

# Chapter 11.

## Family Relationships as Sources of Stress and Support: Making the Connection Between Work and Family Experiences<sup>1</sup>

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*Dorothy Parker has been quoted as saying, "Women and men, men and women-- it will never work." Many feel the same pessimism about relationships between parents and children, as positive affect is abraded and worn down by the competing agendas and priorities of multiple generations, varying in age and gender, but held together by shared residence and family ties. Individuals continue to see family ties as important potential sources of existential meaning, life satisfaction, and happiness. Nevertheless, their actual experience in family interaction is often an uncertain and volatile mixture of contentment, disappointment, pride, and anxiety.*

*There is little doubt that the quality of family relationships contributes to individual well being, and much research has investigated this linkage between relationship quality and individual outcomes. Studies of family influences on children repeatedly find that what parents do with and for their children-- the materials they provide, the attention and warmth they display, and the investments of time and energy they make in their children-- are reflected in better outcomes (see for example, Belsky, 1984; Bradley & Caldwell, 1977, 1979; Crouter, Perry-Jenkins, Huston, & Crawford, 1989; Moore & Snyder, 1991; Parcel & Menaghan, 1994a; Patterson & Bank, 1989; Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989). Similarly, it is clear that disappointing, distant, and conflict-ridden relationships between spouses exact a powerful emotional toll on both spouses and children (Menaghan, 1983; Seltzer, 1994).*

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*How do we account for the high frequency of troubled family relationships? Do family members' difficulties in sustaining positive interactions simply reflect the inherent difficulties of family life and individual personal shortcomings? Although these factors are important, I argue that it is important to look beyond the family itself and to pay attention to potential sources of problematic interaction between spouses and between parents and children that may reside in durable social and economic arrangements and cultural understandings that are embedded in larger social contexts. Over the last 7 years, I have been especially interested in understanding better how the larger social context-- particularly parental experiences in occupational life-- shapes family life and children's outcomes. Key findings are reviewed, and their implications for prevention and intervention strategies on behalf of individual and family well being are explored.*

## **The Changing Social Context**

Both work and family experiences have undergone enormous changes in this century. Today, we are in the midst of a revolution in family composition, gender roles, and responsibility for breadwinning and child rearing, and the impact of this revolution on the quality of individual and family lives is still uncertain. Increasing numbers of children are born to mothers and fathers who have no legal bond to one another. Among children born to married parents, a significant percentage experiences the disruption of their parents' marriage before they are grown. For both these reasons, increasing numbers of fathers live apart from their biological children. Both new marriages and entry into informal unions are increasingly common, and relationships between these "new" men and the children already resident in the family must also be negotiated (Seltzer, 1994). In addition to these changes in residence, there have been great changes in the division of labor between men and women. Increasing numbers of mothers, living on their own, shoulder the total set of responsibilities for household work, nurturance, supervision and socialization of children, and breadwinning. When mothers do share household work, child rearing, and breadwinning with their children's fathers or with other men, the resulting division of labor is typically inequitable; yet, both men and women are reluctant to label it as such (Lennon & Rosenfield, 1994).

The opportunities and demands of the workplace are also shifting dramatically. Shifts away from manufacturing jobs and toward both more service jobs and more jobs demanding high levels of education and training mean that adults with poorer educational attainment face greater obstacles in obtaining employment. David Dooley refers to the “unwelcoming economy” that greets young workers today (Dooley & Prause, in press). Those who are employed often experience increased workloads created by employers’ continued efforts to streamline by reducing the number of their employees. In rural and farming areas as well, formerly secure families face eroding incomes and uncertain futures (Conger & Elder, 1994; Lasley, Leistriz, Lobao, & Meyer, 1995).

As a result of these various changes, increasing numbers of individuals find it difficult to sustain family ties, and increasing numbers of families find it difficult to sustain a connection to the labor force that provides sufficient economic and non-economic returns for their families. More two-parent families follow a dual-earner pattern, committing more total hours to labor force participation and feeling increasingly short of time at home. Single-parent families, especially mothers rearing children alone, face still greater time shortfalls when they are employed, and even full-time female employment is no guarantee of an adequate family income.

Although extensive research has considered the effects of job loss and income shortages, I focus in this paper on variations in workplace conditions experienced by those who are employed, evaluating the consequences of parental occupational circumstances for both individual well-being and family interaction. It is increasingly clear that the possession of roles and statuses, as well as role gains and losses, has varying effects depending on the quality of those roles (Aneshensel, Pearlin & Schuler, 1992; Wheaton, 1990). Both the quality, and the fact of employment, particularly maternal employment, affect family interaction. Stated negatively, parental work stressors, in part by undermining the parent’s emotional well being, are linked to the quality and appropriateness of both husband-wife and parent-child interaction and these patterns in turn are linked to child outcomes. When occupational and economic stressors cause parents to be more distant, preoccupied, or impatient with their spouses and their

children, stress on the family is reflected in more stressful environments within the family, providing an intergenerational bridge of emotional disadvantage.

## **Theoretical Background**

I draw on both social stress and work socialization theory in making this argument. Social stress theories suggest that the connection between economic and occupational experiences and mental health outcomes has three key links. First, social stressors affect individual emotional well being; difficulties in roles that are highly salient to the self or threats to prized identities are particularly painful and threatening (Pearlin 1983, 1989; Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan & Mullan, 1981). Within American society, occupational success is normatively demanded of adult men, so it is reasonable to expect occupational problems to have a particularly strong impact on men. Over the last several decades, however, women's employment has also become increasingly normative, especially if they are unmarried, making this role increasingly salient for women as well. Thus, occupational difficulties are likely to threaten individual feelings of worth and competence and increase emotional distress.

Second, individual well being affects how one interacts with others, including family members. Individuals struggling with emotional turmoil or depression are less available for satisfying interaction and more prone to either withdraw from interaction or become aggressive and argumentative (see Menaghan, 1991; Piotrkowski, 1989). Such adults find it difficult to be responsive and consistent in interaction with their spouse and children (see Downey & Coyne, 1990).

Third, distressing patterns of family interaction in themselves constitute an additional stressor that further undermines individuals' emotional equilibrium. For most adults, the perceived failure to sustain warm and supportive relationships with family members is itself threatening to their identity and exacerbates the emotional distress that may initially have been aroused by occupational problems. This role spillover from work to family can in turn evoke problems in workplace relations, feeding a negative spiral between work and family contexts.

Work socialization arguments, such as those proposed by Melvin Kohn and Carmi Schooler (1982, 1983; see also Miller, Schooler, Kohn, & Miller, 1979; Pearlin & Kohn, 1966), put less emphasis on how occupational conditions affect workers' emotional state and more on their effects on workers' values and attitudes about themselves and the world. These arguments emphasize that what one does on the job generalizes to other role performances and is critical in shaping adult attitudes and parent-child interaction. Work that offers more opportunity for judgment and self-direction seems to encourage greater intellectual independence, more liberal social views, and a greater questioning of received authority. When parents' work is more substantively complex and offers greater opportunities for self-direction, Kohn and Schooler find that parents place greater value on their children's development of self-direction, and they are less concerned with behavioral conformity per se. Thus, work conditions that increase the adult's sense of mastery and competence and permit greater autonomy will affect both what parents value for their children and how they treat them.

These two strands of theory-- work stress and work socialization-- are related: Since attitudes about self and society shape emotions, work that enhances certain attitudes is apt to be linked to greater emotional well-being as well. Stated negatively, work that is routine, heavily supervised, and low in autonomy and substantive complexity produces a sense of powerlessness and alienation that has multiple effects: it colors beliefs about the possibility of control in other aspects of life, arouses psychological distress (see Mirowsky & Ross, 1986, 1989; Rosenfield, 1989; Pugliesi, 1995), leaves parents less able to be emotionally available to their children (Downey & Coyne, 1990), and makes spouses more prone to withdrawal from interaction and to expressions of anger and hostility within interactions (Elder, Conger, Foster, & Ardel, 1992; Pearlin & McCall, 1990; Repetti, 1989; Weiss, 1990). This potent combination of both attitudinal and emotional consequences is one reason why occupational complexity has been linked to such a wide range of outcomes, including psychological distress, alcohol use, and self-esteem (Lennon, 1994; Menaghan, in press). I focus in this paper on this aspect of mothers' working conditions and trace its impact on the quality of the home environments that employed mothers provide their young children and on their view of their marriages.

In examining linkages between occupational contexts and family outcomes, one must constantly keep in mind the likelihood of selection into stressful circumstances: Individuals are not randomly assigned to better or worse occupations or easier or more difficult family circumstances. Human capital arguments draw attention to the individual differences in intelligence, initiative, educational attainment, physical health, and social competencies that shape individuals' prospects in the labor force and in family life. The observed and unobserved variables that lead to a premature exit from high school, an early marriage or pregnancy, or an unfortunate partner choice are also important in explaining later outcomes. Recognizing such selection effects, research generally includes as controls an array of individual characteristics and resources when trying to assess the effects of occupational and economic factors on families and individual lives. Additive controls, however, may not capture likely interactions between social stressors and individual and family vulnerabilities or resources; the psychosocial and interpersonal strengths that adults bring to stressful situations make a difference in the way their family relationships are affected.

Group membership is also consequential for both accumulated psychosocial resources and occupational and family circumstances. Where societies are stratified by race and ethnicity, opportunities and advantages are enhanced for members of favored or dominant groups and constrained for others. Depending on the extent and nature of gender norms, men and women encounter differing obstacles and opportunities in the workplace over and above those produced by individual differences in capabilities. Thus, it is important to consider such group selection effects by race and gender as well as individual ones when assessing the conditions under which social circumstances affect individual outcomes. More generally, changes over time in the health of the international, national, or local economy may amplify or dampen the strength of effects of individual variables.

These considerations suggest that, at any point in time, adult resources and work and family stressors interact in complex ways to shape family patterns and both adult and child outcomes. Occupational factors do not necessarily affect mothers and fathers similarly, nor will occupational conditions that positively affect individual well being also have positive effects on interaction between spouses, on relations between parents and children, and on child outcomes. Therefore, I focus on what my own and others' research suggests about the current linkages between social circumstances and parent-child relationships, and between parental occupational experiences and marital relationships, before examining implications for prevention and intervention.

The studies discussed here use the extensive information on both mothers and children available in the Child-Mother data sets of the National Longitudinal Surveys of Youth (NLSY). This data collection effort began in 1979 with a nationally representative sample of young men and women (aged 14 to 21 on January 1, 1979), with over-samples of ethnic minorities and economically disadvantaged groups; the total sample was over 12,000. Beginning in 1986, there have been biennial assessments of the children born to the female NLSY respondents; in 1992, more than 9,000 children were assessed. Thus, the data set contains an unparalleled wealth of background data on these mothers, collected on an annual basis, as well as detailed information about their children. It includes annual data on family composition and marital status, and for more recent years it also has information on mothers' emotional well being and on the quality of their relationships with their partners.

## **The Intergenerational Cascade: Occupational Effects on Parent-Child Interaction and Home Environments**

In our early study of employed mothers and their young children aged 3 through 6, Toby Parcel and I considered the effects of both occupational and family circumstances on the quality of children's home environments (Menaghan & Parcel, 1991; Parcel & Menaghan, 1994b). Our primary dependent measure of home environments, drawn from Bradley and Caldwell's HOME scales (see Bradley & Caldwell, 1977, 1979; Bradley et al., 1988), emphasized three dimensions-- intellectual stimulation, maternal warmth and responsiveness, and the safety of the physical environment-- and included both maternal report and interviewer observations. The explanatory measures of social stressors included the quality of employment as indicated by variations in the substantive complexity of the occupation, level of wages, and usual work hours; the number of children with whom parents were coping; and variations in the number of and the relationships with other adults in the family household-- particularly whether the mother had a spouse, a male partner, or a female relative also in the household (all of the study children lived with their mothers). All of these analyses controlled for differences in maternal background, including early self-esteem, cognitive ability, and educational attainment, and in child characteristics, including ethnicity, gender, age, health problems, and birth weight.

The measure of occupational complexity used was constructed from the occupation-level data included in the Dictionary of Occupational Titles developed by the U.S. Department of Labor (1977) and then matched to the detailed U.S. Census three-digit occupational codes that were assigned in each wave to NLSY respondents who were employed. Because this measure is the same for all jobs classified within the same occupation, it contains more measurement error than would a measure constructed at the job level, which attenuates the strength of the relationships that we were able to observe. Analyses also included a measure of the wage level of the current job. This measure is an indicator of the economic returns for the mother's time invested on the job and may also

serve as a proxy for variation in job quality that is not captured by the occupation-level measure of substantive complexity. All analyses also controlled for work hours of the parents.

Consistent with our hypothesis, we found that, among these employed mothers, maternal work quality, as indicated by higher occupational complexity, predicted higher scores on a global measure of the overall quality of home environments. The same relationship can also be stated more negatively: Among employed mothers with young children at home, when opportunities for complexity and self-direction on the job were limited, their children's home environments were adversely affected. Higher family stress, as indicated by larger family size, also predicted lower quality of the home environments.

In more recent analyses, I have re-examined these issues with an expanded sample that included mothers who had 3- to 6-year-old children and were not working in 1986 as well as those who were employed (Menaghan, in press). Mothers' employment status interacted with their marital status, with employment having a more powerful effect when mothers were not married and, conversely, marriage having a larger positive effect when mothers were not employed. The positive effect of higher maternal wages reached statistical significance with this larger sample, and the effect was stronger for unmarried mothers. Thus, although occupational complexity had significant positive effects for both married and unmarried mothers, both the fact of employment and the wage levels of those employed had greater consequences, positive and negative, for unmarried mothers.

Combining these effects yields predicted differences in the quality of home environments, depending on a mother's marital status and her employment at differing levels of complexity and wages. Compared with those who were both unmarried and not employed, mothers employed at average jobs provided significantly more positive home environments, whereas those who were employed at jobs high in complexity and wages provided still more positive home situations. Those unmarried and employed at jobs low in occupational complexity and low in wages provided only marginally more positive home environments than unmarried mothers without any job at all. Thus, although being employed had a positive effect for unmarried mothers, the strength of that effect varied

depending on the quality of employment. Because differences in employment status and wage levels were narrower for married mothers, the family environments of married mothers who were not currently employed were little different from those provided by married mothers employed at average jobs and were similar to those provided by unmarried mothers employed at good jobs.

These effects were estimated in cross-sectional models, with additive and interactive controls for a range of maternal resources, including mothers' self-esteem and cognitive skills measured several years earlier. If our arguments regarding the causal impacts of social circumstances are correct, then changes in occupational and family circumstances should produce changes in family environments. Parcel and I conducted such analyses, using the larger and more heterogeneous sample of preschool-aged children with both initially employed and not employed mothers and following them over the next 2 years to 1988 (Menaghan & Parcel, 1995).

We found that recent changes in parents' occupational conditions-- in job complexity, wages, and hours-- had little impact on changes in home environments. This lack of impact seems to be partly due to the limited change in occupational conditions that occurs over a 2-year period. Even over longer periods, in fact, occupations and occupational conditions are likely to be fairly stable. Because they are less likely to fluctuate, their effects may accumulate slowly and be amplified with increasing duration, so that studies that consider effects for older workers who have experienced occupational conditions for longer durations may report stronger effects. Thus, it may make sense to focus on estimating duration-dependent effects of occupational conditions, as well as considering small changes in occupational conditions from one point to another.

Family changes were both more common and more consequential than occupational changes. Within those 2 years, 24% of the mothers had an additional child, 6% began a marriage, and 9% ended one. Both the birth of an additional child and the termination of a marriage were reflected in negative changes in family environments.

Changes in mothers' employment status were also common, with 17% beginning employment and 12% exiting from employment. Beginning employment also had significant adverse effects in our additive models compared with remaining employed at both time points, but this effect varied depending on other factors. When mothers began work in occupations that were above average in substantive complexity, there was no negative effect; indeed, the sign of the effect under these conditions was positive, although nonsignificant. However, when the mother's new employment was in an occupation with an average level of complexity, beginning employment had a significant negative impact. The effect was significantly more severe when mothers began working in jobs low in complexity, with the quality of home environments dropping nearly a third of a standard deviation. "Average" was defined in relation to the distribution of this sample of employed mothers; because they were young women who had begun childbearing early, their average occupational conditions were relatively low compared with the average for all occupations. Again, this pattern suggests that effects of mothers' employment status are not uniformly good or bad; it is necessary to consider the quality of that employment.

Compared with mothers who were employed at both time points, mothers who remained without employment during the 2-year study period also registered overall declines in the quality of family interaction. However, interactive tests showed that these overall negative effects were due to the sharp decline observed in the subset of mothers who were also persistently unmarried; this subgroup experienced a decline in home environments that was more than three times that experienced on average by other persistently unmarried mothers and more than nine times larger than that produced by persistent non-employment alone.

As in the cross-sectional models, the level of maternal wages was especially critical for unmarried mothers. These interactions suggest that, for employed mothers with young children, the effects of unmarried motherhood are partially dependent on the level of wages they are able to obtain. For mothers whose wage levels were relatively high (implying annual maternal earnings in this sample of \$19,760 in 1988), remaining unmarried had no significant negative impact on the trajectory of change in the quality of their children's home environments, but for other unmarried mothers working at lower-wage jobs, home environments declined.

Thus, mothers rearing children alone may vary widely in the quality of home environments they are able to provide over time. In many cases they may face a painful dilemma. If they stay out of the labor force and remain unmarried, the persistence of low interpersonal and economic resources in the family seems to take a toll that damages the quality of children's home environments during their critical early school years. Yet, if the only alternative open to them is employment at a job with low wages and little complexity-- a likely scenario-- these mothers may gain relatively little.

The findings suggest that work and family circumstances combine in non-additive ways to shape the quality of family interaction, both cross-sectionally and over time; that mothers' occupational complexity has positive effects on children's environments; and that the absence of both marital and occupational roles is especially problematic. From a public policy perspective, this linkage suggests that efforts to ameliorate possible negative effects of family composition or mothers' marital status may usefully focus not only on family status but also on the quality of occupational experiences available to mothers. Of course, it may be no easier to intervene in the economy than to alter marriage, divorce, and childbearing patterns.

## **The Consequences of Occupational Conditions for Marital Interaction**

Family interaction-- both between parent and child and between spouses-- is important in shaping child well being. In addition, the quality of relations between parents itself affects parent-child interaction (Menaghan, 1994). Thus, one plausible pathway by which occupational and economic arrangements affect children may be through their effects on interaction between husbands and wives and between men and women more generally. It is interesting that very little is known about whether or under what conditions occupational circumstances affect marriage. The literature, as well as Parcel's and my empirical work, has emphasized effects of occupational conditions on individual well being and on parent-child interactions, but has seldom examined their implications for relationships between adult family members. Some interesting exceptions are Weiss (1990) and Pearlin and McCall (1990).

One might simply assume that occupational conditions that are beneficial for individuals-- particularly, greater occupational complexity and higher wage levels-- will also benefit family relationships, increasing children's material resources at home, improving mothers' well-being, and enhancing mother-child interaction. Our findings and those of others generally support this expectation when parent-child relationships are considered. However, the picture becomes more complex when the focus is narrowed to marital relationships themselves. Research on maternal employment status has suggested that employed mothers may be less satisfied with their marriages and that the fact of the wife's employment may be a source of strain between her and her partner. As I have discussed more fully elsewhere (Menaghan, 1994), greater female occupational attachment is likely to challenge old marital roles, family commitments, and family satisfaction. As work on the family farm or in production within households has given way for most men and for ever increasing numbers of women to individual job holding and wage earning, and as real wages, even for men's jobs, have fallen, wives' employment is increasingly necessary-- it now takes more than one wage earner to earn what one (male) wage earner used to earn. Thus, increasing numbers of men share at least part of their breadwinner role with their wives and face pressures to take a greater share

in the domestic labor and child rearing. They also face increasing pressures to take their wives' employment preferences and employment trajectories more fully into account. Although the existence of such pressures reflects changing gender norms regarding employment, in some ways those changes seem to have (temporarily?) stranded society in a stalled or incomplete revolution (see Hochschild, 1990; Ross, Mirowsky, & Huber, 1983), without adequate changes in supporting or connected gender norms, particularly regarding how the domestic division of labor should be handled and how competing employment demands and aspirations should be adjudicated. When husbands had clear primary responsibility for providing for the family and uncontested dominance in family decision making regarding employment, this cultural consensus often led wives to subordinate their own job interests to those of their husbands without much explicit bargaining. As normative support for such unspoken subordination erodes, however, husbands and wives who are both employed face greater overt conflict as they struggle to work out jointly satisfying occupational and family arrangements.

Such families have been labeled dual-earner, but researchers need to be careful to qualify that term's implied similarity in husbands' and wives' occupational roles even when both are employed. Wives' employment is more often part-time or part-year; it is more often interrupted by demands to care for ill, aged, or young family members (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1987); and it tends to be concentrated in women's ghetto occupations (secretarial and clerical, retail sales, cashiers, beauty/cosmetics, and young children's education) at lower pay and lower complexity. Even when both are employed full-time, men tend to work longer hours, and women continue to perform the bulk of household labor as well as child care (Ferree, 1990). The dissimilarities in men's and women's occupational conditions and the absence of equality in domestic contributions reflect the slow rate of change in gender-differentiated and gender-stratified social roles, both in the workplace and in the household. Thus, in understanding how parental employment affects marital relationships, it is important to consider effects of occupational conditions and not merely the employment status of husbands and wives (see Lennon, 1994, and Pugliesi, 1995, who make similar arguments regarding employment and individual well-being).

I have explored the relationship between parents' occupational conditions and their marital quality in only one analysis thus far, of NLSY women in married couple families with 5- to 8-year-old children (Menaghan, 1994). All of the husbands and nearly two thirds of the wives were employed. The quality of the marriage was assessed in terms of the wives' report of the frequency of arguments and of positive interaction. Among employed wives overall, working in an occupation that offered greater complexity did not significantly reduce marital problems, except for providing some benefits for the subset of wives who initially had lower self-esteem and mastery. The effects of the husbands' occupational conditions on marital complaints differed when wives were and were not employed themselves: Beneficial effects of husbands' occupational complexity were observed when their wives were not themselves employed, but were blunted when wives were also employed. This same interaction can also be interpreted in terms of the effects of wives' employment. The more complex the husband's occupation, the more that wives' employment was associated with greater marital complaints. Thus, the effects of wives' employment on their marriages seem to depend in part on their husbands' occupational demands and opportunities.

Why should the benefits of one's own and one's spouse's "good" jobs be so limited? One intriguing hypothesis is that, at least in the short term, occupational conditions that have positive effects on individual well being do not necessarily have the same favorable implications for marriages today. There are several reasons why this may be the case. First, work socialization arguments suggest that workplace opportunities to engage in more substantively complex work and to exercise judgment and self-direction will make both men and women less socially conservative and less tied to traditional solutions to problems (Miller et al., 1979); this change in turn may lead to greater questioning of previously accepted gender roles. Such increased willingness to consider more innovative and possibly more equitable divisions of labor within the family household has the potential to increase marital happiness, especially for wives. Yet, efforts to negotiate new arrangements may not be successful immediately, and in the meantime both partners may feel disadvantaged.

A second reason why better jobs may adversely affect marriage and family life involves the relative salience of work and family roles. Some authors suggest that family and domestic tasks may be less central for most American women than they have been in the past. In their book, *New Families, No Families?*, for example, Goldscheider and Waite (1991) worry that neither men nor women are emerging with the requisite skills or priorities to sustain a family household.

Such declines in domestic priorities may be amplified by specific employment experiences. Piotrkowski (1979) found that highly ego-enhancing occupations are likely to remain salient to the worker even when he or she is away from the workplace. And Peterson and Gerson (1992) suggested that, for both husbands and wives in dual-earner families, having a job that provides more scope for decision making-- a proxy for greater occupational complexity-- increases workers' investment in the job. Yet, they also found that it reduces the willingness of workers-- both male and female-- to carry out domestic tasks. The implication is that more intrinsically interesting and complex occupations are more attractive to their role incumbents than are the necessary routines of household maintenance, and individuals employed in such occupations will seek to increase their involvement in the occupational sphere while resisting efforts to be drawn further into family tasks. Thus, it seems possible that the individual benefits of more complex occupational conditions may have offsetting effects that limit their potential to make a positive contribution to marital relations within the family.

These offsetting effects may be between one partner's employment status and the other partner's occupational conditions or, where both partners are employed, between each partner's occupational conditions. At least for families with young children, the combination of two highly complex occupations may pose dilemmas regarding allocation of work and family responsibilities and thus undercut their potential benefits for family interaction. Further research may help specify the conditions under which the individual benefits of greater occupational complexity are reflected in more positive marital interaction.

## **Work and Family: Joint Moderators of Stressor Impacts on Families**

The rather complex picture that emerges from these various analyses suggests that linkages between parental working conditions and family outcomes are stronger under some circumstances than others. Drawing on analyses both of family interaction and marital quality and of the effects of occupational and family circumstances on children's behavioral and academic well being, I suggest in this section several tentative conclusions regarding research on work and family stressors and family well-being.

First, evaluations of maternal employment status-- either as a potential resource or as a potential stressor for families-- need to take into account variations in employment quality. Similarly, it is likely that maternal entrances to and exits from the labor force have differing consequences depending on the quality of maternal employment left or entered: Employment entry is more likely to be positive when the mother enters a more substantively complex occupation or one with higher wages, whereas exit from a job characterized by low wages, long hours, and less complex conditions is more beneficial than other exits. Such contingent effects should be anticipated and explicitly modeled in research efforts.

Second, when two parents are present and employed, the effects of one parent's working conditions are likely to vary depending on the working conditions of the other parent. Combinations that increase the overall demands of employment for the family will have more negative effects. This observance seems obvious in the case of work hours. For example, Parcel and I found that the combination of two parents being on overtime work schedules was associated with significantly more behavior problems for young children than when only one parent worked overtime hours. Yet, the same pattern of diminishing returns may also hold for other occupational conditions that have positive effects on individual well being. We have emphasized that these diminishing returns may

be reflected in poorer marital quality; other findings suggest that they may also be detectable in children's outcomes. In contrast, the effects of one parent's stressful occupational conditions may be offset by positive features of the other's work. For example, fathers having less than full-time work-- generally an indicator of unwelcome underemployment-- had less negative impacts on the quality of children's home environments when mothers were employed (Menaghan, 1994).

Third, work and family conditions are likely to interact in their effects, and analyses must take these likely contingencies into account. Work-family combinations that increase the total set of family demands will be more negative than other combinations, so that otherwise positive working conditions may nevertheless carry some costs for family interaction in combination with specific family conditions. However, positive occupational circumstances may offset or soften the adverse repercussions of family difficulties. For example, high-wage employment reduced the negative effects of remaining un-partnered on the quality of children's family environments. Thus, the intergenerational costs of adult social stressors may be dampened or amplified depending on the family demands and stressors simultaneously impinging on parent-workers.

Research that considers either working conditions or family circumstances in isolation from one another may yield misleading results. Rather, it must consider both work and family factors simultaneously and evaluate plausible interactions systematically. Where two parents are present, researchers should evaluate the effects of both husbands' and wives' employment patterns. In the non-experimental world in which we conduct studies of work and family life, it is also critical to take into account individual and group resources that are likely to be correlated with current circumstances. Finally, although a researcher may focus on one or another outcome in a specific study, taken together these studies should embrace multiple outcomes for multiple family members-- both adult and child well being, both spousal and parent-child relations-- because benefits for one person or relationship may not hold for others. This is a complex research agenda.

## **Implications for Prevention and Intervention**

What are the implications of this line of research for efforts to enhance the quality of family interaction, to prevent negative outcomes, or to intervene in situations in which children or adults seem to be at high risk for trouble?

Clearly, the limited benefits of occupational complexity for marital relations that were found in my research need to be replicated in other studies and for couples with children of a wider age range. These findings suggest, however, that gender-linked expectations for marriage and the domestic division of labor continue to influence how occupational experiences affect marital satisfaction. I have suggested two possible explanations in this paper-- marital difficulties may reflect greater overt negotiation efforts that are not (yet) successful, or they may reflect the reduced priority given to family tasks relative to occupational investments for both men and women. The type of social policy that might be beneficial depends on which of these explanations one emphasizes. Individual couples' efforts to negotiate new and more satisfying work-family arrangements may be aided by more explicit discussion and practice of conflict resolution strategies, as the many popular marriage enrichment approaches suggest. Societal-level changes in the conditions of employment might also reduce problems for all couples. One aspect that I have not emphasized here but that likely plays a large role in marital difficulties is the timing and scheduling of employment. Greater societal-level resolution of some of the structural dilemmas, such as the mismatch between work and school hours, the need for full-time work schedules to obtain job-linked benefits, high time and task overloads for individual workers, and norms requiring overtime schedules if one is a "serious" worker, is difficult to imagine and, in a time of downsizing and global competition, difficult to accomplish. However, despite the difficulties in envisioning change, it is worth emphasizing that current employment patterns and career trajectories contribute to the problems families face. Social policy-makers tend to expect individual families to each find their own way to deal with work-family dilemmas, without addressing how structural changes would ease the task for all families.

One set of decisions that individual families struggle with is whether and how much mothers should be employed when children are young. Of course, this very question, with its focus on mothers rather than fathers, reflects the continued norms that mothers be the primary caregivers and fathers the primary breadwinners. Past welfare policy has reflected this assumption by not requiring mothers with young children to work while providing some income benefits. Calls for reforms, however, suggest that both mothers and children would be better served by policies that require mothers to work. To what extent can the findings reviewed in this paper regarding maternal employment and children's family environments inform this debate?

In these survey data, it is clear that the quality of a mother's employment, as indicated by the substantive complexity of her occupation, affects her children's home environment. Similarly, the wage level she is able to obtain from employment matters and is particularly critical for mothers rearing children on their own. These patterns immensely complicate any simple conclusions regarding whether maternal employment hurts or helps children. The emerging answer, which should not really be surprising, is that it depends on the nature and quality of that employment. From a social policy perspective, this answer suggests that one should be skeptical about the benefits for children that would accrue if "welfare to work" strategies were implemented until more is known about the wages that mothers would earn and the job conditions they would experience. At least for the NLSY mothers studied, unmarried mothers employed at low wages in low-complexity occupations were similar to those not employed at all in the relatively low quality of their children's home environments, and both unmarried mothers who remained non-employed and those who moved from non-employment into employment at low wages and low complexity registered declines in home environments.

On the one hand, these findings do suggest that employment in good jobs can help; on the other hand, they also suggest that employment in bad jobs will not. It is difficult to be optimistic that the mothers currently receiving income, health coverage, and in-kind benefits from government programs would move into good rather than bad jobs. Mothers are selectively drawn into employment depending on the human capital they possess and the opportunities offered by the local job market; those who remain non-employed,

especially those who are unmarried, are likely to have bleak prospects for employment in good jobs.

It is possible, as Parcel and I have noted elsewhere, that longer term follow-up studies would nevertheless show that employment even in relatively bad jobs may lead to better jobs and that the habits, routines, and demands of employment in the long term confer benefits on children and increase their own chances for economic self-sufficiency. The studies reviewed here have emphasized the short-term costs, not the potential long-term gains, of employment. A belief in such gains, combined with the costs emphasized here, would suggest social policies that increase the economic returns from employment and that facilitate upward occupational mobility. If changes in wage rates threaten to eliminate some entry-level jobs, as opponents of minimum wage increases have argued, and put undue burdens on individual employers, a compromise strategy would be political action that decisively increases the federal program of earned income tax credits. This program rewards employment at the same time that it supplements the income obtained from work; reducing the sharp disparities in economic returns from work might reduce the associated disparities in children's home environments.

Such changes in taxation policy, however, would not alter the nature of most low-wage jobs in terms of substantive complexity and autonomy. Research findings have demonstrated that greater occupational complexity has individual benefits as well as benefits for children, so that alterations in job design and in the distribution of jobs that provide greater complexity for more workers is desirable. There is debate regarding how the distribution of jobs is changing, with some researchers emphasizing the de-skilling and routinization of formerly more complex and challenging jobs and others emphasizing the increasing complexity of available jobs. However, it seems clear that where choice is possible and conscious job design and redesign are occurring, the desirable direction of change is toward greater occupational complexity. Social policies should encourage that direction.

In some ways, the finding that work and family conditions interact, so that unmarried mothers with good jobs can nevertheless provide home environments that are little different from those provided by married mothers, suggests that family troubles may be partially alleviated by occupational and economic strategies and policies-- not merely by decrying current family composition. However, such changes would not be easy to accomplish, especially in an economic climate of global competition and job reduction and a political climate marked by aversion to re-distributive taxation strategies.

Although not a direct implication of these specific research findings, I suggest that researchers and social commentators should give more explicit attention to the linkages among larger social conditions, occupational and economic circumstances, and individual and family well being. Many individuals tend not to recognize occupational conditions as sources of difficulties in their own family lives, and this invisibility may itself contribute to their impact: Precisely because individual family actors find it difficult to discern the social and economic roots of problematic interaction, they can be bewildered by interpersonal difficulties and prone to attribute problems to personality flaws or moral failings. Such global, internal attributions are themselves insidious influences on interaction. Thus, the recognition that occupational social contexts have the potential to affect individual adults' emotional well-being adversely and to make positive family interaction more difficult may enable families to make more accurate attributions about the sources of their troubles, even if they are unable to alter them.

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