“Work-Life Balance” and “Having It All” have been much in the news for the past couple of years. Credit Anne-Marie Slaughter, Sheryl Sandberg, and Hanna Rosin, among others, for updating and renewing an important set of discussions, conversations, and arguments about gender, work, and family.

And credit Gayle Kaufman’s *Superdads: How Fathers Balance Work and Family in the 21st Century* for spotlighting the state of flux in which American fathers find themselves: there is no effective way to track, or to facilitate, changes in how we see gender, work, and family, if our singular focus is on women; what men do or do not do bookends what women can or cannot do.

In popular culture, we are seeing a rise in representations of men as equally sharing or primary parents, but the staple image of the *Doofus Dad* endures; on A&E’s reality series, “Modern Dads,” for example, a “veteran dad” demonstrates his childproofing expertise by duct-taping electrical outlets.

Kaufman, by way of contrast, gives us comprehensive portraits of a range of fathers—the “new,” the “old,” and the “super,” taxonomy explained below—across race, class, and situation, usefully documenting where we have been, where we are, where we might be heading. Her data come from some seventy interviews, of 60-90 minutes each, which she conducted with fathers in the Charlotte, North Carolina, area (p. 44) and in Northern California (p. 26).

After laying some historical and theoretical groundwork in the opening chapter, in subsequent chapters she covers: the transition to fatherhood; the work-life dilemma from the point of view of fathers; the experiences of the group she refers to as “old” dads, meaning “workaholics” who view their role through a fairly traditional lens; the emergence and experiences of “new” dads, meaning men who take a more egalitarian view of the division of domestic labor; Chapters Six and Seven highlight the titular “superdads,” the fathers who “go above and beyond,” who see themselves as *fathers first*; Chapter Six looks at married superdads, Chapter Seven at single, residential superdads; finally, she summarizes her
main findings and ties them to a discussion of policy implications.

LOCATING THE CONFLICTS

Writing about gender can be hazardous.

More complicated than defending oneself from ideological opponents is the often tedious task of inoculating oneself against attacks from putative allies, people who may claim to share the same egalitarian goal but differ sharply over how the goal is to be achieved.

**Does arguing for the importance of fathers slide into a slighting of single mothers or same-sex couples?**

**Does writing about the difficulties of men—at home or in the workplace—“inappropriately” take the focus off the problems of women?**

Kaufman approaches her topic openly and honestly. She is interested in learning about, opening up, and then explicating for her readers, the experiences of contemporary fathers.

“I became interested in discovering if fathers feel conflicted between their work and family lives,” she writes in the first chapter. In particular, she wanted to understand the superdads, the “fathers who significantly adjust their work in order to have more time with their families.”

“We might not think this would be so revolutionary if we were talking about mothers,” she notes, careful to credit women for their hard work on both fronts, “but these fathers are a step in the direction of better families and greater gender equality,” careful to credit men for their progress—and to point out that this is *not* a zero-sum game in which she is favoring men; it is about the larger project of gender equality.

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“While I do not argue against the existence of differential treatment of female and male employees,” she writes a few pages later, “I assert that women are not the only ones who are disadvantaged by these outdated assumptions. Men, too, are harmed by these assumptions.”

While I agree with those observations—and, for the most part, with the manner in which Kaufman positions herself and her argument—there’s a bit of a “dancing in the mine field” quality to her assertions—though, to be clear, as far as I’m concerned, the mines are real.

She is similarly careful about documenting albeit only in glancing fashion some of the gender conflicts that impede the progress of men, the ways in which women can be ambivalent about egalitarian trends including those which, for the most part, they support and from which they benefit.

She quotes Garret, for example, a restaurant manager, on his argument with his supervisor, who was resistant to his taking the amount of family leave Garret felt he needed:

“I tried to explain to her that the reasoning behind it was, you know, I didn’t know what we were doing. I mean, we were having a baby. You don’t know what that’s gonna entail. I mean, I just didn’t know, ’cause I know the baby’s up and down all night, and mom can’t stay up for days and days while I go to work. I just made a decision early. I mean, I didn’t spring it on her and say, ‘Oh, by the way, I’m not gonna be here for a month and a half.’ I gave her plenty of notice, you know, that that’s what we were gonna do.”

We get the supervisor’s gender from the pronoun, but no interrogation whatsoever of the gender dynamics that may be in play. If Garret is a manager, his supervisor must be somewhere further up the ladder: the owner of the business, a
district manager, a corporate vice president?

We hear all the time—indeed Kaufman writes about—institutional or structural gender discrimination, and the insensitivity of men and male dominated structures to the needs of mothers.

Was the leave in question, something Garret was entitled to under the federal Family and Medical Leave Act? Is the fact that a woman seems to be at least somewhat resistant to parental leave relevant in this instance? This feels like a missed opportunity, a place where the reader might have been given both more information and a more well-rounded picture.

We get another interesting gender dynamic anecdote from Devin, an assistant professor at a state university, regarding tension with his wife, a stay-at-home mother:

“It’s hard because I feel like I’m trying to do a lot of different things with work and with being at home... She feels like I get time away where I’m not responsible for somebody when I go to work, which is true: I don’t have to be responsible for Ava when I go to work. And she would like that time away where she doesn’t feel like she’s responsible for somebody. It’s just hard because I feel like I have responsibilities at home and I have responsibilities at work, and so the free time that I get is to go to work, and that’s not really fun time for me. So that ends up being a real sticking point between us.”

Academic readers will doubtless have immediately picked up on Devin’s title. He is an assistant professor: his daughter was born before Devin was tenured and the carefree campus to which he “escapes” is the site of the seven-year ordeal that will determine both his professional survival and a great deal about his family’s future economic viability.

What do we make of his wife’s plaint in that context? Again, this feels like a lost opportunity.

IN THEIR OWN VOICES

While rich in anecdotes that provide a full spectrum of work/family situations, Kaufman’s extensive quoting of fathers is both a strength and a weakness: what we get is usefully unfiltered, but might have been edited a bit for clarity.

The second chapter, for example, “Becoming a Father,” begins with this epigraph:

“What I’ve learned out of this is raising a child if you’re doing it, let me put it this way, if you’re doing the best you can, genuinely the best you can, you put that child before your needs, and it’s truly the toughest job you’ll ever have... It’s also in my heart the most rewarding thing I’ve ever done. (Claude, barber)”

Arguably, this quote could have been edited, cut by a third, and clarified, with no loss in meaning:

“What I’ve learned is, raising a child, if you’re genuinely doing the best you can, you put that child before your needs. It’s truly the toughest job you’ll ever have... It’s also in my heart the most rewarding thing I’ve ever done.”

Kaufman is a professor of sociology at Davidson College in North Carolina and there is a social science research value to absolute fidelity in conveying what an interview subject says, making sure that not a shred of the interviewer’s judgment “contaminates the data.”¹ That imperative may be at the root of the rather neutral manner in which she treats both what her subjects say and how they say it. But the preservation of every interjection, digression, and know what I mean? sometimes makes for rough sledding for the reader.

WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON?
"I think today’s ‘stalled revolution,’” Kaufman writes, near the end of the book, “has more to do with workers versus workplaces than men versus women. As I have tried to make clear, there are a growing number of men who are choosing family over work. These fathers have the potential of making work and family needs a parent issue rather than a women’s issue [emphasis added].”

One of the most important things Kaufman does, here and elsewhere in the book, is to focus on a core, and insufficiently discussed problem, within the group of people fighting for gender equity and a more humane work/life balance: do women want to own the problem or to solve the problem?

If we call the painful maelstrom of juggling home, work, and family a “women’s” issue, men are consigned either to irrelevance or, at best, to “ally” status. Specifically naming the quandary of childcare a parenting issue immediately doubles the number of potential advocates for change.

The superdads, as Kaufman amply documents, are making their own room in the parenting sphere. That’s good for children, it’s good for women, and it’s good for men.

There’s room for Superdads, the book, as well. It illuminates an important— and hopeful—trend.

Notes

1. In the appendix, Kaufman provides a number of methodological details, including the fact that the interviews were treated as data to be coded. That approach may have had an impact on what kind of editing was or was not done—although an argument could be made for keeping the data “clean” for coding, but streamlining the text a bit for the benefit of readers.

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