Sleep in a Sleepless Age

A Sociology of Sleep, Work, and Family

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Abstract: In this paper, I explore the social dimensions of sleep as it relates to high-tech work and its cultural contexts. I discuss the implications of sleep, and its cultural vilification, for the families of high-tech professionals. In particular, I develop the notion of sleep as care, and of women as (still) the de facto care givers, and the ways in which these two persisting social facts interact with sleep's denigration in the high-tech social world. I consider the emerging trend of what proponents call 'co-sleeping' in light of these concepts. My aim here is to develop a working theory of sleep as cultural venue for gendered expressions about autonomy, dependence, care, and need within a context of corporate capitalism in general, and information technology in particular.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sleep - or rather, the lack of it - forms part of the bedrock mythology of the information technology revolution. The entrepreneur who stays up all night flogging his business on to fruition, the programmer who works only in the wee hours, the production team who forgo sleep for days to make a project deadline - these are stories that information technology professionals tell about themselves, the cultural schemas which lay down rules of ideal behaviour.

What are the components of these stories? There are four central, and related, notions: *sleep as not-work*, and thus only wasted time; *eschewed sleep as a form of modern pioneerism*; *sleep as the traitor to the body*, revealing the seams in a seamless life; and *sleep as a form of self-care*, and as such to be spurned. All four contribute to the intense, celebrated repression of sleep as an activity - indeed, the raising of that repression to

mythic status. Sleep, and our relationship to it is far from unimportant here - rather it has become an emblem in the information technology revolution, particularly in the cultures of Silicon Valley, and its many replicas.

In this paper, I explore the social dimensions of sleep as it relates to high-tech work and its cultural context. In particular, I develop the notion of sleep as care, and of women as the de facto care givers, and the ways in which these two persisting social facts interact with sleep's denigration in the high-tech social world. My aim here is to develop a working theory of sleep as cultural venue for gendered expressions about autonomy, dependence, care, and need.

2. SLEEP AS NOT WORK

Sleep holds several meanings in cultures across the globe, and holds several within North American culture alone: some view it as an escape from reality, a bridge into other levels of consciousness, a small death, or a realm for contacting the gods or God. Sleep is thought to have a palliative function, at times a communicative one [6]. Still, for the hegemonic white Protestant culture, sleep is a time when you can not do anything else. Max Weber documented the marriage of capitalism to work asceticism that characterized the early Puritans, and wrote of how these cultural strains underlay contemporary American society, where the material conditions of capitalism had become the iron bars caging the ideas of the Protestant ethic. From the perspective of the heirs to that ethic, then, sleep is unsalvageable time, a waste of time because it can not be devoted to work.

The extent to which the work asceticism of the Puritans is now hegemonic in North America is debatable, but the way they defined sleep has remained with us. Even if many contemporary Americans have found other ways to spend their time besides constant work, sleep has remained a spate during which one is unavailable. With an important exception in families, which I shall treat separately below, sleep is still defined negatively — a time when you can not work or do other things — as opposed to positively. Within this framework, the less sleep you can get away with, the more time for work or other activities, the better.

3. SLEEPLESSNESS AS MODERN PIONEERISM

In the United States, metaphors have long sought to borrow from the history of the European settlement of the old West to encircle information technology in the romance, the nostalgia, and the adventure that era still

holds in Anglo-American portrayals. These metaphors paint information technology as new, uncharted, risky (and thus suitable only for the fittest), and potentially highly rewarding. Most white middle-class labor is missing the interaction with nature, the sense of conquest and lone bravery that cloaks this cultural trope. For information technology professionals, then, the seductiveness of language that casts them as the first to cross the frontier is powerful.

Missing from this analogy, of course, is the physical hardship which information technology famously makes unnecessary. The sacrifice of sleep, therefore, is in this context amplified and heralded, because it satisfies that quest for hardship. In this context, sleep sacrifice is portrayed as a form of modern Pioneerism, where workers will forego personal need to get where they have to go - in the IT case, to the conclusion of the project, the end of the code, the success of the company.

4. SLEEP AS TRAITOR TO THE BODY

Sleep is not all cultural trope, however, and its very links to the actual body feed what I consider the third element behind the prevalent mythology of sleeplessness in information technology: the notion of sleep as the potential betrayal of stress and strains in otherwise seamless lives. As the denizens of information technology have sought to downplay sleep, or rather to speak loudly of their disdain for it, their bravado and their lifestyles depend very clearly on the cooperation of their bodies. If, after a month of 100-hour workweeks, the information technology worker collapses from the strain, the lack of rest, and the stress, his body has belied what his credo maintains: sleep is unnecessary, or at least not very important, in the face of critical deadlines and pressure. In essence, the worker relies on his body to keep the secret, that there are no costs to this work absorption, this work life. The body's need for sleep lurks below, threatening exposure.

Evidence suggests that many American workers are beyond this point. The numbers of those who use sleeping pills to fall asleep and coffee to wake up have soared. Sleeping pill prescriptions have never been so high. Never before have so many Americans been diagnosed with sleep disorders [6]. As with childbirth, child development, psychological matters, and death, Americans have turned sleep into a medical event - so we may talk of 'the medicalisation of sleep,' just as others might 'the medicalisation of childbirth' - properly under the purview of doctors and appropriately shaped or treated with medication. The medicalisation of childbirth had ramifications such as the absconding of knowledge and authority by a (mostly male) profession from a group of (mostly female) laity and mothers;

the establishment of rigid time schedules of 'normalcy,' the deviation from which is pathologised; and the use of medical interventions - surgery, medication, etc. - to mold the event more to the liking of the medical professional in charge [8]. The same future could be foretold for sleep.

5. SLEEP AS CARE

The last point undergirding the mythologizing of sleeplessness among information technology workers has been the idea of sleep as a form of care, particularly self-care. Like food, and exercise, sleep is a means of maintaining one's self, of meeting one's own needs. The very act of sleep accentuates a feeling of dependency - unconscious, the individual cannot be aware and self-censoring, indeed, and the sleeper is peculiarly vulnerable. Sleep requires a modicum of safety and trust, because the human body is so exposed and one cannot be one's own protector. Dependency, needs, vulnerability, care - these are not the words valorized in American culture, many strains of which prize and rest upon a vision of the rational autonomous self. But the rational autonomous self does not sleep.

Information Technology culture celebrates that vision as well, and eschews dependency, needs, and care. Research has shown that many IT workers have libertarian political views, believe in the United States as a meritocracy, consider 'choice' and 'talent' to be the operative means by which people are sifted into various societal strata [9]. In part, they believe this because it supports their position on the top of the economic ladder as one of deservedness rather than luck. In part, that very package of beliefs, and its flip side, the willful blindness to care and dependency, is grounded in American political and economic life, so that Joan Tronto suggests that thinkers have "worked so hard to keep care in the background" because it calls into question our very basis for citizenship: work, or productive labour [12]. Thus sleep, as an unavoidable state of dependency and need in which we repeatedly find ourselves, is air-brushed from the picture, made invisible.

This invisibility is reflected in the scholarly treatment of the issue. Research abounds on sleep problems - sleep apnea, snoring, insomnia - and how best to solve them, but such research is firmly grounded in the medical, mostly pharmacological disciplines. With the exception of a few early writers, and a resurgent strain in anthropology looking at infant-parent sleeping patterns - dubbed 'ethnopediatrics' - sleep does not get much scholarly attention in sociology, or the social sciences generally [1]. By ceding this portion of the human experience to medical researchers and writers of self-help books, social scientists are perhaps giving their silent assent to the notion that sleep is the one moment when we are alone with

ourselves, the one moment which is not governed by social phenomenon. Closer appraisal of course gives this the lie: sleep is social, and the ability to get it, the capacity to avoid it, its value and meaning, its attendant practices, rituals and ideologies, all of these features are shaped and experienced within social processes of gender, race/ethnicity, class, nationality, sexual orientation and others which flavor our world. But, I would argue, as sleep is steeped in dependency and care, its status as an experience worthy of note has been suppressed.

6. SLEEP, GENDER AND TECHNOLOGY

While we might think, within this context, sleep and other forms of self-care have not and could not hold back the onslaught by the work-time-technology juggernaut, sleep issues involving the caring of others has indeed maintained its presence, albeit on shifting ground. At the end of the day, information technology workers still attempt to care for their children themselves, within their families [10]. Yet as more and more women join the workforce, and as their careers begin more and more to resemble the careers of men in daily time and yearly time invested, the time during which Information Technology parents can parent is shrinking, bounded by children's diurnal clock and the time during which work happens [7].

I would argue information technology and the 24-hour economy which it makes possible has had great effect on sleep as it happens in families, and further, that this effect is powerfully gendered. In some respects, the effect of the 24-hour economy may be felt most pronounced by some men, because men can take on more responsibility for the home, without necessarily shedding the demands of their provider roles. Some research has found that those who do start to share more domestic tasks include not only those who challenge men's traditional breadwinner role outright, but also those who take on the bread winning and more of the work on "the other side of the paycheck" as well [4]. How do they do it all? As working women have, these men give up sleep, recalling Hochschild's observation of her second shift (women) workers: "These women talked about sleep the way a hungry person talks about food." [7, pp.9].

But the effects of information technology and the 24-hour workday are quite different for women. It is here, at the childcare nexus, that the confluence of women, work, and information technology converge. Women's traditional responsibility for the second shift work has meant that women who work for pay have always had longer days than men. The 24-hour economy, however, has meant some changes for women and sleep, however. For, while IT might allow more men to share parenting at the cost

of sleep, I contend it has not changed *how much* women sleep, as they already shoulder most of the responsibility for child rearing, even as they have entered the workforce in unprecedented numbers of the last 25 years. I would instead conjecture that it has changed *how* they sleep, and how they teach their children to sleep, in other words, it has changed their methods of what I call 'sleep-parenting.'

The establishment of a 24-hour workday for information technology workers has led to a shrinking of time available for other endeavors; included in those other endeavors is the taking care of one's children. But as Gillis argues, with the shrinking of actual family time comes a certain fetishisation of what time there is that is left - of which the recent concept 'quality time' is a prime example [5]. In many dual-income families today, mothering is left to the few 'magnified moments' remaining: for many families, dinner, sometimes bathing/ and bedtime. I contend that high-tech professional mothers use sleep and bedtime to 'do' their gendered parenting, in the performance sense outlined by Judith Butler [3].

For at least 100 years, American mothers have put their babies to bed in rooms separate from them, at their own bedtime, hours before the rest of the family goes to sleep [13]. Advice from the U.S. Government's Children's Bureau, which published baby care pamphlets at the beginning of this century, counseled mothers to put their babies down in their own rooms, allowing them to 'cry it out.' Most Americans continue this practice, making them - as some studies have claimed - perhaps unique among the world populations [2].

And yet there is another practice burgeoning, or with burgeoning visibility, that of 'co-sleeping,' in which babies sleep with their care giving adults [11]. A principal cause of this trend, I contend, is the shrinking amount of 'family time' experienced by mothers in dual-income families, particularly those mothers who work in information technology fields, experiencing some fallout from the 24-hour workday. For these mothers, with such little time left during which they and their children are both awake, mothering is being redefined to include those moments when they are not awake. Here is the exception noted above to the wholly negative definitions of sleep: these mothers sleep with their babies because they believe that sleep is a time when you *can* do something — be with each other, express care, enact their gendered parenting.

Mothers who practice co-sleeping do not challenge the discourse of sleeplessness that informs the high technology culture. Indeed, their behavior still transgresses cultural norms held widely, so aside from the occasional ideologue, they conduct their sleep lives as invisibly as possible. Rather, I am arguing that they have accommodated themselves to this sleeplessness -

and workfulness - by shifting their family time to the night, heretofore declared private time.

The shift also comes at a time of many other cultural changes surrounding work and family behaviors in the United States. Researchers have traced the onset of babies sleeping alone, in America and part of Northern/Western Europe, to the point in the 19th century when the marital relationship attained its sacred romantic sheen. Perhaps the inroads made by "co-sleepers" reflect a tipping of that balance away from the parental romance - what with higher divorce, higher age of marriage, and greater numbers never marrying. Perhaps that balance is tipping, in unprecedented fashion, toward children - as people have fewer children and have them at later ages, and thus cherish them singly, in some cases to the point of fetishisation [14]. Perhaps the trend reflects mothers' backlash against the rational, autonomous self, the care-less worker many women feel they must become as they cross the threshold into work every morning.

7. CONCLUSION

So far, most sleep takes place in the home, for working parents among the family. As this site recedes under the onslaught of corporate capitalism, particularly in the context of the 24-hour economy, patterns of belief and practice, ritual and ideology are shifting as well. These changes are fundamentally gendered, as some men change how much they sleep, while some women change how, and with whom, they sleep. 'Co-sleeping' is but one example of the ways in which these shifting patterns make and remake intimate relationships among those who work and live in the information age. To attend to the myriad others, we must render sleep visible again, pulling aside the shrouds of night time privacy to learn more about contemporary processes of family and work.

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