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"I Play Golf With My Kids, Not My Colleagues": Politicians, Parenting, and Unpaid Work as a Choice?

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Cover Page Footnote
Acknowledgements: I dedicate this article to my husband, Michael, who is a wonderful role model of how to balance fathering and paid work in innovative ways. Your commitment, love, and hard work are an inspiration to me. I also dedicate this piece to our three loves: our son, Michael, and our twin daughters, Ella and Violet. Thank you for teaching me so much about what it means to be a scholar who studies working families, but more importantly for teaching me how to be a mother to each of you. I also thank the women and men of this study for openly telling me the stories of their lives. Finally, the author would like to thank Marjorie DeVault for reading earlier drafts of this article and the anonymous reviewers of the Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare for their helpful feedback. Funding: This research was supported by the College of Fine Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences at the University of Massachusetts Lowell and by a grant from the Center for Women in Politics & Public Policy at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

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Through in-depth interviews with thirty women and men politicians, this paper investigates their unpaid work as parents and their paid work. Using Goffman’s (1959) concepts of “front stage” and “back stage” performances, the author argues that the women and men developed strategies to do this work. Decisions about whether or not to run for their first job in politics were gendered. Another finding was that the experiences of their families and the making of public policies were gendered. The women organized their “village” while the men saw their fathering roles in terms of scheduling dad time. Finally, there were differences among the men; some of the men made “choices” about their fathering that led to a cost to their paid work careers.

Key words: gender, work/family conflict, parenting, qualitative, Goffman

Introduction

The Presentation of Self and Work/Family Conflict

In their article on work/family conflict, Banerjee and Perrucci (2012) analyze the prevalence of employee benefits and whether the existence of work/family policies is related to a lower perceived work/family conflict for a group of workers from the United States. Using data from the National Study of Changing Workforce (NCSW, 2002), they use survey data from
3,504 workers to look at possible gender and race differences. Their impressive study finds that despite the prevalence of conventional employee benefits, few are actually related to reduced work/family conflict. Instead, they uncover that what does reduce the work/family conflict for these workers is when employees have flexible work-time provisions. A supportive workplace culture is also related to less work/family conflict, but they find that primarily it is the flexibility that has enabled these workers to reduce work/family conflict. They also find that women experience more work/family conflict than men.

Although this study of politicians is related to these ideas about work/family conflict, it adds to our understandings about how people manage their work and family lives in several ways. First, I analyze how a group of workers manage their work/family conflict experiences and how they actually describe them in a social context. Second, I highlight how flexibility for these workers is key, but that it varies by gender, especially in how they discuss scheduling time for work and family and the spaces in between. Finally, unlike the workers in Banerjee and Perrucci’s (2012) study, a requirement of these politicians was that their career success depended on how they presented themselves publicly. Thus, the findings in this study add to theoretical discussions about how we come to know what we know about the meanings and definitions of work and family as well as gender.

Erving Goffman (1959) is one of the most noted sociologists who wrote about the concept of the presentation of self in everyday life to discuss how identities are created in a social context. He has argued that social actors manage their impressions of who they are by a series of “front stage” and “back stage” performances, and that how others perceive them is also part of the process of identity making (Goffman, 1959). He has also written about the concept of stigma and how identity work is connected to individual performances of one’s identity and to larger social institutions such as work and family (Goffman, 1963). The concepts of “front stage” and “back stage” performances can also be applied to politicians to illustrate how they did this work in their careers and family lives.
Work and Family Literature and the Concepts of Public and Private

Bianchi and Milkie (2010) categorize the major highlights in the work and family research in the first decade of the 21st century and they find that from 2000–2010 there are six central topics that have emerged in the work/family research, which include: gender, time, and the division of labor in the home; paid work: too much or too little; maternal employment and child outcomes; work/family conflict; work, family, stress, and health; and work/family policy. They also make a claim that scholarship in these areas was inspired by an increased diversity of workplaces and of families, by methodological innovations, and by the growth of a community of scholars in the work/family area. This study on politicians adds to this thriving body of scholarship by investigating politicians as a focus of study in the work and family research area. Politicians are unique in that the ways in which they seemingly balance their work and family lives is seen as public domain. By looking at both women and men in these positions, this study seeks to compare and contrast their experiences and to add to the work and family literature.

Various scholars have investigated the connections between work and family and argued that work and family are interconnected (DeVault, 1991; Galinsky, 2001; Gerson & Jacobs 2001; Hochschild, 1997; Moen & Han, 2001). In addition to this scholarship, others have used interdisciplinary feminist and sociological lenses when looking at the complexities of the topic of work and family (Hansen & Garey, 1998). Smith (1987) has argued for a “generous approach to the notion of work” and has advocated for an investigation of how people organize their lives around their busy work and family schedules. Work, then, includes both paid and unpaid labor. Recent research has also argued for a “generous” concept of work approach and the idea of looking at “invisible work” or work that is often not seen by the naked eye when analyzing projects of social justice and inclusion (DeVault, 2014). This research on politicians is in line with this scholarship, as well, and supports the idea that it is important to take an interdisciplinary perspective when viewing work and family while working towards social justice in work and family spaces.
Hansen (2005), who applies such perspectives, has written about the concept of “interdependence” and how it relates to family, kin, and social class. In her book, *Not-So-Nuclear Families* (2005), she follows four family networks, which represent each of the four social classes, and argues that despite the American ideology of individualism, these families rely on networks of care to help raise their children. Her findings indicate that while class positions do account for some differences in how caregivers manage work and family, the structural organization of workdays and school schedules are a barrier to families who are struggling, in many ways, to exist. Her findings also suggest that caregivers must strategize, often in very complex ways, about how to manage dual-career families with the responsibility of raising children.

There is little known, however, about the gender differences and similarities of politicians in terms of their public and private lives. This study adds to this scholarship by investigating how a group of people who create public policies think of themselves in their role as public officials, as well as in their positions as parents and as part of the paid workforce. In this study of politicians, I investigate how they manage their private family lives, which are part of a larger public representation or discourse of the family. Unlike the participants in Hansen’s (2005) study, the ways in which the politicians “do family” is under public scrutiny.

In her Introduction to the Special Issue of the *Journal of Family Issues* volume, Janning (2008) outlines how scholars might look at examples in popular culture to analyze the conceptualizations of homes and families and the concepts of public and private. As she states, the study of public and private as it pertains to families and family roles is not entirely new (Hochschild, 1997); however, how these definitions are portrayed by the media is understudied. In a more recent piece, she investigated how gender plays a role in the creation and preservation of family photographs (Janning & Scalise, 2015). Her findings in this study reveal that gender as well as age played a part; however, she finds that women were more likely to take primary responsibility of the actions needed to maintain the photographs, which is consistent with the idea of “intensive mothering.” Although this study of politicians is not about
media representations of these individuals, there is a theoretical connection to these studies. In this study, I am interested as well in how these politicians as mothers and fathers navigated and framed their identities so that they were seen as good parents as well as workers.

Recent Literature on Fathers

Since Banerjee and Perrucci (2012), in their quantitative study, argue that women experience more work/family conflict, I wanted to see if this was the case for this sample of workers who literally perform their identities as part of their job description. Although social scientists have recently been giving fathers more attention in their research, it still remains an understudied area. The work/family area and fatherhood is even less written about by scholars and deserves our attention to more fully understand the experiences of working families.

Lupton and Barclay (1997) use poststructuralist theory to analyze the representation of fatherhood in psychology, sociology, and the health sciences. They also look at fatherhood and how it is represented in television, film, advertisements, and child care and parenting manuals and magazines. Finally, they also rely on four case studies of men’s own accounts of becoming first-time fathers. They find that the experience of fatherhood encourages “new” or “involved” fathers who can express and foster their nurturing feelings, but is juxtaposed with men that are still expected to fully participate and act as providers through their paid work experiences (Lupton & Barclay, 1997). The men of this study represent another generation of fathers and the discourses surrounding them—how they present themselves in their daily lives influences how they think of themselves and their families.

More contemporary studies of fathers include macro approaches such as looking at policies that govern fathering, which include paternity leave polices. In their comparative analysis of paternity leave policies in forty-four countries, scholars have found that a surprisingly small number of countries are devoted to family equity (Feldman & Gran, 2016). Since the men of this study are in a unique position to create these policies, it is interesting to investigate how they themselves think of their fathering work in conjunction with their role as
policy makers and how they represent that in the public eye. In other more micro approaches, sociologists have looked at the challenges that stay-at-home fathers face and argued that these fathers are starting to transform traditional and new ideals of fatherhood as well as to create a new definition of masculinity (Solomon, 2014a, 2014b). The fathers of this study are certainly not stay-at-home fathers; however, their stories and how they present themselves in their daily work and family lives offers important knowledge about the “new” working father who is trying to do it all—work for pay and be as involved as possible in the lives of their children.

Methods

This research is based on thirty in-depth interviews with men and women politicians in a northeastern state about their lives as mothers and fathers and about their paid work experiences as public officials. All respondents were given a pseudonym to ensure confidentiality. All interviewees were either state representatives or state senators, and I interviewed fifteen men and fifteen women. I interviewed twenty-one state representatives, and of these, ten were women and eleven were men. Of the nine state senators interviewed, five were women and four were men. Respondents ranged in age from age thirty-three to seventy-three. Twenty-nine were married, one was divorced, and all respondents had children or a child who lived with them. Four of the respondents had grandchildren. Twenty-four of the respondents were White, three were Jewish, two were African-American, and one was Hispanic. I asked respondents how they perceived their family’s economic status according to the following scale: very comfortable, comfortable, somewhat comfortable, or struggling to get along. Two individuals described their status as very comfortable, nineteen respondents described themselves as comfortable, and nine said that they were somewhat comfortable.

All respondents were asked to participate in face-to-face semi-structured open-ended interviews with me, where I focused our discussions on the work they did in their paid jobs and the work they did as parents. All interviews were audio-taped, and the majority of them took place at their place of paid employment. Additionally, some interviews were conducted
in the community at their other office locations, a diner, and a public library. Research questions for this investigation include:

- How do public officials experience their work and family lives, and how do they perform these identities?
- What might it mean to be a public official and to balance a public and private life?
- How might these experiences vary between and among men and women?
- What are the struggles and privileges they experience in their positions, and how do they negotiate these?
- How might they resist gender stereotypes that are perhaps imposed on them by larger societal definitions of gender?

I began the interviews by asking participants questions about their educational experiences and then moved on to discussions about their first jobs. Then, I asked them to construct a chronology of their jobs and how it led into their current careers. I also asked them about their involvement with public policies in their current jobs and how they became interested in these policies. Also, I posed questions regarding their relationships with their partners and children to ask how these experiences have affected their daily lives. I paid particular attention to the obstacles that they faced in their positions as workers, mothers, and fathers and the times when they seemed to resist these barriers. Through the use of grounded theory method, I let the analysis grow out of their stories and relied on an open coding method of analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Glaser & Strauss, 1999). In the tradition of feminist methodologies and oral histories, I sought to do the work of “excavation” to make these stories and the work that these women and men were doing visible to those who might not know of them, while also situating myself in the process (DeVault, 1999).

As I began to code the data, various themes began to emerge from their interviews around the topics of getting into politics, personal connections, family, and public policies, scheduling, and the “choice” and cost of their unpaid work for fathers. There
were variations between the men and women on these themes. The ways in which they did the work of mothering and fathering greatly influenced their paid careers. There were also variations among them, particularly, the men, in terms of how they were able to do the work of fathering in their societal positions.

Findings

What follows are four major themes that emerged from the data with regards to how these men and women experienced their public and private work lives. Using Goffman’s (1959) concepts of “front stage” and “back stage” performances, I will analyze how they did this and how the presentation of self is gendered. First, I will analyze how respondents got into politics and how this varied by gender. Next, I analyze the personal connections among these politicians to their families and public policies and how this varied by gender. In the third findings section, I discuss how respondents described how they viewed themselves in terms of being a parent and a worker. This theme illustrates the finding that women found their two roles more integrated and relied on flexibility, while the men discussed how they navigated being a parent as a worker in terms of scheduling time. The fourth and final theme involves how these individuals thought of themselves and how they made a “choice” about the work of fathering their children and working in the paid workforce.

Getting into Politics

Decisions to Run—“I would love to have a wife.” Although the seven respondents who shared about their decisions to run as something that they also discussed with their spouses, as well as their children, there did seem to be some differences with regards to these decisions along gender lines in their roles as mothers and fathers. When referring to the experience of running for their current political office, women were the ones who seemed to delay their desire to run. For example, Grace, a fifty-four year old, White, economically very comfortable, married, state representative told me that she waited until her youngest daughter got into high school and was very “careful” about
when she ran. Grace, who has two daughters ages twenty-six and nineteen and a son who is twenty-four, talked it over with her husband and children before she began her campaign. She knew that running would put her “whole family in a fishbowl” and said that, as it turned out, “running was a good thing.” However, she was indeed strategic about when she chose to do this, because of how she perceived it would affect her ability to be a mother to her children. This suggests that she tried to keep her private family life separate from what would eventually become her public paid work life, until she was ready to have her family be in the public eye. The strategy she used, then, of knowing how to manage her performance as a mother and worker in a changing social context, was critical for her being elected. First, she had to be seen as a good mother. Then, she could run for office.

Another example is Cynthia’s story. Cynthia, a state senator, is sixty-nine years old, self described as Jewish and White, economically comfortable, married, and has three children and four grandchildren. She mentioned that she did not run for office when the kids were growing up “because it’s a seven day a week, fifty-two week a year job.” She also mentioned that there are “few women with young kids here,” which suggests that unlike their male counterparts, the majority of the women waited until their children were raised before running for their current positions. Cynthia, like Grace, also told me that she waited until her kids were grown and had graduated from school, and that she was fifty-four years old when she went into politics. Cynthia’s experience, then, also highlights that she had to strategize and be seen as a good mother before she could engage in the paid work of a politician.

Half jokingly, she said regarding men and women in politics, that, “I would love to have a wife,” which suggests that the job of being a state senator allows little time to do the unpaid work of being a mother and wife. She also mentioned that she could not go into politics when the children were younger because of financial reasons because the pay was so low. To do her current job, she had to take a “lateral move” where she was a Joint Chairperson of a committee so that she could be in the Senate and Chair her own committee. Thus, unlike the men, the women had stories of still struggling even when they entered the political arena and they were constantly negotiating their
role in the legislature and in their paid work experiences. While the men often grappled with how to manage their current jobs and moving up, they did not, as the women shared, seem to consider their positions as fathers when running for their current jobs.

Getting elected as a family affair. Once a respondent actually decided to run, the lines between their private family lives and their public jobs seemed to become more blurry. Carl is fifty years old, White, comfortable, married and has three children who are all in their twenties. He is a state representative with deep ties to his community, who when I asked about what it was like getting elected, told me that, “it was as if all five of us ran for office.” Similar to this story, Samuel, a state representative who is sixty-three years old, Jewish, somewhat comfortable, married and has two children in their twenties, told me when he ran that, “we were concerned about getting elected.” These statements, both by men, suggest that the men’s experiences of running for office were that they worked as a team with their respective families to get elected and that they were all in it together. The men, then, had to navigate being a father and worker; however, unlike the women, the men actually seemed to use their families as a way to make them seem likeable or one who should be elected into office. The women seemed to have to get their timing right so that they were not necessarily seen as doing both at the same time. This suggests that the work of being a politician is indeed gendered.

Similar and yet different to these stories is the story of Farrah, the youngest respondent in the sample, who is thirty-three years old, African American, comfortable, married with two small children under the age of five, and is a state representative. Although she had a similar story, in terms of getting and staying in office, she commented that to do her job, “you can’t do it without family support.” She proceeded to explain that she has a large extended family, that both her mother and father help care for her two small children, and that her husband has a very flexible work schedule. Her story suggests, and possibly is due in part to her status as a woman as well as her age, that the family was not only helpful in getting her elected, but that they are also a key factor in keeping her in office. This story differs from those of the men. In other words, for the women and the men, getting into politics
was a family affair, but for the women, especially, staying in it greatly depended on family support to assist with their unpaid work of raising their children. Therefore, as the women adapted and managed their performances in their changing work and family lives, the support of their families in their careers was a key factor in terms of helpful them do the work of mothering.

Decisions not to run for their first job in politics. No man in the study spoke about others telling them not to run for their current position due to being a father. The women were different in this regard, as they had to strategize when they would have their children, raise them, and also time it right with the opening of a political seat in their community. These strategies are a kind of work that is unique to the women of this study, and by studying both their work and family lives we can see how they navigate these experiences. There was one example where a community actually pressured a woman not to run for her position. Tammy is a sixty-two year old, White, economically comfortable, married, state senator who has two sons ages thirty-six and thirty-four. Although when she ran first for a position in the House of Representatives, she “agonized” over her decision, she still said it “felt right” to do so. Despite this, people in the community told her she should not run because of her two small children. No man in this study had such a story of running for political office, which suggests that the experiences of being policed by the community in terms of their positions as mothers and fathers was based on gender, and the women faced different obstacles than the men in terms of getting into politics in the first place.

Personal Connections, Family, and Public Policies

This section analyzes the intricate ways in which the politicians navigated their private family experiences along with their jobs in public office and how it influenced their work on public policies. Six of the thirty respondents described a deep personal connection to the policies that they worked on and their current family lives. Of these, three were men and three were women. Fifteen of the thirty respondents discussed a direct correlation between the policies they work on and how they grew up in their families. Of these fifteen, seven were men and eight were women.
"I came here to give a voice to the children and the elderly." Libby, who worked as a social worker with the elderly population and then stayed home to raise her kids, is a forty-six year old state representative who is White, somewhat economically comfortable, and is married. Her elderly mother lives with her and her family. She has four children who are ages seventeen, fifteen, thirteen, and nine. Her oldest son, who is seventeen and whom she describes as someone who "sees things differently," is autistic. Libby said the following:

L: The work I do here is very much reflective of my life. I have this autistic son that's clearly made an impact on my life. I understand the special education system. I understand disability. I understand what's not out there that should be out there. And I've got this 82-year-old mom living with me, and I understand the needs of the aging population through my previous career. So I try to really meld it all together. So those have become things that I'm best known for here. I have a lot of colleagues who have either constituents or family members with autism and I will try to meet with them and talk them through what that's all about, and the shock and the grief of going through that kind of diagnosis, and then what you need to do after that to give your child the best possible chance. You get a lot of those kinds of requests. And then other people asking me, "what are we doing for seniors in our state?" I have colleagues that look to me to sort of ask what we're doing and what we need to do. I've been able to take the lead on those two things, which is really great. I mean, everyone has an area of expertise. For some people it's banking. For others it's insurance. Those things bore me to tears. But thank God there are people that like that. That's why they came in here... But that's not why I came in here. I came in here to try and give a voice to the children and to the elderly.

Libby talks about how she uses her personal experiences of having an elderly mother and a son with autism to inform her of how to change policies regarding the rights of these groups of people. In this way, her unpaid work of caring for her mother and son, as she states, are "meld[ed] together." Second,
she has become the spokesperson for people with autism in her work setting. Her colleagues intentionally seek her out for how to handle cases with their own constituents or even family members. This is not work that she is paid for, but she considers it a part of her job that she loves and is good at. She also does this for the elderly and helps her colleagues navigate these issues in their districts. Her life experiences with an elderly mother and a son with autism are exactly why she went into politics. The men did not tell their stories in this way. Libby literally does the work of “giv[ing] a voice” to those that might not be heard and uses this knowledge to fight for social justice and the welfare of these individuals.

**Rooting for the underdog.** Christopher is a fifty year old state representative, who is White, economically comfortable, and married with three adult children ages twenty-five, twenty-three, and twenty. He is working on policy issues that revolve around the topic of public education and economic development. Christopher discussed how he stayed back in school in the first grade and that school was always very challenging for him. Here is what he said about his family upbringing:

C: My school experiences were very challenging. During a different time, I probably would have been [considered] a special education child … My whole life I have sought out and supported and helped the underdogs. I've done it my whole life.

Christopher is sympathetic to those that may struggle in school and his own personal story has impacted his work. The way in which he frames his narrative and work, however, is that there is a power difference—he is and has in the past “sought out and supported and helped the underdogs” or those that are seen as less fortunate than him. This suggests that although he personally connects and can sympathize with these constituents, he is not one of them. The women discussed their role in this process in a different way.

**“A citizen of the world.”** Karen is a sixty-six-year-old state representative who is Jewish, somewhat economically comfortable, and is married. She has three adult children who are ages forty, thirty-eight, and thirty-five and seven young grandchildren. The
policy areas that she works on include health care, prison reform and women and children in prison, nursing, and education and teaching children to be, as she described it, “globally smart.” This was how she told her story:

K: I think probably what has influenced me in many ways is my family, growing up with the parents that I had and probably those were the influences of my early life and early choices. My father was a German Jew who came here in [the 1930s] ... he grew up in Germany during the beginnings of the rule under Hitler and he actually had to leave Germany ... he transferred to Italy and finished his medical education in Italy and he came to this country ... and met my mother here and they married ... So I grew up in a family that I think cared very much about social justice, and my father having experienced what he experienced and his parents actually were fortunate to get out of Germany ... And so having that as my background, I think created an atmosphere of social justice and just an interest in democracy. And the ability to vote and pay taxes and be a part of your community I think were very strong values that my parents both had and I would say that that was a huge influence on my life going forward ... So I think I always had in my mind that I wanted to give back or help others ... and I had the idea of being able to reach out across the world. I think my father always considered himself a citizen of the world and that’s kind of the atmosphere I grew up in.

Karen also describes how she was able to complete her nursing degree and then trained for the Peace Corps, but that she did not end up going because she got married. After this, she took ten years time off of her paid work to raise their three children. Although she considers herself as someone that “help[s] others,” as a daughter of immigrants, she describes this as part of the work of social justice and her being in a global context. By stating that her father was a “citizen of the world,” she navigates policies in her work to make people, “globally smart.” A finding, then, is that the women seemed to have a different sense of their connection to their communities than
the men. Rather than seeing them as helping those “under” them, they saw themselves as part of their local and global communities.

The impact of “colored water.” Patricia is a fifty-six-year-old state representative and attorney who is White, economically comfortable, married and has two children ages eighteen and ten. When she grew up, her family moved from the Northeast to the South before the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and she saw the South at the height of racial segregation. Here is how she described her journey of becoming involved in politics:

P: I never expected to run for office. I was interested in politics even as a child and interested in ideas generally in history ... It was unusual for women to run for office. My parents were not at all political ... My father always used to say, “you can’t fight city hall.” And I used to wonder, “why not?” ... My parents voted, but apart from that, I wouldn’t describe them as politically involved. And growing up, we moved to [the South] before the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. So I got to see American apartheid, which was really shocking to a kid coming from a place where everybody was the same color ... There was this absolute divide ... There were no integrated schools. There were not integrated neighborhoods. And the gas station would have restrooms for white people and if you were lucky, they had a wooden privy for colored. And it was just appalling. And no one could or would explain it to me, which made me feel really let down by the adults in my life. I remember being in a grocery store with my parents and my uncle. There were two water fountains next to each other and one had a sign over it that said “colored water.” And I turned it on and I looked at it and I turned the other one on. I went to my parents and I said, “the sign says it’s colored water, but I can’t figure out what color it’s supposed to be.” And they laughed. And I said, “what is funny?” And my uncle said, “oh, well, the sign doesn’t mean it’s colored water. It means it’s for colored people to drink.” And I said, “but why?” And I could tell that my parents were embarrassed. Nobody even offered any kind of an explanation ... I was not a conformist.
For Patricia, this was a turning point in her life, where she continued to question everything that she was taught in school, went to law school, had her family and eventually, as she described it, “backed into” politics. Although Patricia “never expected to run for office,” the context that she grew up in in the rural South prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and seeing racism firsthand gave her a particular perspective on life where she questioned everything that she was taught. Despite that the climate was one where it was, “unusual for women to run for office,” she did, because her upbringing made her question the norm. A self-described, “nonconformist,” she did the work of thinking that another way of life was possible, and through her work and family experiences has sought to create that life, not just for herself, but for the members of her community. The social justice work that she does is unique then and based on the experience of her gender; experiencing the effects of sexism, she was able to question things like racism in her paid position as a politician.

Scheduling: The Village and Scheduling Time

“If I didn’t have the village.” Katherine is thirty-nine years old, White, economically comfortable, married and has a four year old son. She currently works as a state representative and holds a leadership position. After discussing her educational background and early job experiences, I asked Katherine if she could describe the role she has in her family. She began by talking about her four-year-old son and how she tries to negotiate caring for him along with full-time work:

K: There’s a state-wide hearing early in the morning, so that was the best way I could coordinate with my son being in school. He’ll be in school, so by the time I’m done with the hearing, it won’t interfere with his schedule or mine.

C: I remember seeing a picture, with you as a kid and your son all attending the same school as part of your campaign. I wondered if you had any more kids?

K: No … Raising a child is a whole ‘nother thing. And work, luckily I have my family around and that is
how I do it. I would not be able to raise my son if I didn’t have the village. You know, it takes a village to raise a child. I’ve got my parents, who are both retired, who live half a mile from my house, who are deeply involved. And my sister. My mother-in-law looks after him one day a week. And the upside of that is, it isn’t like I have set times with any of them. It’s like crazy scheduling week to week, but I try to be around on Friday and keep the rest of my days full as much as I can. I try to start early and I try to coordinate my work life with his school life and with the exception of [things that come up]. A very positive element of being a rep. is that I really can kind of set meetings. It’s like right now we’re meeting at this time. If you suggested 5:00, I would have just said no.

C: Because that’s probably like supper time.

K: It depends. I mean that’s the thing. You know, on Wednesdays I have a meeting at five. Just the ability to be able to do that makes all the difference in the world. Flexibility matters enormously when you are raising young children. Working, not working, part-time. If you have the ability of some flexibility, it is just the difference of night and day. Any working mother will tell you that.

The village and flexibility are key to raising her four-year-old son. Without them, she would be unable to hold her dual position as a public official and mother. Curiously, she uses the language of a famous woman politician and recent presidential candidate, Hillary Clinton, about it taking a village to raise a child. In some ways, it is as if she is using this public discourse surrounding mothering to connect herself to others in both her work and family roles. She also connects herself to working mothers especially by saying “any working mother will tell you that.” Katherine’s “front stage” performance to me is, then, that she is just like any working mother, but her “back stage” work that she does to achieve the status as a worker and mother is significant. Without her organizing the family support of her mother, father, mother-in-law, and sister, she would not be able to have the flexibility to do her job. I would argue that her
presentation of self is that she is able to do both, but according to her comments, it takes a lot of work to puzzle out the schedule between her work and home life to achieve this balance and identity as a working mother.

In her last campaign, Katherine used a picture of her as a child and her son who now attends the same school she did, with a picture of the school in the background. The picture also included photographs of her grandmother and father when they attended this school. This suggests that there is an intimate linkage between her family and work life. The way in which she presents herself, then, is as someone who is intimately and biologically connected to this particular community—and this was something that gave her great success in getting elected for office.

I argue that the sense she has of herself in her family life has collapsed with her identity as a public official so that the personal is indeed political. The way she negotiates this in the interview and how she talks about her role as a politician and mother, then, are intertwined, as is shown in the above example. When she discusses the role she has in her family, it is impossible for her to not discuss her work schedule and how she develops strategies to manage both work and raising a child. In this way, her “front stage” and “back stage” performances of being a worker and mother are inextricably linked together.

Scheduling Dad time. While the women often talked about their roles as mothers and public officials as inextricably linked and how they were the ones primarily in charge of the care of their children, the men in this study had a slightly different way of discussing how they experienced their lives as fathers and politicians. Of the fifteen fathers in this study, five of the men talked about fatherhood in terms of scheduling time. While no woman spoke about motherhood in such a way, it was interesting to hear how the men talked about being fathers and balancing it along with their jobs in public office. Their roles as fathers and workers seemed more separated than the women in this study, especially in how they presented themselves through their stories.

Alberto is forty-four years old, Hispanic, economically comfortable, married, and has three children. His two daughters are ages six and two, and he has a son who is four. He has been a state representative for ten months. He was elected to this
position after working in the county district attorney’s office, where he worked with victims of sexual assault. When asked about what kind of father he is, he said, “I’m Mr. Dad from 6:30 until 8:45 AM.” He told me that his role as a father was to wake the kids up and to get them ready for school. He also said that he tries to structure his work schedule so that it does not interfere with his kids’ soccer and dance lessons. He also mentioned to me that he and his wife saw his job as not a permanent one because of its two year term.

Scott, another state representative, who is thirty-seven years old, White, economically comfortable, married, and has four small children, spoke similarly about his role as a father. When asked about his role as a father, Scott said, “I’m the 11 to 7 guy.” He said that since his wife is usually exhausted in the evenings after being home with the children all day, if one of the kids wakes up in the middle of the night, he will provide the caregiving during this time. He also stated that he gets the kids up in the mornings and makes them their breakfast.

These fathers, due to their positions as elected officials, were being pulled in many directions by the various demands of their jobs, and in many cases, additional jobs, as many of them were also attorneys or real estate agents. Unlike the women, however, they instead used time and scheduling as a strategy for doing fatherhood to make sure that they spent time with their children, even though they were usually not the primary organizers of caregiving in their families. This differed from the women, like Katherine, who even though she also worked full-time, was in charge of organizing the care of her son.

“It’s situational.” Benjamin, a state representative who is thirty-seven years old, White, economically comfortable, married, and has three children, ages eight, five, and three, described how he blocked off chunks of time in his schedule for his kids’ skating lessons and sports, while his wife takes care of the children during the week. Although like Alberto and Scott, he discussed scheduling dad time, he also discussed how managing the children is also “situational.” Benjamin’s wife is a lawyer who also works full-time, and his mother-in-law takes care of the children three days a week. Here is how he described his role as a father:
B: I try to be involved. I try to coach a lot. I coach my oldest’s basketball (team) and when she did soccer, I did that. I try to be involved with homework when I get home. If my wife hasn’t already had them finish up, I try to jump in and see where I can be helpful … I go to the days at school. On the weekends … when I’m not doing stuff … we try to do stuff together, whether it be just playing games or going to the park … [My wife] is a saint. She does all the stuff before I get home at night … So, really during the week, she really is the one…If there’s something that comes up, most of the time, except like this morning, she had to be in court and we had a little problem with my son, I came in a little later. I dealt with it and brought him to school. He didn’t want to wear his pants. He’s having a pants problem. [laughter] … Just didn’t like them. But it was school picture day, so we had them all lined up. So, I bribed him with a Dunkin’ Donuts doughnut and we went up there for twenty minutes and hung out, and then I dropped him at school … [How we manage the kids]—it’s situational.

Benjamin’s story represents a link between Katherine’s story, in which flexibility was key for managing her paid and unpaid work, and between the stories of Alberto and Scott, who discussed how they did the work of fathering in blocks of time. Although Benjamin stated that he also scheduled dad time, he also articulated that sometimes it was necessary for him to step in outside of those blocks of time. Due to the flexibility of his paid work, he was able to do this and juggle both roles while his wife went to court. Still, she is the primary caregiver and organizer for the children, while he views his role of more of one who “helps” out with the children. For those fathers that chose to spend even more time with their children, it came, as they told me, at a high professional cost.

The “Choice” and Cost of Unpaid Work for Fathers

“I play golf with my kids, not my colleagues.” Although the above fathers talked about fatherhood as something that they worked to fit into their paid work schedules, three other fathers talked about fatherhood as a kind of “choice,” which they chose over their paid careers. Thus, there were differences among
the men and how they experienced fatherhood. For some, this “choice” also came, as they described to me, at a professional cost. Three out of the fifteen men told me about making choices that affected their careers and limited them being promoted.

Lenard, a fifty-year-old, White, economically comfortable, married, state representative spoke about being a father to his three boys and how it has affected his career. He said, “I play golf with my kids, not my colleagues. This choice has led to me not being able to move up the leadership food chain.” Lenard is very involved with his sons, ages fifteen, fourteen, and twelve, and participates in their football, baseball, and school activities, and has been a very active coach as well as father. Also, he told me that he has wanted to be there for his oldest son, especially, since his son has some issues regarding his mental health. By choosing to spend leisure time with his sons and not his colleagues, Lenard resists using the strategy of his peers, who do business on the golf course to climb up the corporate ladder. The privilege of his somewhat flexible job allows him to spend time with his sons and to also make a difference in the community, but he also has refused to sacrifice his family life to move up in his paid work. By choosing to prioritize fatherhood over his job, he has sacrificed moving up in his career.

Not running for higher office. Two male senators that I spoke to about their role of being a father told me off the record about having to make tough choices where they also chose their families over their careers. To them, as well as for Lenard, the choice was not seen as a sacrifice, but they also recognized that it did indeed impact their career path. For example, Kenneth, a forty-six-year-old, White, somewhat economically comfortable, married, state senator, has two young sons ages four and two. Kenneth said that although he was considering running for a higher office, he and his wife were in the process of discussing that, and he was probably not going to run. He told me that it was an extremely tough decision because seats do not open up every day and you might miss an opportunity. However, he also shared with me how he had established himself professionally and completed his education and became a father later in life, and that was what was most important to him. He said he did not wish to jeopardize his family for the sake of his career. This finding suggests that, despite their privileged positions, the men
still had to make choices in how they presented themselves in their daily lives and how they managed their “front stage” and “back stage” performances of being fathers and paid workers.

“I didn’t want to be a part-time Dad.” Brandon, another state senator who is thirty-seven years old, White, somewhat economically comfortable, married, and has two young daughters ages five and four, shared with me that, after talking with his wife, he made the decision not to run for a federal position in Congress. He said that he had worked for and watched a mentor of his do this, and he saw his mentor begin to lose connections with his family. Brandon told me, “I didn’t want to be a part-time dad.” He used this philosophy when writing a press release to his constituents who had urged him to run. Brandon said that he wanted to represent being a “good father” and that doing the job at the federal level would not allow him to do this. In the press release to his constituents about why he chose not to run for this federal position, he wrote:

B: In the end, I realized that while anyone can be a Congressman, I am the only one who can be a father to my two daughters … And that is the reason that I announce today that I will not seek election to Congress … Nothing brings me greater joy than spending time with my wife…and my daughters … My daughters are very young, and I want the opportunity to see them become the incredible adults I know they will grow to be … But I want to do more than watch them from a distance, or to be a part-time parent … In my heart, I know that the most important thing I will ever do is make a difference in the lives of my own children.

The structural organization of the job limited the men in such a way that they were, despite being privileged in many ways, put in positions where they had to refuse moving up in their political careers to be involved fathers. This represents a shift in fathering and political officials, as many of the men told me that their dads, due to their generations, worked all the time and they wanted to be more involved in the lives of their children. Being in political office has put them in a unique position, in that they are able to do the work of caregiving and are put under close scrutiny by their constituents when they do not. Their fathering practices represent an interesting shift in this new generation of fathers.
Conclusion

This study has investigated the paid and unpaid work of men and women politicians, while paying close attention to uncover how and if gender matters in the presentation of self in everyday life. Goffman’s (1959) concepts of “front stage” and “back stage” performances, I argue, is a useful theoretical framework when examining how people create their identities in a social context. One limitation of Goffman’s work is that he was not primarily concerned with gender in his analysis, and using the data from this study we can see that the sample of men, in particular, had differences among them as a group when they navigated being paid workers and fathers in the twenty-first century. I argue that his ideas about identity work are still useful for scholars interested in such things as work/family conflict and how individuals are managing complex lives within the ever-changing social institutions of work, family, and gender.

One finding of this study is that decisions of whether or not to run for their current political positions varied by gender. For the women, they often had to be strategic about when they chose to run, and they often waited until their children had finished school before doing so. Women were sometimes told not to run for their current political positions if they had small children. Men, however, were not policed in this way and as they tried to advance to higher offices; members of the community often encouraged them to run, especially when considering careers in federal politics. While women struggled to get positions in state politics, men, once there, had to make decisions about what kind of father they wanted to be within their current roles and whether or not they wanted to continue to move up. Women, as this study shows, were not usually afforded this opportunity or “choice.” This suggests that it is indeed the social institutions of the paid workplace and conceptualizations of gender ideologies within the family that are gendered. How the women and men of this study navigated these dynamics led to them being seen as good mothers, fathers, and workers by the larger society.

Another finding of this study was that respondents expressed having a personal connection to policies that they worked on in their capacities as politicians. Although there were similarities in how the men and women did this work, there were also differences.
The men seemed to think of themselves as “helpers” and ones who rooted for the underdog. Instead, the women included themselves as part of the group. As one woman described, she was raised to think of herself as a “citizen of the world,” and she worked very hard to bring global awareness to her constituents and also saw her place in the global community.

A third finding of this study of politicians is that the way in which they presented and saw themselves as parents differed by gender and among the men with regards to the topic of scheduling their work and family lives. For the women, they seemed to be the primary organizers of care and did the work of getting together “the village” to help raise their children. The women also navigated their paid work careers due to the flexibility they had in their jobs as politicians and seemed to integrate their identities as mothers and paid workers. Lastly, they used their public image of themselves, often in campaigns, to illustrate themselves as “good mothers” who were connected to the community by their families and unpaid work.

The men were able to father, as they told me, by scheduling blocks of time to do the work of being dads. Thus, I argue that they saw their identities as a father and paid worker as more separate from each other. Lastly, one father who had a similar story of his family and work life also added that sometimes the work of being a father was “situational,” because his wife worked and there were times where he had to step in to “help.” Although he still did not consider himself the one organizing the village, he navigated his dual-earner family on a situation-by-situation basis in some cases, when his wife could not be there.

One of the final findings of this work concerns this new generation of fathers, the pressures that they endured despite their privileged states, and how they made “choices” about how they did the work of fathering. Often, the fathers had to make decisions about what kind of father they wanted to be within their current roles and whether or not they wanted to continue to move up in their careers. For those fathers who “chose” to be a more integral part of their children’s lives, this led them to not being promoted within their current positions—a professional cost. Despite this, these fathers worked to redefine what it meant to be a political figure as well as a father and often stated this publicly to the community. This and the other findings suggest
that it is indeed the social institutions of the paid workplace and conceptualizations of gender ideologies within the family that are gendered.

This study is useful to those in the social sciences and to those who work directly with families and family policies because it suggests that there is a shift in fathering and what it means to be an “involved” dad. Broadly speaking, this data adds to the growing body of literature in the work/family conflict area, sociology, gender studies, and family studies. By looking at such a group of individuals who do the work of “front stage” and “back stage” performances through their presentation of self in their everyday lives of working and parenting, it becomes clear that the social context and overall culture of the United States also impacts the decisions these individuals make in their home lives and work careers. As things continue to shift and more women are elected into political office who are mothers and more men politicians with children decide to be more involved in their family lives and childrearing, it will be interesting to see how people will campaign for higher office in the future to illustrate that they are not only good workers, but also good parents. We, as members of society, also have the good fortune to impact who is elected into these important roles and to perhaps one day shatter stereotypical gender ideologies and change the course of American history.

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