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What is This?
The Origins of the Ideal Worker: The Separation of Work and Home in the United States From the Market Revolution to 1950

Andrea Rees Davies¹ and Brenda D. Frink¹

Abstract
This article presents a historical analysis of the history of work/home separation in the United States. With the growth of markets and technology, work and home (which had been mixed) became separate and gendered. Early 20th-century offices adapted productivity standards from factories into the new white-collar “ideal worker” norm. By the 1950s, the office culture familiar today was well established—movies, television, and novels glorified the gendered system of professional work while also cautioning men to reserve time for family. Although the workforce has transformed since the 1950s, an ideology that naturalizes work/home separation persists.

Keywords
ideal worker, work and home, separate spheres, gender, history

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In the 21st century, work and home are often depicted as two separate worlds in epic conflict, as Americans struggle to find balance for their families (Slaughter, 2012). However, this view of work and home is fundamentally a modern phenomenon, emerging from economic and social developments in the United States over the past two centuries. Other articles in this volume show how the separation of work and home is problematic today, or offer alternatives to alleviate work/family conflict. This article provides a historical backdrop against which these contemporary studies can be understood by examining the origins of this separation for middle-class Americans and demonstrating that it is neither timeless nor inevitable.

We begin with the market and industrial revolutions of the 19th century, when home and work became separate and gendered for the middle classes, and employers developed new tools for maximizing employee productivity. Next, we turn to the early 20th century’s expanding white-collar office, which adapted productivity norms from the factory into the new “ideal worker” norm. Although the Great Depression and World War II inspired alternative work practices, a historical analysis shows how the ideal-worker norm remained firmly in place in the 1950s, becoming a cultural icon that drew the attention of film and fiction. Ironically, the ideal worker—embodied by a White, middle-class family man with stay-at-home spouse—did not match the reality of most American workers, and some workers chafed against its restraints.

Separation of work and home is a slippery concept. Here, we use it to mean two distinct but related things. One type of separation is predicated on a gendered division of labor. In this formulation, work and home are separate when cultural expectations delineate men as responsible for work and women as responsible for the home—and when women’s labor within the home is not defined as work. Less frequently written about, the other type of work and home separation is a compartmentalization of time achieved by an individual worker. Here, work and home are separate when work tasks take place during designated work hours and home tasks take place during nonwork hours. There is a connection between the two types of work/home separation: the compartmentalization of work time is largely impossible, particularly for parents, without the gendered division of home and work.

The gendered division of home and work is part of what scholars refer to as the “ideology of separate spheres” (Cott, 1977). This ideology divided the world into a private sphere, associated with women and the home, and a public sphere, associated with men, work, and politics.
Historians have long employed the concept of separate spheres as an analytical tool for understanding the history of middle-class women. But, this framework is also useful for understanding the gendered behavior of middle-class men and the gendered organization of the workplace. For White, middle-class men, the expectation was set by the 20th century that career success meant leaving everyday family responsibilities behind. As early as the 19th century, “[w]age labor became constituted with the ideal worker as a man, or one who did not do housework, care for children, and engage in other forms of unpaid labor that were distinguishing mothers’ lives” (Boris, 1994, p. 2).

Scholars have grappled with the possibilities and limits of the separate spheres paradigm (Kerber, 1988). It describes a cultural ideal, one that never fully accounted for reality. Women have always played a part in public life, and public and private spheres have often overlapped. The numerous women throughout history who have worked as boarding-house keepers, for example, were neither at home nor at work (Boydston, 1990). Further, working-class women and women of color were generally excluded from the ideology of separate spheres (Stansell, 1982). One reason is that they often mixed home and work in complicated ways—doing piecework at home (Boris, 1994) or working as nannies or housekeepers (Glenn, 2010). In the 1920s, 20% of wage-earning women worked in domestic service, with another third in some kind of personal service. In some cities, 84% of employed African American women were in domestic service (Kessler-Harris, 1982). For the women who entered the professional workforce, separate spheres ideology meant they were often valued for their perceived ability to bring private-sphere caretaking abilities to the workplace, as secretaries (Kwolek-Folland, 1994), teachers (Prentice & Theobald, 1991), or social workers (Sklar, 1995).

The ability to compartmentalize the day, setting aside uninterrupted work time, is a key requirement of behaving as an ideal worker (Williams, 2000). The ideal worker is one who is devoted single-mindedly to the good of the employer, and is not subject to personal distractions from family or other responsibilities. This ideal is most readily approximated by White, middle-class men because this group is the most likely to have a stay-at-home spouse who provides backstage support. Additionally, part of behaving as an ideal worker is work devotion—or perceiving one’s career as a satisfying calling that deserves extreme personal sacrifice. Work devotion is most common in professional-level careers, as opposed to working-class careers (Blair-Loy, 2003).
For background on the history of the gendered workplace, many social scientists rely on Kessler-Harris’s (1982) monograph, *Out to Work*. This article builds on Kessler-Harris by synthesizing some of the historical studies completed in the decades since *Out to Work* was published. A historical view complements the social science studies in this volume, highlighting how the separation of work and home formed in response to a particular set of social, economic, and technological developments. We find that one reason for the persistence of the ideal-worker norm is the deep attachment to cultural ideas about gender, work, and family.

The Market Revolution and Changing Definitions of Work and Family

In premarket America, work and home were not conceptually separate categories. Rather, this separation took place as a two-step process, both of which have been termed revolutionary. The first revolution—the market revolution—redefined the word *work* to mean only those tasks that earned money. For the middle classes, this change generally meant that men’s tasks were viewed as work, and women’s were not. At the end of the workday, a paid worker now left work time and entered family time, rather than blending one with the other. The second revolution—the Industrial Revolution—furthered the separation of home and work for some workers. It also gave employers more precise ways to evaluate employee productivity, through the factory clock and a scientific management system.

In the United States, the market revolution occurred in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, as new roads, canals, and railroads dramatically cut the cost of transporting goods to market, creating new trade opportunities for inland farmers and artisans. Previously, work had been about subsistence rather than maximizing productivity. Goods were produced and consumed within local communities because high transportation costs prohibited excess production—farmers and artisans simply could not afford to ship products to port cities (Sellers, 1991).

These premarket Americans did not view work and home as separate categories, partly because most of their work took place within the home. Further, many work tasks, such as farm labor, did not earn money, thus blurring the line between work and nonwork. In this context, men’s and women’s activities looked equally like work. Women’s labor—including tasks such as cooking, child care, raising chickens,
churning butter, caring for boarders, spinning cloth, and cleaning—was viewed as legitimate work that supported the household’s larger economic operation (Boydston, 1990). This does not mean the premarket world was a gender utopia. Households were ordered by a strict patriarchy, run by male heads of household with wives, employees, and children as part of the household workforce.

Employees lived with their employers, as part of the hierarchical, patriarchal family structure. When a master shoemaker, for example, spoke of his family, he referred to both his employees and his kin—the household consisted of husband, wife, journeymen, apprentices, and children, all under one roof (Johnson, 1978). Gradually, an apprentice shoemaker advanced to independent status and created his own household, thus fulfilling the cultural imperative of “independent manhood.” White men performed their race and gender identity through the hard work and self-restraint that led to financial independence—a true man was a self-employed artisan or farmer rather than someone else’s dependent, such as a wife, child, wage earner, or slave. White American men thought of themselves as living in rough equality with one another, as status depended more on lifecycle than on permanent class differences (Sellers, 1991).

The market revolution changed the pace and scale of production. When the Erie Canal opened in 1825, for example, the cost of shipping from Lake Erie to New York City dropped from $100 to less than $9 per ton (Sellers, 1991). Master shoemakers in the canal town of Rochester, New York, were not limited to making individual shoes for local customers. Instead, they began mass production, crafting shoes for slaves in the plantation South. No longer producing everything in the home workshop, master shoemakers operated small factories or sent piece-work to families in the emerging working class. Many of these new wage earners were women or children (Dublin, 1994). The apprentice system broke down—laborers lived in their own neighborhoods, separate from the employer, with little opportunity to advance to the status of master artisan (Johnson, 1978). The market revolution created a visible class of permanent wage earners, challenging ideas of manhood and sparking the defiance of working-class men who sought to defend their labor against deskilling and low pay (Johnson, 2003).

The emerging middle class began to conceive of work and home as separate, gendered spheres. As middle-class men’s work tasks became more monetized, the definition of work narrowed to include only money-generating activities. Further, as employees moved out of their employers’ homes, the family who remained—father, mother,
children—were perceived in light of their affective, rather than economic, relationships to one another. Filtered through this lens, housework and child care were viewed as effortless expressions of a mother’s love for her family. These tasks lost their status as work (Boydston, 1990).

By the Civil War, White, middle-class northerners largely viewed work and home as distinct, gendered spheres that took place at different locations. Men worked, women stayed home. Historians debate whether this change amounted to overall progress or decline for gender equality. Some argue that middle-class women lost power within the family once they were perceived as nonworkers and associated only with the domestic virtues of caretaking (Boydston, 1990). Others contend that women used the ideology of separate spheres to claim moral authority both at home—now viewed as women’s supreme domain—and in public, taking up causes ranging from temperance to abolition to women’s rights (Cott, 1977).

The Factory, the Time Clock, and Scientific Management

In the late 19th century, the Industrial Revolution—associated with new technologies and the modern factory system—swept through America. The Industrial Revolution furthered the separation of work and home for certain workers. Moreover, factory-system employers implemented new processes to measure and control productivity.

Large-scale factories and the growth of the service sector drew more and more Americans into lives as wage earners, rather than as farmers or independent artisans. While half of all workers were self-employed in 1860, two thirds worked for wages by 1900 (Kennedy, Cohen, & Bailey, 2002). Rising immigration rates brought a new workforce to the United States. Nearly 9 million immigrants arrived in the last two decades of the 19th century, followed by a staggering 14.5 million between 1900 and 1920 (Rogers, 2002). Men, women, and children alike worked for factory wages, often in perilous conditions (Laurie, 1989). Industrial Revolution wage labor presented new challenges for immigrant, working-class families, particularly those transitioning from agricultural backgrounds to factory life (Bodnar, 1987; Sanchez, 1995; Takaki, 1990). Some women contributed their wages to family economy, others lived independently in urban areas and were referred to by their contemporaries as “women adrift” (Meyerowitz, 1988).
Some workers continued to blend home time and work time, even as the industrial economy shaped the type and volume of their work tasks. Piecework grew hand-in-hand with industrialization as working-class women and children rolled cigars, sewed, or picked rags at home. In the case of cigarmaking, the line between home and work became especially blurry, as manufacturers purchased tenement buildings and created live-in factories. Cigar manufacturers trapped cigar-making families in a cycle of debt by renting tenement apartments to immigrant families at above-market rates, offering credit at first-floor grocery stores, and deducting rent and purchases from wages. Bosses claimed the right to enter apartments at any time, since these were part of the factory floor. Looking back from our present-day perspective, it is difficult to know whether tenement cigarworkers were working at home, or living at work (Boris, 1994).

Piecework in the home allowed women to earn money while caring for their children. But the price for uniting families was steep. The low piece rate for tenement-made cigars meant that many families worked 14-hr days, 7 days a week. Middle-class reformers and union leaders objected to the system, insisting that mothers should focus on their children and decline paid labor at home. Piece-working women, however, pointed to the necessity of earning income for their families. Given the alternatives, they believed that piecework offered the best way to meet their family responsibilities as both wage earners and mothers (Boris, 1994).

The Industrial Revolution changed the relationship between home and work in other ways. As employers developed new tools to measure productivity, the division of the day into work time and home time became more clearly pronounced.

At the factory, the workday was no longer timed by the sun but instead by bells and whistles that clearly marked the start and stop of each shift. The steel industry, for example, ran round-the-clock, on two 12-hr shifts, clearly demarcating home time from work time (Krause, 1992). The industrialization of time affected everyone, not just factory workers. In 1883, noon—previously identifiable as the time when the sun reached its zenith—fell under the control of industry when railroads split the country into time zones to better coordinate train schedules (White, 2011).

Scientific management provided another tool for monitoring productivity, one that aimed to maximize each worker’s output. Scientific management, introduced by Frederick Taylor in the 1880s, skyrocketed in popularity in the early 20th century. Under Taylor’s system, experts
evaluated the production process, broke it into simple tasks, and timed them with stopwatch precision. Experts eliminated wasted human motion by identifying the exact movements required to complete work tasks, encouraging workers to perform like the efficient machines around them. No longer did production expertise reside with the working-class factory foreman, nor with an individual artisan as in premarket times. Instead, expertise was now held by a cadre of middle-class managers trained in efficiency (Nelson, 1995).

Workers fought back against the changing workplace. Unions utilized strikes and protests to advocate higher wages, better conditions, and greater control over production (Laurie, 1989). They also fought for control over time. As the separation of work time and home time became widespread, labor unions struggled to protect home time against long work hours. Workers began the fight for an 8-hr day in the 1880s, marching under the popular refrain, “Eight Hours for Work, Eight Hours for Rest, Eight Hours for What We Will!” (Rosenzweig, 1983, p. 1). For these workers, the 40-hr workweek was seen as something that allowed, rather than inhibited, work/life balance. With work limited to a precisely defined schedule, workers would be ensured time to engage in nonwork activities on evenings and weekends (Roediger & Foner, 1989).

By the early 20th century, work and home were conceptually distinct for many Americans. For both middle-class workers and factory wage earners, the experience of work and home took place at different times and in different locations. For employers, who relied on factory bells and scientific management, work was now about maximizing worker productivity.

The White-Collar Office and the Ideal Worker

The corporate office adapted factory time and place norms—creating a middle-class ethos of workplace professionalism—to manage a new workplace and workforce. Between 1890 and 1910, professional service work swelled from 2.1 million to 4.4 million, with women comprising nearly half of the workforce (Saval, 2014). At first, scientific management set productivity standards by timing office tasks. The output from the fastest typist, for example, became the productivity baseline for typing (Kwolek-Folland, 1994). But the Taylorist cog-in-the-machine approach to measuring white-collar work shifted by World War I. New managerial theories refocused the approach to efficiency by exploring how an employee’s positive work experiences increased productivity.
(McKenna, 2006). The fixation on productivity resurfaced as a gendered archetype, one that scholars today refer to as the ideal worker.

Office work reorganized both time and space for professional employees. In addition to the time clock signaling the beginning and end of the workday, many offices used buzzer clocks to clearly separate work time from personal time, now called breaks (Kwolek-Folland, 1994). Office design further clarified corporate gender hierarchies. At Metropolitan Life Insurance in New York, for example, entry points for men and women included separate hallways, stairways, and elevators. The difference between a man sitting at a mahogany desk in a private office and a woman working at a metal desk on an open floor spoke volumes (Kwolek-Folland, 1994; Saval, 2014).

New technologies, such as the typewriter (1874), telephone (1876), and Dictaphone (1907) transformed work and brought an increasing number of White women to the office (Saval, 2014). Women clerical workers rose from only 2.4% of the workforce in 1870 to over half of the clerical workforce by 1930 (Kwolek-Folland, 1994). In the past, clerical work consisted of varied tasks and was a gateway into professional work for White, middle-class men (Luskey, 2010). In the 20th century, clerical work became the narrowly specialized domain of women (Kwolek-Folland, 1994).

The presence of women office workers helped to define the ideal worker in gendered terms—a man completely devoted to his employer, his faithfulness rewarded by promotions. As a professor of commerce explained in his 1919 text Developing Executive Ability: “what does count tremendously is that every man should put his whole soul into something, should nurture a ruling passion and tremble under the influx” (Gowin, 1919, p. 235). Any married man putting his whole soul into work relied on a spouse at home. Meanwhile, a woman office worker found herself in a workplace version of separate spheres. According to Kwolek-Folland (1994), the female clerical worker, like the wife, “was still associated with a sense of duty, a willingness to subsume into work, an unflinching devotion to her boss and his business, and an inherent difference from men” (p. 67). Upon marriage, it was expected that she would exit the workplace to devote her whole soul to her family (England & Boyer, 2009). Until the 1950s, most organizations had explicit marriage bars, rules that denied employment to married women (Cobble, 2004). Ironically, women who justified their office jobs as traditional wifely caretaking frequently remained unmarried to maintain their careers (Mills, 1951). Woman professionals, such as social workers, did the same (Sklar, 1995).
A revised notion of masculinity was intertwined with the ideal worker. No longer did manliness rely on economic independence, as in the 19th century. Instead, manliness was reflected in continual job promotion (Davis, 2000). While the corporate office required devotion from all employees, cultural gender norms set the standard for workplace behaviors worthy of reward. Men climbed the corporate ladder, while women, relegated to low-paying and nonpromoting clerical work, held the ladder firm from below. Further, access to managerial work was restricted to White men as African Americans were denied entry to most professions. At the close of the 1930s, for example, African Americans numbered only 8 of nearly 27,000 certified public accountants in the United States (Hammond, 2002).

Separate spheres ideology undergirded both the white-collar workplace and workplace legislation. In the early 20th century, various labor laws and court decisions offered special protections for women workers, safeguarding women’s social function as mothers. The 1908 Supreme Court ruling in Muller v. Oregon, for example, permitted states to restrict women’s labor, but not men’s, to 8-hr days. The 1921 Sheppard-Towner Act, which funded maternity care and well-baby clinics, emphasized women’s primary responsibilities as mothers rather than breadwinners (Kessler-Harris, 2001; Ladd-Taylor, 1994). Forty U.S. states made the primacy of motherhood clear with mother’s pensions (a precursor to the Social Security Act’s Aid to Dependent Children), granting financial support for some unmarried women to remain home with their children (Goodwin, 1997). Some historians view protective legislation negatively, since it cast all women as mothers first and economic citizens second (Kessler-Harris, 2001). Others see it as strategic first steps to more humane workplaces for everyone, men included (Sklar, 1995).

Despite the pervasiveness of separate spheres ideology, it failed to capture the reality of most working American women. In 1901, one quarter of all employed women were widowed, thus making them the primary breadwinners for their households (England & Boyer, 2009). Other women workers—one in five urban wage-earning women in 1900—lived independently, apart from families, even as employers justified low wages by assuming husbands and fathers supported women workers (Meyerowitz, 1988).

**Alternative Workplace Cultures**

Two powerful events, the Great Depression and World War II, disrupted early 20th-century work and family culture. As employers
grappled with unemployment and war, they experimented with alternatives to the ideal-worker norm.

In 1930, the Kellogg Company approved a radical change to the workplace, a 6-hr day and 30-hr workweek. Founder W. K. Kellogg presented more shifts at fewer hours as a solution to the Great Depression, saying “this will give work and paychecks to the heads of 300 more families” (Hunnicutt, 1996, p. 13). Although boxes of cereal at Kellogg differed from clicking typewriters at the office, the example shows how workplace arrangements—in this case, fewer hours for men—reinforced the traditional male breadwinner role at home.

By 1933, unemployment hit 13 million workers—one quarter of the American workforce, a rate of unemployment that persisted until World War II revived the economy. Work-sharing, based on the idea that a shorter workday would save jobs, won national support from business and labor (Roediger & Foner, 1989). Ultimately, the work-sharing movement fell by the legislative wayside as New Deal policies focused on full-time work for White, wage-earning men. The 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act, for example, codified the 40-hr workweek, which covered 39% of adult working men and disproportionately excluded women and African Americans (Kessler-Harris, 2001).

Although they did not use the phrase work/family balance at the time, the Kellogg workplace experiment altered home life. In the words of one female employee: “you got all your housework done before you went to work” and “husbands could work their shift and take care of the children” or “help out at home” (Hunnicutt, 1996, p. 60). Some couples renegotiated their division of labor at home, using their new work schedules to experiment with, as another female employee described it, “the way things are usually done” (Hunnicutt, 1996, p. 9).

Kellogg’s successful 6-hr-day experiment was coupled with a cultural shift in the relation between masculinity and work. Previously, working full time was part of the male breadwinner image. But during the 1930s, any Kellogg man demanding full-time work was called a variety of derogatory terms, including “work-hog,” “overtime-hog,” “selfish,” and “money hungry” (Hunnicutt, 1996, p. 78). The cultural reimagining of workplace masculinity served to protect families during a time of economic instability.

The Kellogg experiment did not permanently change cultural ideas around manhood and work. As World War II came to a close and returning soldiers reentered the workforce, a traditional focus on male breadwinning reclaimed Kellogg’s workplace culture. By 1947, the 6-hr
workday was identified as women’s work or girls’ departments and the 8-hr workday as men’s departments (Hunnicutt, 1996, p. 103). In the 1950s, most Kellogg workers endorsed popular rhetoric about the importance of full-time work for men. Now the 6-hr employee, rather than the full-time worker, was branded as different.

World War II brought an end to the Great Depression. It also drew 6 million American women into wartime work. In 1940, women represented just over one quarter of the U.S. workforce, a figure that jumped to 36% in just 4 years due to wartime employment needs (Kennedy, 1999). With so many women entering the workforce for projects perceived to be vital to national security, employers were forced to address the gendered nature of the ideal-worker norm. Employers reimagined previously sex-segregated jobs, broadening the acceptable job categories for women. Jobs also desegregated by race, as Franklin Roosevelt’s 1941 Executive Order 8022 prohibited racial discrimination in the defense industries. While the proportion of African American women, for example, employed in industrial occupations rose from 6.5% to 18%, racial discrimination persisted despite the executive order (Anderson, 1982).

Rosie the Riveter—particularly Norman Rockwell’s 1943 image of a muscular, overall-clad redhead holding a rivet gun—fed the cultural imagination of the woman worker. Even as women took wartime positions (including military service), the Rosie image reinforced prewar gendered ideas of work and home. Hollywood Rosie films, for example, portrayed patriotism, not breadwinning, as the driving force behind White, married women’s work. In Tender Comrade and Since You Went Away, married women worked for the duration of the war only, working nobly to bring their husbands and sons home. Despite the fact that 600,000 African American women entered the paid labor force during the war years (Anderson, 1982), African American women did not appear, even as background workers, in Hollywood’s Rosie-themed films (Galerstein, 1987).

Nonetheless, wartime employment brought sweeping changes to the workplace. The shipyards in Richmond, California provide one example. With $5 billion in government contracts, Richmond’s population leapt from 23,642 in 1940 to 100,000 in 1943 (Lemke-Santangelo, 1996). The Kaiser company, the largest shipbuilder in Richmond, employed over 90,000 workers and produced 727 cargo ships during the war. Kaiser shipyards supported women workers with its new, affordable child care facilities, offering convenient locations and operating hours that matched work shifts (Lemke-Santangelo, 1996).
Gender and racial barriers to industrial employment weakened during the war, giving visibility to some women of color as productive and patriotic members of the American workforce. Wong (1945), a second-generation Chinese American living in San Francisco, worked as a secretary at the local shipyards. In 1943, she was invited to christen a ship, an event publicized as an example of Chinese American patriotism (Wong, 1945). While wartime work did not transform cultural ideas about racial difference, it created new work opportunities for women of color in the growing industrial economy (Escobedo, 2013; Lemke-Santangelo, 1996). Fanny Christina Hill, an African American defense worker, recalled both racial discrimination and higher hourly wages than her previous domestic service job. Hill’s sister noted: “Hitler was the one that got us out of the white folks’ kitchen” (Marcus, Burner, & Marcus, 2007, p. 228).

But in 1945, the shipyards shut down as fast as they had started up 4 years earlier. Tens of thousands of workers, many of whom had relocated permanently to California, lost their positions to returning servicemen reentering the workforce. While White, middle-class women could afford to respond to the cultural pressures to return home, many working-class women were forced to return to traditional sex- and race-segregated jobs (Anderson, 1982; Escobedo, 2013). Ultimately, the wartime work experience left broader cultural ideas about gender and race unaltered (Kessler-Harris, 1982). The rapid transition of women into and out of the industrial workforce exposed deep cultural connections between the gendered home and workplace.

White-Collar Conformity in the 1950s

In the 1950s, the working world retreated from the Great Depression and World War II workplace experiments. The corporate workplace relied on the gender ideology, especially the ideal worker, established in the early 20th century. The notion of the ideal worker, and his ability to separate work time and home time by relying on his stay-at-home spouse, was so widespread that it was reflected in fiction and film. In postwar America, the ideal worker became a cultural icon of Americaness and White manhood—even as critics urged middle-class men to spend time with their families and warned against the pitfalls of corporate conformity.

Where the office had offered a new workplace culture in the early 20th century, it was no longer novel by the 1950s. Furthermore, work took on additional cultural significance by symbolizing economic and
social stability. White Americans were anxious to see men in their “proper places” as workers and breadwinners—an encouraging counterpoint to unemployment and war (May, 1988).

At the beginning of the century, women office workers were mostly young and unmarried. However, the pool of postwar talent changed as the median age for first-time married women dropped, reducing the number of unmarried White, middle-class women to fill female-typed office jobs. As a result, the demographic profile of female office workers shifted to become largely older, married women whose children were grown (England & Boyer, 2009).

Despite these demographic changes, employers presumed women to be temporary, expendable workers. In fact, the “Kelly Girl” was invented in the 1950s as the first explicitly temporary white-collar worker. The young middle-class women who filled these positions were perceived as workforce sojourners rather than as legitimate economic actors with financial responsibilities. Employers hired and dismissed temporary employees with a minimum of hassle. As one ad for a top temp agency tellingly read: “Need only half a girl? Why pay for a whole one?” (Hatton, 2011).

Women workers were assigned to low-skill positions—and positions that women held were defined as low skill. The first computer programmers were women, because male engineers assumed programming would be a routine clerical function, analogous to telephone switching. Even when programming required advanced mathematical training, employers rated these female jobs at a subprofessional grade. As the complexity of programming became apparent, employers gradually recategorized it as a male job (Ensmenger, 2010; Light, 1999).

Many women realized that the ideal-worker norm, which required the separation of work time from home time, was incompatible with family responsibilities. Some observers argued that married women, especially those with young children, should not enter the workforce. Others believed that work should accommodate women’s roles as mothers and homemakers (Cobble, 2004). Both the National Manpower Council and the Commission on the Education of Women argued for policies to facilitate women’s wage work, including increased access to child care and greater participation by men in housework. National legislators supported working women by including a child care deduction in the Revenue Act of 1954 (Hartmann, 1994).

Union women were especially vocal about basic accommodations for working mothers, arguing that motherhood was not simply a personal choice. Rather, they cast motherhood as a social role that deserved
accommodation by employers and the state. Union women pursued a variety of workplace improvements: maternity leave with both pay and job protection, improved access to daycare, and shorter workdays. While male unionists focused on increased vacation or sick time, women aimed at reducing the length of the standard workday to 6 hr, better enabling mothers to blend work and family. Many women at Kellogg, for example, continued in 6-hr schedules, even as longer shifts became available (Cobble, 2004).

The nursing profession achieved many of these goals in the 1950s. A nursing shortage compelled employer concessions. Employers not only lifted the marriage bar, they also redesigned work to be more compatible with family responsibilities. Employer accommodations included maternity leave, higher pay rates, and on-site child care. According to one historian, the biggest innovation was part-time work, a change that helped nurses balance work and personal responsibilities (Leighow, 1994).

White men continued to be imagined as ideal workers in the 1950s, but many chafed at this role. The corporate office was a complicated source of male identity. On the one hand, men worried about conformity that sapped their masculinity (McKenna, 2006). On the other hand, career success was critical to their breadwinner roles. Many middle-class men found workplace satisfaction because they believed it allowed them to succeed as family men (May, 1988).

Employers expected that ideal workers were coupled with supportive, stay-at-home wives. If a young, male executive was up for promotion in the 1950s, it was common for management to interview his wife—partly to verify her executive quality, as defined by status markers such as social polish, and partly to confirm that she would support her husband’s long work hours. Berebitsky (2012) argues that these interviews both confirm and complicate the expectation of work/home separation. On the one hand, employers verified that a wife’s role at home would support her husband’s work. On the other hand, management envisioned the male employee and corporate wife as a joint package. The man’s home life (seen in his choice of wife) affected his workplace performance (seen in his wife’s support for his work and her ability to be a stylish companion at corporate events; Berebitsky, 2012).

The physical separation of work and home increased as suburbanization moved the two worlds farther apart geographically for White, middle-class families (May, 1988). Echoing 19th-century separate spheres, the suburban home gained cultural significance as women’s domain. The 1950s is the only decade in the 20th century in which the
average age at marriage dipped and the number of children per family rose. For Cold War Americans, the suburban home was a compelling, gendered symbol of America (May, 1988). At the same time, the image of the suburban family did not match reality for most American families, based on race, class, or other factors. Many women worked, despite the dominant gender rhetoric (Hartmann, 1994; Meyerowitz, 1994).

This national celebration of American gender norms surfaced in 1950s cultural products, including movies, television, and novels. Shows such as *Leave It to Beaver* and *Father Knows Best* depicted White suburban families where the weekday norm was the mother at home and the father at work. For men in these shows, the gendered separation of work and home facilitated the division of the day into work time and home time. From the hours of 9 to 5, the father belonged in the workplace. Evenings and weekends, his place was with his family. In 1950s fiction, the heroic "family man" resolved work–family conflict by seeking a secure but balanced life, rather than sacrificing family life for career (Long, 1985).

The world of corporate ladder climbing had its critics. Middle-class Americans worried that workplace success, reliant on bland conformity, conflicted unfavorably with other masculine traits such as rugged individualism. This worry flourished during the Cold War—as Americans sought to prove that capitalism promoted an ideal social system, one that bolstered rather than undermined gender relations (Berebitsky, 2012). Writers and filmmakers depicted a world in which workplace masculinity conflicted unfavorably with other masculine traits such as individualism and fatherhood. The popular novel (1955) and film (1956) *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* reflected these fears. In the story, World War II veteran Tom Rath lands an upwardly mobile job in advertising. However, he finds the job trite compared with his troubling wartime memories. Career growth requires additional time away from his family, a choice he ultimately rejects (Long, 1985). As Rath tells his boss, "I can't get myself convinced that my work is the most important thing in the world . . . . I want to be able to look back and figure I spent the time . . . with my family, the way it should have been spent" (Wilson, 1955, pp. 251–252). In this popular novel and film, true manhood is found not in climbing the corporate ladder, but in showing the individualism to set one's own priorities and goals. Other works of the era, such as Yates’ novel, *Revolutionary Road* (1961), or Whyte's nonfiction, *The Organization Man* (1956), also describe the corporate workplace and demands for conformity as enemies of White middle-class manhood.
Conclusion

This article has argued that the ideal-worker norm emerged at the beginning of the 20th century, and that this norm relied on an idealized gendered and racialized separation of home and work. For White, middle-class families, this gendered separation began with the market revolution. By the 1950s, families consisting of an ideal worker and stay-at-home wife gained status as an American cultural icon. Social scientists, who have brought this story up to the present day, demonstrate that this ideal does not match the realities of our current workforce. Indeed, the demographic composition of today’s workforce looks very different than it did in 1950. As of September 2013, women comprised 47% of the labor force (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], U.S. Department of Labor, 2013b), up from 29.5% in 1950 (Toossi, 2002). More than half (59%) of married couples with male/female adolescents are dual-career earners (BLS, U.S. Department of Labor, 2013a) and 64.6% of mothers with male/female adolescents are employed, as are 58.4% of mothers with boys/girls under 6 (BLS, U.S. Department of Labor, 2013c). As for families following the traditional ideal-worker model, only 30.8% of married couples with male/female adolescents have an employed husband and a stay-at-home wife (BLS, U.S. Department of Labor, 2013a).

Despite numerous changes to the workplace since the 1950s—the influx of women into the paid workforce, the Equal Pay Act (1963), and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act (1964)—both the ideal worker and the separation of work and home remain largely unchallenged as cultural norms. As seen in the early 20th century, legislation intended to improve the workplace has sometimes had the consequence of reinforcing a gendered definition of work/home. Flexible workplace policies are one current example. Today’s family-friendly policies do not necessarily challenge the accepted separation of work and home and can marginalize the workers who request them (Glass, 2004; Ryan & Kossek, 2008).

Flexible workplaces can be a double-edged sword. While flexibility helps families by creating time for parenting responsibilities, it can also enable work time to intrude on personal and family time. In the professional world, the compartmentalization of time is eroding: the ideal worker is now available round-the-clock, rather than simply Monday to Friday, and work hours and expectations have taken over the personal lives of many professionals (Perlow, 2012). A recent successful experiment creating predictable time off for professionals shows how requiring
workers to turn off work one night per week increased employee satisfaction and productivity (Perlow, 2012). This experiment is a useful reminder of the hard-won labor victory for the 40-hr workweek, which was intended to create, rather than inhibit, work/life balance. Those who fought for the 40-hr workweek demanded a limit to work hours, guaranteeing time to spend in nonwork activities on evenings and weekends. Although the ideal worker is not new, 21st-century technological advances complicate this norm by blurring the physical boundaries between home time and work time, making compartmentalization ever more difficult. The ideal worker, and the ability to say yes to any full-time/face-time schedule, has become the standard of productivity against which other professional workers are measured.

As history shows us, workplace policies do not operate in isolation. Rather, they are in constant conversation with shared cultural beliefs about work and home. As Kessler-Harris (1982) concluded in *Out to Work*, “Our task now is to find the compromises that will enable women and men to choose to go out to work without sacrificing the families that satisfy affective needs” (p. 336). In order for today’s workplace policies to effectively redesign the workplace, they must be accompanied by a cultural transformation of gendered ideas about not only work but also family.

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