interviewed had found that their temporal boundaries required special vigilance. Jeffrey, a software engineer, explained, “If I walk to the kitchen, . . . I may see something in the kitchen, and I think, oh, there’s some dishes. So I put them in the dishwasher. That’s not working. And I owe them [his client] working time. . . . So you end up compensating.” Home workers cannot depend on organizational settings to maintain temporal distinctions but must themselves monitor time spent at paid employment.

As studies of telecommuting have shown, however, merely working at home provides only limited flexibility when telecommuters, still based in an organization, remain accountable to work-site norms and office routines (Mirchandani 1999; Sullivan and Lewis 2001). With its rigid temporal constraints, the standard, organization-based job is also a gendered construct. It presumes an “abstract worker,” who must meet “implicit demands” to separate paid work from domestic responsibilities (Acker 1992, 257). Home-based contracting, in contrast, relieves the worker of accountability to organizational culture, allowing greater control of time and, with it, the possibility for challenging the conventional division between paid work and domestic life. A contractor’s relative autonomy thus provides greater latitude in apportioning paid employment and household responsibilities.

Notable among the contractors I interviewed is the similarity with which men and women described their experiences. Both women and men cited the temporal flexibility that contracting allows as a means for accomplishing varied tasks in the time available. Brent, a programmer, explained, “It’s very rare that I have a day when I just code or design all day. . . . I can do different things, like stuff in the house.” Dinner could be cooking, Brent elaborated, while he continued
programming, allowing him to attend simultaneously to two domains. Meredith similarly described software development as so “absorbing and draining” that she needed occasionally “to clear my head. . . . I also need time at home to do all the things in the house. I don’t think I could go back to a nine-to-five job, let alone a nine-to-nine job.”

Responsible for arranging their own schedules, these men and women interspersed paid and unpaid tasks and drew their own temporal boundaries. With more autonomy to arrange their working time than most standard jobs permit, none maintained rigid boundaries between home and work. Instead, they developed individual routines that allocated time for household maintenance and paid employment. Although only a few informants had begun contracting to accommodate household responsibilities, all reported daily practices that differed from the gendered arrangements of organization-based work. The flexibility of contract employment thus allowed them to challenge the gendered dichotomy that supports the standard job.

**MANAGING CARE**

All working parents face two sets of constraints, one imposed by the expectations of paid employment, the other by the imperatives of care, which require parents to accommodate their time to children’s needs. For most home-based contractors, the proximity of paid work to family life makes managing work and family an ever-present project that structures the day around children’s schedules. Rita, a programmer, described regulating her time when her two children were younger: “I would start very early in the morning, like 7:00 in the morning, and try to get the most productive hours in while the kids were in school. . . . I’d get the kids, bring them, spend a little time. Then they’d go off and play, and I’d go back to work, . . . and then I’d stop in the late afternoon and get dinner ready.” Like Rita, home-working contractors often create fragmented schedules that provide uninterrupted periods of concentration while children are otherwise occupied. To work full-time hours, those with young children are likely to need child care assistance.

Even with assistance, however, the proximity of caregiving and contracting can make managing time a challenge. Fred, a programmer, had much of his working time “covered” by a day care provider, but when child care was unavailable, he had found himself “fitting in” short bursts of writing code around infant care: “The most important skill I learned when I became a father was how to do everything with one hand. . . . I mean, I wrote a piece of software 10 minutes at a time, you know, changing diapers, with the baby up in spells. . . . Keeping track of things, keeping it all together, that’s the hardest part.” Unlike Rita’s fragmented day, Fred’s divided awareness subverts the gendered expectations that more often render women responsible for the “invisible work” of care and family maintenance (Perkins and DeMeis 1996). Although domestic involvement represents a new norm for some fathers, studies of household labor also document pervasive asymmetry between women and men, in which women remain household managers,
defining tasks and anticipating needs (Coltrane 1996; Hochschild 1989; Mederer 1993). Fred’s account, however, suggests that gender, as a principle for organizing work, has become less salient in the household, at least while he is alone providing care. Men, too, may assume some measure of household management, as Fred explained, “I end up keeping track of everything. . . . I’m always making lists.”

Home-based contractors, regardless of gender, describe proximity to the household as a rationale for assuming responsibilities. Sylvia, a writer and editor, reported, “We have a house cleaner who comes in every other week to do the really heavy lifting, but other than that, my kids and I do the housework because my husband travels. . . . And I pretty much manage things at home.” Gary, also an editor, echoed Sylvia’s reasoning: “My wife is working full-time [on-site], . . . so I can get the laundry done. I can go to the store and can go pick up the kids. . . . I find that being a freelancer sort of allows me to be a dad.” As parents at home during the day, fathers as well as mothers become responsive to children’s needs. Bruce, a software engineer, explained, “The kids come home from school; they need a ride here and there. If a kid wants something, . . . the right thing to do is to drop everything and do what the kid wants. The problem [is] . . . getting the billable hours in.” With deadlines to meet, contractors often find that interruptions extend paid work into early mornings or late nights.

The need to log billable hours can also cause home-based contractors to draw boundaries that segregate work from home. Patrick, a programmer and systems analyst, explained, “I installed a couple of French doors and trained everybody: when Daddy’s working, Daddy’s working. So I don’t get distracted that way as much. But I do. . . . I have a struggle.” With his wife on maternity leave, Patrick explained, he was “focusing more on the business,” and his wife had become both primary parent and household manager. Having both parents at home, even temporarily, had promoted a more conventional division of labor, redrawing boundaries and reassigning tasks. Patrick described “watching the baby” while his wife did errands or drove the other children to various activities, the details of which eluded him. Such involvement approximates the behavior of fathers whose assertions as engaged parents reflect commitment to their children but little attention to the minutiae of daily life (Arendell 1995; Lareau 2000).

Patrick’s struggle with his own time discipline suggests both continuity and change in the gendered expectations of work and family. Like other fathers in this study, he described assuming more household responsibility as he worked at home, and he anticipated resuming more household oversight, together with more child care, when his wife returned to her job. In the meantime, with only French doors between paid employment and family activity, he sought new strategies that would allow him to be simultaneously the family’s principal breadwinner and an involved parent. Seeking to meet both sets of expectations, he had reaffirmed a boundary between home and work, resorting to a physical barrier, which carried as much symbolic significance as practical value. As he noted, however, the permeability of this boundary allowed adjustment, and changing circumstances made gendered arrangements open to review.
As available parents, home-working fathers further contend with visible responsibilities more typically associated with motherhood, such as appearances at school, after-school activities, and doctors’ appointments (Deutsch 1999; Garey 1999). As Gary explained, “When there’s a teacher conference, I’m the one who goes. . . . I end up doing the things that take most of the time. I’m kind of in the place where most women have found themselves.” Ben, a software engineer, described a similar experience. “I put the core needs of my family ahead of my work regimen,” he reported, “and that means school, play dates. . . . my youngest daughter has a number of significant allergies. . . . potentially life threatening. . . . and should she have a reaction and need treatment, my wife works anywhere from an hour to an hour and a half away.” Working at home, Ben had discovered, made him the primary parent during the day, a responsibility he often enjoyed but that required him to be ready to respond to his children’s needs.

For Gary and Ben, proximity to the household meant performing tasks that they might not otherwise take on and visibly navigating cultural expectations that apply less often to fathers. For them, household work encompassed greater parental availability than they had assumed as employees on-site. As Gary elaborated, “How to be a dad and venture into this other-gender territory? It’s not heroic. It’s something that has to be done.” Comparing home-based contracting with on-site employment, both women and men cited the constant proximity of paid and unpaid work as a rationale for allocating responsibilities. Their spouses might assume household tasks and obligations when they returned home, but the parent present during the day became primarily responsible more of the time. The conditions of home-based contracting could thus reverse or affirm a conventional gendered division of labor, and for men, blurring the boundaries that more typically mark gender difference could alter household norms.

CONSTRUCTING CAREERS

For both men and women, home-based contracting itself alters career patterns associated with organizational employment. Most contractors work for multiple clients, moving from one project to the next, spanning the boundaries of employing organizations, with trajectories that represent one form of “boundaryless career” (Cohen and Mallon 1999). Although the work they take on may match that of staff employees, contractors do not occupy organizational positions. Career success is therefore less a vertical progression up an organizational ladder than a horizontal path marked by a series of projects that provide, ideally, both professional challenge and financial reward. Over time, contractors seek to develop skills and enhance earnings, but they do not receive raises, promotions, or performance reviews. The same autonomy that allows them to regulate their daily schedules, therefore, requires them to direct their own careers.

Removed from the expectations of standard employment, contractors can chart careers that accommodate a number of decisions that might incur penalties for staff employees. A contractor can limit working time, for example, without concern for a
place in the organizational hierarchy. Sherry, an editor and translator, considered her plans for parenthood: "I feel as if I have a lot more options as a freelancer. . . If I want to be a mom, I can be a mom, and I can have a job at the same time and have it on my own terms." To accommodate a family, Sherry explained, she could solicit projects that allowed her to manage child care. She might find less challenging work while her children were young, she speculated, without compromising her credibility as a professional. Corporate careers, in contrast, demand compromise, especially when organizational benchmarks—reviews, promotions, special assignments—chart professional progress.

Linda, a database developer, described her experience with a corporate employer that had required her to choose between "the mommy track," which would have limited her long-term career options, and "a very high-tech career path," which had demanded long hours that often brought her home after midnight. As a contractor, she explained, "my growth path is not at somebody else's company." Rather than work toward a promotion, Linda emphasized, "I'm here [in her home office] to earn money and to develop my skill set." Contractors are, in effect, on the clock but off the ladder, without the imperative—or even the prospect—of advancement within an organization. Without time at work demanded in return for increasing organizational status, they need not routinely subordinate family needs to achieve career goals. Committed to an occupation without a corresponding attachment to a job, a contractor can more readily accommodate paid work with life course decisions that might otherwise conflict with an employer's demands.

Many informants considered the flexibility of their careers to be such a significant asset that staff employment seemed less desirable. Most, however, also believed they could find standard jobs in their fields, though not necessarily on terms they would want. Todd, a technical writer and project manager, had recently considered but had "backed out" of a job offer: "They told me they'd pretty much try to re-create what I now have. You know, I could have an office in my house. I could have flexibility. I could telecommute. But at the end of the day, if there's a meeting at 10:00 on a Monday and my son wakes up and is sick and needs me to stay home with him, I'm going to stay home with him . . . and make it up at night. My experience tells me I couldn't re-create this if I had a staff job." Standard work, Todd elaborated, always "comes with an understanding: Work comes first. . . . It's not that you're fired if you put family first, but they find ways to make it harder for you." Todd's experience represents the normative expectations of standard employment, the spoken and unspoken requirements that signal commitment to an organization and make an employee eligible for increasing recognition and reward. Unlike Linda, Todd did not consider his job offer a "mommy track," a subordinate, gendered alternative. Like Linda, however, he had determined that a career as a contractor best allowed him to be an available parent without occupational sacrifice.

Superficially gender neutral but premised on an enduring boundary between public pursuits and private obligations, the standard job allows little latitude for reconfiguring either daily schedules or individual careers (Acker 1992). As work at
home blurs spatial and temporal boundaries, however, home-based contractors—both men and women—evidence variation in attending to the dual trajectories of paid work and family life. Without the expectations that come with organizational position, they face fewer demands to separate paid work from household needs. Rather than conform to organizational structures, their career paths more readily adapt to individual choices. Their careers may thus challenge the gendered arrangements that determine options for organization-based employees.

Some contractors use their flexibility to adapt during periods of family transition. When careers of partners or spouses require relocation, for example, they can move and continue their work, sometimes without losing their clients. Myra, a manuscript editor, had found that such a move had brought a surprising advantage: “I think partly moving away gave me a real cachet,” she mused. “The fact that I was in demand from far away meant I was good.” Soliciting work in a new location, Myra had been unsure that her long-term clients would continue to call, and when they did, potential new clients had been impressed. Janice, a writer and project manager, had begun developing a clientele when she and her husband decided to adopt: “We decided we wanted to have a kid… That was one of the reasons I really started to actively pursue moonlighting.” If the ever-changing demands of her job proved incompatible with parenting, Janice had reasoned, she would already be established as a contractor. When the company did eventually relocate, she explained, she had indeed been prepared. Michael, an editor and proofreader, described a more abrupt transition, which had precipitated a period of contracting: “I was laid off in June. My daughter was born in May, so I was able to be a full-time father and do freelance work at the same time.”

In some dual-earner families, the contractor’s career can absorb the shock of change more readily than a career shaped by organizational expectations or marked by a normative sequence of stages. Max, a programmer, planned to develop a technical support business. Comparing his plans with his wife’s, however, he explained, “My wife got a tenure-track job, and we’re talking about starting a family. . . . It doesn’t hurt for me to hold off.” Considering the inflexibility of his wife’s academic career, with its high-stakes tenure decision, Max fully expected to be the primary parent, “for at least a few years” while his wife established herself. For her, the path was predetermined and the sanctions for deviance potentially severe. For him, career structures were less rigid, and short-term compromises carried lower costs. Yet acknowledging an arrangement that reversed the more conventional subordination of women to men’s career goals, Max had set limits: “I can go for only so long before I need to make it into something that is more consistent,” he elaborated. As many contractors explained, accommodation can be an ongoing process, with gendered expectations reconsidered over time.

Like their daily schedules, however, contractors’ career decisions are not infinitely adaptable. To remain professionally viable, my informants explained, they had to update skills and maintain networks of colleagues and clients, usually on their own time and at their own expense. Lacking organizational positions, contractors also lack the benefit packages that typically come with standard employment,
and they have no access to employer-sponsored training, which can be especially important in technical fields (Kunda, Barley, and Evans 2002). The need to compensate for the organizational support that employees receive had caused many informants to spend unpaid time attending classes or teaching themselves new skills. A few also suggested that contract work might, over time, foreclose options. Todd speculated that a protracted period of contracting might make a job in top management unattainable in some corporate settings. Myra wondered whether relocation had curtailed her options for standard, on-site employment, in part because the growth of nonstandard work in her field had eroded the supply of standard jobs.

**REDRAWING BOUNDARIES, REFLECTING ON GENDER**

Seeing themselves as active agents, all informants described their work arrangements as positive choices and considered their options for future employment open. In understanding their decisions, however, they also interpreted their actions against a backdrop of gendered norms that mark professional progress and family life. Just as they expressed awareness of patterns associated with standard employment, they also acknowledged gendered patterns of household work, which provided the interpretive frames through which they analyzed their experiences. Informing these interpretations are distinctly gendered notions of women’s domesticity, men’s breadwinning, and egalitarian ideals.

Almost all of the women in this study expressed resistance to gendered attitudes associated with women at home. As Rita reported, “When I started being at home all the time, that was when we really started getting into the roles... I told my husband I wouldn’t be like a housewife in disguise.” Negotiating with partners, Rita’s report suggests, may pose greater problems for home-working women than it does for men, who benefit more from the conventional division of household labor. Women must counter head on the gender-based assumptions that equate work at home with their “natural” domesticity and so undermine their legitimacy as practicing professionals. Sylvia pointed further to a larger community context with which she had to contend: “Some people don’t really believe that if you’re working at home, you’re really working. So, hours that I’ve committed to work, neighbors will drop by; friends will ask for favors. People don’t realize that when you’re working at home, you really are working and not baking pies or something.” Pat, a writer and editor, had also found that visibility at home during the day could convey an impression of leisure or availability, and believing that she could assist with child care, neighbors had felt free to ask for help: “Some people ask [for favors] because I’m out in the garden or something... They think I just putter around the house.”

For women with children, motherhood could also overshadow professional status, requiring them to assert their legitimacy as paid workers. Meredith described the responses of friends and family when she began contracting: “I got a lot of ‘you’re going to be home with your kids’ kind of stuff, and I corrected people, ’cause it’s not how I define what I do.” Myra lamented the same attitudes: “I don’t
like the marginality of what I do. . . . What I really like is that I do have time with my kids. But I’m not just with my kids. . . . I have to explain to people that I actually do work when I’m at home.” Like other women in this study, Myra had objected when members of her community assumed she could volunteer at her children’s school or provide transportation for neighborhood children. A few men similarly acknowledged the gendered division of labor that makes women domestic providers. Comparing himself to a colleague, Phil, a writer, mused, “A woman who is working at home with children in the house is ‘obviously’ really looking after the children and not working. . . . It’s assumed that a woman is doing child care.” Unlike his colleague, a woman with children, Phil had never been asked to assist friends or family while he worked at home.

Unlike the mothers, the fathers I interviewed expressed little concern for their professional legitimacy. Rather, they consistently described being at home with their families as a reward to be seized and savored. Todd emphasized his reasons for remaining a contractor: “I have two young children, so I really want to spend as much time with them as I can while they’re young, and the flexibility that I have in my work gives me that opportunity.” Missing in this account is concern for the devaluation of domestic involvement so readily associated with women’s family work. Instead, Todd’s interpretive lens magnifies his status as parent without obscuring his position as professional. Working at home, he believed, allowed him to be an active father, involved in his children’s lives. More than motherhood, his experience suggests, fatherhood reflects a cultural construction compatible with paid employment.

None of the men in this study described home-based employment as a marker of marginality. Their silence likely reflects gendered perceptions of home and work that provide men with greater legitimacy as workers. Their household participation, however, may also be insufficient for alleviating gender inequities. Numerous studies of housework document differences in men’s and women’s understanding of domestic equality and so suggest that informants’ interpretations of family life may mask an unequal division of household labor (Gerstel and Gallagher 2001; Hochschild 1989). Yet, like Todd, these men speak of work at home as an opportunity to meld paid work with family responsibilities and other household tasks.

Fred conveyed a common sentiment: “I cherish the time I get to spend with my wife and daughter.” Yet he also perceived contractors as exceptionally capable: “They tend to be the upper end as far as a certain set of characteristics: intelligence, skill, experience, independence. . . . They have the ability to get things done.” Far from subordinate, such a self-image claims special expertise. Bruce described finding similar validation in his relationships with clients: “There are some people who like the idea of bringing in a high-powered consultant. . . . They feel good about it, particularly if I can solve their problem.” Viewed as “cowboy contractors,” arrived to save a project, these images depict prowess more often associated with masculine achievement. Women, too, reported validation in their work and recognition from their clients, but they also grappled with conflicting perceptions outside their employment. Sherry described clients as “rolling out the red carpet” when she
arrived on-site for project meetings, but she also expressed concern that her flexibility might be equated with indolence: “There’s always this element of people who have this idea that you’re sitting around doing nothing, you know, eating bonbons at 3:00 p.m.”

As earlier research affirms (Christensen 1988; Mirchandani 1998), women ensconced in home offices can easily lose their legitimacy as active participants in the workforce. Surrounded by the trappings of private life, they become cloaked by an assumed domesticity that obscures their employment status. For both women and men, work at home, even work segregated from domestic life, can facilitate greater participation in child care and household tasks. For women, however, long-standing notions of domesticity can render these efforts invisible, normative, and unremarkable. When a woman struggles to meet family needs while putting in the requisite billable hours, she is merely restructuring the “second shift” (Hochschild 1989), alternating between paid work and housework but still working a double day. When a man juggles paid work with the same responsibilities, he is breaking new ground.

CONCLUSION

Home-based contracting blurs both spatial and temporal boundaries that separate public from private activity, allowing contractors enhanced flexibility to meld work and family life. Unlike telecommuters, who hold standard jobs, contractors need not maintain regular schedules or conform to office routines. Instead, they develop their own schedules, interspersing household tasks with paid employment as they manage time to meet responsibilities for care and commitments to clients. Removed from the gendered structures of organization-based employment, both men and women report arranging time for paid and unpaid work as they move back and forth across the temporal boundary that standard employment maintains. Those with children cite the proximity of paid work to the household as the rationale for becoming primary parents during the day. Men as well as women describe the flexibility that contracting provides as an advantage in meeting household needs. Blurring the temporal boundary that marks the conventional division of household labor, therefore, their daily schedules can diminish the salience of gender as a principle for organizing work.

Outside standard, organization-based employment, home-based contractors also chart individual career paths without concern for benchmarks that otherwise mark professional progress. Most span the boundaries of multiple employers, constructing careers that depend on a series of projects rather than a sequence of jobs in an organizational hierarchy. Their career trajectories can contrast markedly with the gendered structure of organizational life, which more often exacts time at a work site in return for organizational status and disadvantages those who try to combine paid employment with family responsibilities. Both men and women describe configuring long-term career paths that adjust short-term goals to partners’ constraints. With greater latitude for adjustment, they can accommodate paid
work with family needs without the sanctions more often incurred by their counterparts in organization-based jobs. The flexibility of their career trajectories may, therefore, render gender less salient in allocating time during a career.

Working time—rigid or flexible, paid or unpaid—can thus become a tool in the construction of gender in the household. Sirianni (1991) identifies self-management of time as a means for promoting gender equality, as workers’ autonomy allows flexibility for redistributing time devoted to paid employment and household labor. In these two occupational groups, self-management does indeed facilitate reallocation of tasks and obligations, as contractors determine both daily schedules and longer-term careers. Freed from the temporal constraints of standard employment, home-based contractors can meld paid work with personal needs, even as they monitor their time and draw their own boundaries. Home-based contracting thus carries the potential for “doing gender” in ways that reapportion responsibilities for production and reproduction (West and Fenstermaker 1993). In this way, unpaid tasks associated with household maintenance can provide a means for challenging conventional notions of gender difference.

Yet, even as women and men make the same choices and engage in comparable practices, their experiences of home working reflect long-standing gender dichotomies that devalue women’s domestic involvement. For men, home-based contracting can create the space with which to reshape household practices and challenge gendered household norms. For women, however, the same arrangement contributes to gender-typical images and expectations that can obscure their status as workforce participants. Home-working women, far more than men, remain subject to a normative domesticity that obscures their participation in the workforce. For men, in contrast, home-based contracting creates conditions for accommodating careers and maintaining the household without compromising professional identities. As these divergent experiences indicate, cultural constructions of home and work perpetuate gender difference, despite blurred temporal boundaries or individual choices.

Reconstructing gender, therefore, is more than an interactional process of allocating time and tasks. Home-based contractors remain lodged in a macrosocial system that continues to support inequalities that are both material and symbolic. Gendered notions of domestic space, working time, household management, and career imperatives continue to make home work a gendered phenomenon associated with women’s unpaid labor. Both men’s responsibility for the household and women’s assertions of professional legitimacy are thus challenges to a construction of gender that depends on a division of paid and unpaid work. Redrawing boundaries that mark this division requires resistance to norms, assumptions, and practices associated with women or men. Conceptualizing gender as a “web of boundaries,” Potuchek (1997, 196) emphasizes the dynamics of a gender system open to challenge but still firmly embedded in social institutions. Some boundaries may move, making gender less salient in some situations, but a system based on gender difference endures.
As these women and men develop their own schedules for care and careers, therefore, their challenges remain small-scale efforts, available to only a small segment of the workforce. Middle-class, white, skilled—and therefore relatively privileged—they are workers with a range of choices. They work within occupational structures that provide the opportunity to leave standard, organization-based employment without the attendant disadvantages—lower earnings, devaluation of skills, stagnant careers—common to many forms of nonstandard work, and their occupations leave open the option to return to standard employment at some future time. The practices of home-based contractors, therefore, may diminish the salience of gender in the household, but the standard job remains a gendered construct, devoid of family obligations. Institutional arrangements that divide public from private, managerial practices that inhibit flexibility, and organizational control of working time all contribute to pervasive gender dichotomies.

The differences between the experiences of men and women engaged in home-based contracting thus underscore the social organization of gender as a dominant framework for distinguishing functions and constructing difference. The similarities in their career decisions and daily practices, however, show that changes in the gendered structures of employment may allow individuals to challenge historically received distinctions that separate paid work from family life. Altering social arrangements, this study suggests, may blur conventional boundaries between home and work and reappropriate responsibilities that mark the gendered division of labor. The conditions of home-based contracting can thus contribute to reconfiguring conventional gender distinctions. With greater latitude to manage their time, these workers may also promote change.

NOTES

1. Common parlance for describing contract work varies across occupations, industries, and parts of the globe. Contractors in the publishing industry, for example, are called freelancers (or in the United Kingdom, freelances), and much of Europe also uses the term portfolio work (Cohen and Mallon 1999). In this study, a few informants called themselves consultants, emphasizing their relative autonomy.

2. Population statistics describing demographic distributions are unavailable for contractors in either occupation, as aggregate data do not adequately distinguish between industries, occupations, and labor market sectors (Felstead and Jewson 2000).

REFERENCES


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