ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

Working Couples

Edited by
Rhona Rapoport and
Robert N. Rapoport

Routledge Revivals

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Originally published in 1978 *Working Couples* deals with husbands and wives who both hold paid jobs. The editors, the late Robert N. and Rhona Rapoport, had established themselves as well-respected authorities on dual-career families, and in this study they call upon other specialists in the field to apply their research experience to the consideration of the particular problems confronting working couples at the time. They discuss how some of these issues had arisen and analyse how they were being dealt with in a number of contexts.

Working couples at the time were subject to constraints of various kinds in meeting the challenges they faced, and there were many who rejected the lifestyle on these grounds; but there were many others for whom it worked. Numerous families were attempting to operate the pattern in new ways. Both may have separate jobs, and her income may not only be separate from his, but in some cases larger and more reliable. Such a situation creates its own problems, which need to be resolved. The authors look at and clarify some of the generic issues and discover which resolutions have been satisfactory, as well as the various devices created for helping dual-worker families to function.

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Edited by
Rhona Rapoport and
Robert N. Rapoport
with Janice M. Bumstead

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Contents

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The spadework for bringing together people and ideas to form this book was accomplished in 1976 collaboratively with Joseph Pleck, whose initiative with many of the contributors was instrumental in their early involvement in the work.

The book as it now appears is an effort to bring together experienced workers in a new field. It is not comprehensive. It is certainly not, we hope, the last word.

Rhona Rapoport
Robert N. Rapoport
Janice M. Bumstead

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THE WORKING FAMILY PROJECT is a team of anthropologists, psychologists and sociologists working at the Center for the Study of Public Policy, Harvard University for the past three years. The members are Laura Lein (Principal Investigator), Jan Lennon (Administrator) and Maureen Durham, Gail Howrigan, Laura Lein, Michael Pratt, Ronald Thomas, Heather Weiss (research collaborators). All of the staff members but one are students or recent graduates of advanced degree programs at Harvard University. Maureen Durham is on leave from the University of Chicago. The Working Family Project has recently published a pamphlet for the PTA called 'Work and the American Family' and has produced an interim report, 'Work and the Family'.

Introduction

Why a Book on Working Couples?

This is a book about married couples who both hold paid jobs. We call such families dual-worker families. The contributors have studied the experiences of dual-worker families and have considered some of the issues confronting them. They discuss how some of these issues have arisen and analyse how they are being dealt with in a number of contexts.

Working couples, in meeting the challenges they face, are subject to constraints of various kinds and there are many who reject the pattern on these grounds. But, there are others who find and create devices for making the pattern work. We are concerned with discovering and clarifying some of the generic issues confronted, and learning which resolutions have been found satisfactory.

Why do working couples present any special issues? In pre-industrial times both men and women generally worked for the family subsistence; and even today it is normal in some occupations and professions to find husbands and wives working in close partnership. The reason it is a new issue is that many families outside the range of 'special cases', such as the small family shop or restaurant, are now attempting to operate this pattern and in new ways. The wife is no longer necessarily her husband's help-meet, counter-clerk, receptionist, hostess or whatever. She may have an independent job or career, and her earnings may be not only independent of his, but larger and more reliable. Five per cent of wives in intact marriages at this point earn more than their husbands, and if one considers couples where earnings are at a par—say within a category one way or the other—the current estimate is 20 per cent of couples in the USA. Many of these couples are finding that the new patterns do not fit very well with the way they were socialised, or with the way our society is organised.

Our society has evolved, as a dominant lifestyle, a 'conventional pattern' of sex-roles and division of labour between home and work. This conventional pattern, developed with industrialisation, has been characterised by a specialised division of labour in which only men have been defined as 'working'. A woman's place has been seen as in the home, removed as far from the workplace as the logistics of housing and transport allowed.

The male has been seen as the provider, the female as the one who cared for home and children. Initially this was seen as a privileged role, in which the wife was protected from a world in which women's participation was viewed as unsuitable and unnecessary.

In the last century and early part of this century, women's removal from the outside world of work and concentration in the home was seen as a reflection of what was 'right' and 'good'. It was seen as 'right' in terms of a presumed natural order of sexual division of labour; and 'good' in terms of the greater happiness and well-being for the family. Then, in the two World Wars women were brought into the labour force in unprecedented numbers, but, until the present decade, this remained defined as exceptional, and no fundamental restructuring of social roles and institutions occurred to give it continuity. It is only recently that there have been social and legal efforts to normalise the pattern. In so doing a number of problems are characteristically encountered.

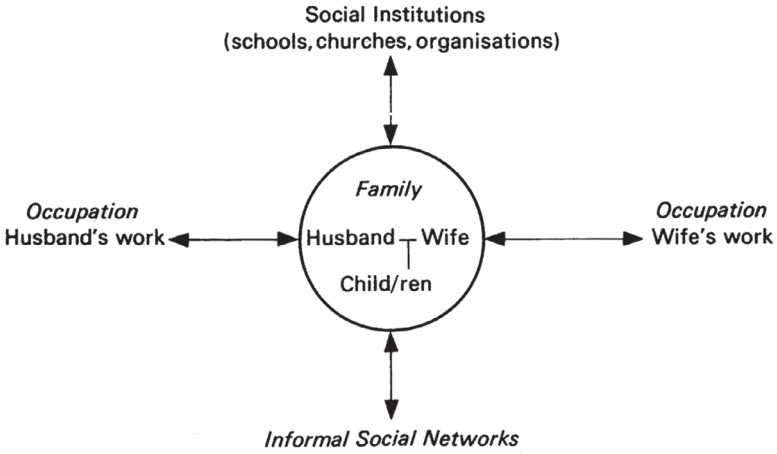
One set of problems is in the minds and emotions of the individuals seeking to change their lifestyles. Reared with a conception of the 'normal' family pattern as one in which the male provider is 'head' of the household and the housewife is his helpmeet, it is difficult to think otherwise with any depth of conviction though the idea at a superficial level of equality for all is very modish.

Another set of problems relates to the social and cultural fabric of our society, which has been so structured that when any given couple departs from the conventional pattern they encounter resistances and strains of various kinds. These range from practical timetabling difficulties to difficulties associated with others' critical attitudes toward them in relation to deviating from expectations in specific situations.

For all these reasons the new pattern of working couples tends to be a stressful one, despite the fact that it has been to some extent legitimised and has recently achieved broader prevalence. In more and more households, including those with small children, both husbands and wives have paid jobs – over 40 per cent for recent USA figures and nearly as high in Britain. But though behavioural problems have changed, there are many lags in values and social institutions have not changed correspondingly. It is not national policy for women to work. In fact, strong *counter*-arguments based on selected data indicating potential damage to children and to marriages as a consequence of wives' working are widely heard. So, despite equal opportunity legislation, the occupational option is an easier one for males (where many social forces press for it) and more difficult for females (where many social forces militate against it). As a consequence many couples who both opt to work find it difficult. Some abandon the dual-work pattern; others sustain it but suffer a heavier emotional toll than is necessary; many couples are reluctant to try the pattern because of a distaste for possible criticism, a lack of social encouragement, and a fear of deleterious consequences in their personal lives.

We introduce here some specification of the issues which arise when couples decide to be 'working couples'. The contributors to the book provide a more detailed analysis of particular issues on the basis of their research.

A grasp of the general pattern of issues can be obtained by considering the framework in Figure 1.



The crucial structural difference between conventional families and dual-worker families is that in the latter both husband and wife sustain external links to occupations, whereas in the former it is only the husband. Considering the contributions in this framework, a clear picture of the place of each contribution emerges. We can also see the gaps as yet undealt with. We return to this in the final chapter.

Let us consider the issues in three groupings:

(a) Issues relating to linkages between family and occupations.
(b) Issues relating to relationships within the family.
(c) Issues relating to linkages between the family and non-occupational social institutions and networks.

Family and occupations

First, working couples are distinctive because both partners have linkages to the world of work, rather than only the husband. At work either or both may encounter hostility deriving from the impact of their dual-worker pattern on others. They may be felt to have an unfair economic or

political advantage over other couples with a single earner. This may, for example, be particularly acutely felt by couples who choose to have children early in their marriage and are thereby put at a disadvantage in the mortgage market because their earnings cannot match comparably placed dual-worker couples.

The wife's boss may be sceptical about whether she can perform as well as a man, or whether she will stay on and be a reliable employee or drop out to have babies. Her colleagues may have low expectations of her participation at work, basing their attitude on the conventional viewpoint that it is impossible for women to combine the roles of parent and worker. Or, they may respond to her presence with stereotyped negative expectations, such as, she will introduce emotional difficulties to the work situation.

There are various responses to these negative encounters. Some women seek to prove themselves competent workers by not admitting when they are fatigued, or by overcompensating and becoming 'superworkers', allowing themselves less leeway than male colleagues – to prove that they can 'do it'. On the other hand, women may also derive satisfactions from their jobs comparable to those of men in the same sort of work. Increasingly, women have a work-role as part of their self-conception and, whatever part economic motives may play in taking and sustaining a job, women expect and find other satisfactions too.

Similar contrasts also hold, of course, for the men. Husbands in working couples may experience difficulties at work that might have been absent if their wives had been at home. If the husband in a working couple shares child-care responsibilities with his wife, he may, for example, pick up his child from some activity or take the child to the doctor. This means that family timetables intrude more into his work situation than they do for men whose wives attend to all of the family timetable co-ordination. If he is attending a meeting that goes on longer than expected, for example, he is faced with a dilemma. As a committed employee he has conventionally been expected not to be distracted by parenting obligations. If his workmates are not understanding, he may be teased, his 'manliness' impugned, and in extreme cases his job or career may suffer.

Relationships within the family

Typically, a working-couple family is involved in a pattern of activities which are different from those of the conventional family, and which create potentials for stress. The stresses may be resolved more or less satisfactorily. With the wife employed outside the home, the domestic tasks which are conventionally assumed to be accomplished by the housewife as unpaid, somewhat 'invisible' work, become problematic because in

the time and with the energy she might have given to these tasks, she is at work in a paid occupation.

The conventional response to the new situation is to speak of the wife's 'two jobs'. One rarely hears, in this context, of the husband's 'two jobs' (unless he is 'moonlighting'). The implication is that if she wants to work, she should carry the overloads of work *plus* conventional domestic obligations. She works a 'double shift'.

Alternatively the husband may share the tasks conventionally defined as female; or the working couple may be assisted by a helper, who may be a grannie, a domestic helper, or any of a range of professional domestic-service workers. Many working couples use some combination of all of these.

But, while stresses and strains have received considerable attention, it should not be assumed that only trouble comes into the family as a consequence of this restructuring of occupational roles. The family that chooses the dual-working pattern, for whatever reason, is likely to derive additional rewards as well as incurring additional stresses. More money will usually be earned, though more services will usually have to be paid for. The wife may feel more fulfilled as a person, though this too is affected by the type of job she has and it is likely in any case to be tempered by the possibility that she may be more exhausted by the additional effort required.

One way that couples seek to minimise the strains on the intimate 'interior' of a family is to establish a new balance in their pattern of family and work commitments. If the husband does not recognise the importance of this but says, in effect, 'I want you to do whatever you want to do to be happy', adding explicitly or implicitly 'so long as it doesn't affect your attending to my needs', he is laying an emotional booby-trap for the relationship; particularly if his wife aims at a work commitment comparable to his.

The wife, too, may lay an emotional booby-trap in the couple relationship if she concentrates on attaining parity in work, hoping that the domestic parity will follow automatically.

On the other hand, there is no doubt that many of those who *over*-emphasise the difficulty of this pattern and reject it for that reason lose life opportunities for potential self-realisation which they, too, may regret in the future.

Perhaps more in the consciousness of young couples, particularly at the point of the arrival of the first child, is the issue of the possible harmful effects on the child of mother's work. Research on maternal deprivation conducted on institutionalised wartime babies separated from their mothers lent credence to the view that separation is a very real hazard. There is also no doubt that when children are neglected and when the pattern is associated with marital conflict, the growing child does not have an optimal environment for growth.

More recent research has indicated, however, that a much more differentiated view is required. It is now recognised that it is a fallacy to 'blame' such difficulties as abnormalities in child development and in social adjustment of adolescents on working mothers. Some babies are damaged by maternal separation, others are damaged by maternal over-involvement and from a learned incapacity to confront and deal with separations, which after all punctuate the life-cycle. Some ways of handling separations are beneficial, others harmful. When mothers work, child-parent contact may not, in fact, be eliminated or even reduced, only differently spaced and structured. The evidence available does not prove that mothers going out to work necessarily deprive their babies of needed emotional support. But we need much more knowledge and discussion on what conditions allow couples to work out a responsible and even beneficial pattern of parenting, so that separations and involvements can be structured so as to avoid the damaging situations.

The family and other social institutions

Many other social institutions, such as schools, are organised to complement the conventional family pattern. If a couple becomes a working couple issues continuously arise such as: Who will take the children to and from school? Who will wait for hours in the health centre during morning clinics, for the child's measles injection? How can the disapproval of the pattern expressed by teachers, doctors or social workers be dealt with? How can conventional-minded relatives and friends be dealt with? Rather than having them to turn to in distress, they are often experienced by dual-worker families as providing additional unwanted problems because they are critical figures against whom one must defend oneself. They may have a particularly powerful capacity to rouse feelings of guilt.

In a dual-worker family's relationships with other social institutions and with less formal social groups and networks the central dilemma seems to be how much energy to put into restructuring these relationships. They are needed as potential supports – and many of them; schools, hospitals and other service personnel are indispensable. In other instances – relatives, neighbours, friends – they represent valued human involvements. But, whether required for utilitarian purposes, or wanted for personal values, these relationships tend in the present state of affairs in our society to be generally unsupportive of the dual-worker family pattern – and therefore particular families who wish to operate the pattern run the risk of going one way or the other – toward total self-reliance (ultimately impossible), or toward total compliance with the conventional expectations of others (ultimately abandoning the pattern).

These then are a few of the problems which arise in the relationships of a working-couple family. In much of the earlier work in the field, the concentration was on the destructive potentials of this pattern. Fears were expressed that it would destroy the marriage, ruin the sex-life, emasculate the male and make the female 'hard' and aggressive. Fears were also expressed that it would damage the children.

Given the fact that there are proponents who emphasise the potential benefits of the pattern, and opponents who emphasise its potentially harmful consequences, it seems important at this point to review what can be learned from couples who have actually experienced the pattern.

The contributions of research

The papers presented in the chapters to follow are all based on research on working couples. Each contributes something to our understanding of a specific process important in establishing and operating the working-couple pattern.

We begin by examining a very concrete problem which couples must face as they seek to establish the pattern initially: finding two jobs. Michael Berger, Martha Foster and Barbara Wallston report on a study of American college graduates who seek to find jobs for both partners on leaving university. Professional and academic job markets are not usually set up for couples in which both partners wish to work. Such couples find little help from employers in exploring two job possibilities simultaneously. Jobs are offered to individuals, and if the partner is taken into account at all, the tendency is to assume that wives will adapt to their husbands taking the best possible job offered to him. Increasingly couples wish to arrange jobs which provide the best combination of opportunities for the couple. But when faced with time pressure and job scarcity, couples often feel pressured to make decisions which benefit one partner more than the other. One worker following the other is not usually preferred, but nevertheless it often occurs in forced choice situations. Couples vary in their capacity to deal comfortably with the interpersonal consequences of such asymmetries, but for people disposed to adopt this pattern, the existence of this kind of emotional backwash is a virtual certainty and needs to be confronted rather than denied.

Charles Handy, in a study of British middle managers and their wives, examines the specially *difficult situation confronting executives' families*, particularly when the executives are on their way up the organisation. The combination of 'greedy' organisational demands, and the conventional-mindedness of the sub-section of the population made up of men entering management, makes the working-couple option an infrequent one in this