

4 Family Life

Work-family linkages

Families, like work organisations, vary structurally according to their members' composition, role definitions, and ways of organising their activities. Moreover, like work organisations, family structures change over time, as children are born or grow to maturity and leave the parental home; as, perhaps, husbands and wives divorce and, often, take on new marital partners; as elderly parents or relatives require care and accommodation. These structures both affect and are affected by the nature of the adult members' employment. Ideally, there is only a minimum of tension between work organisations and families: work provides the economic wherewithal for family life; families provide rested and motivated workers. One sphere is private, and not to be interfered with by those at work; the other sphere, public, and therefore free from the intrusion of familial demands upon a worker's capacity to perform his/her work roles. Or so it would be in an ideal world.

In reality, of course, the work sphere and the family sphere are highly interdependent, with a great many potential points of tension between the two. In some situations, work and family spheres are at loggerheads to such a degree that they may be seen as intrinsically antithetical – each *greedy* to absorb as much of an individual's time and energy as possible. The interdependence of work and family takes two major forms: the economic roles men and women perform in the workplace provide access to the financial resources necessary to sustain family life; while occupational conditions such as work time and scheduling, job mobility, and work cultures all have a strong impact on family life. Moreover, because for most families work is the sole source of income, family members often undergo considerable stress, sacrifice and strain in order to accommodate the demands of

work, even when these accommodations have deleterious consequences for family relationships (Piotrkowski, 1978). The idea that work and family worlds constitute separate spheres is, and has been shown to be, no more than a myth (Kanter, 1977). Family functioning itself depends, in large measure at least, upon the pay, hours, and other conditions of work which confront family members.

Recently, there has been an upsurge in literature examining the linkages between work and family life in both Britain and the United States. The aim of this section is to outline briefly the nature of these linkages, concentrating in particular upon the ways in which family members accommodate the dual demands inherent in participating in both paid work and family life. Thus, one important focus of this section is upon changes, if any, in the domestic division of labour between husbands and wives. In addition, the question of whether family members want more flexible working arrangements is addressed. First, however, an overview of family life in the 1980s is given.

Families in the 1980s

It is quite usual for discussions of family life to depict families in one of two ways. First, accounts (frequently journalistic but not always) are often given of the demise of the so-called *traditional nuclear family*, with statistics cited to show that only a tiny proportion of families comprise husband, wife and dependent children (Chester, 1985). Secondly, families are divided into *types*, with lists constructed to show that this proportion of families are *dual-earner families*, that proportion are *traditional, husband-earner families*, and another proportion are *lone parent families*. Sometimes, these lists are extended by the inclusion of *dual-career families* or *cross-class families*, both variants of the dual-earner family; and *neo-traditional families* in which the wife works on a part-time basis. Both of these two ways of looking at family life are, in their separate ways, accurate and helpful. Family life today is not only complex, but is also very different from what it has been historically. However, unless due caution is exercised in discussions of family life based upon either (or both) of these two ways of looking at families, important facts about families are likely to be obscured, or at best, misinterpreted.

One such fact concerns the alleged demise of the nuclear family. Current statistics show that only 24 per cent of households in Britain

in 1981 contained a married couple with one or two dependent children, a drop of some six per cent since 1961 (Table 2.1, p. 41, *Social Trends 17*, 1987). Other ways of calculating the proportion of traditional nuclear families, based upon the number of wage-earner husbands, financially dependent wives plus one or two dependent children, reduces their representation from one in four to only about 15 per cent of all households (Chester, 1985). However, both of these calculations are based upon the distribution of *households* not families, and as such obscure the fact that most people marry; most people live and die with their first (hence only) marriage partner; most people have children. In 1985, three-quarters of people living in households lived in families headed by a married couple, a figure which has fallen only slightly since 1961. Almost three-fifths of people lived in households headed by a married couple with dependent children, accounting for 45 per cent of all people living in households but only 28 per cent of all households (*Social Trends 18*, 1988). Moreover, while just over half of all married couples surveyed by *Social Trends* had no dependent children living with them, among families with heads of household under age 30, 60 per cent did have dependent children – a figure which rises to 83 per cent among families with heads aged between 30 and 44 years. When over 80 per cent of couples in the prime years of family-rearing have children still living at home, it is hard to picture the death of the family.

As Chester (1985) points out, snapshots of household types are misleading about families. Not only do they tend to obscure the continuity of family life over the decades, they ignore the fact that it is usual for individual families to change over time, by neglecting the family life cycles through which the great majority of families move. Moreover, being aware of the family life cycle allows recognition of the fact that individual families' needs will be different at different points in their life cycle. Family life is not static: what one family needs at one point in time will not suit other families at that same point, nor indeed, the same family at a different point in time.

Similar comments may be made in reference to the various lists of family types which are often constructed. Each family typology is not only a snapshot view of all families for the year that the typology was constructed, it is also a snapshot view of each individual family. In 1984, for example, approximately 53 per cent of families could be categorised as dual-earner families, 33 per cent as traditional (husband-earner only) families, and 12 per cent as lone parent families.

However, with the exception of the last family type – lone parent families – it is also the case that most couples will move between the first two of these types at least once and usually more than once over the course of their marriage. This movement of families between the various types parallels their movement through the family life cycle, and is occasioned by wives' entry into and exit from paid employment. Wives, in other words, have work cycles over the course of their lives which generally follow their movements in the family cycle. If observed at a selection of points in time over her lifetime, an individual woman could be a partner in a dual-earner couple, a non-working wife with dependent children, a part-time worker, a full-time worker without dependent children, or out of the labour force caring for an elderly parent. Movement, in other words, through the various types of family and work circumstances is the essence of the majority of women's lives.

The *Women and Employment Survey* (WES) provides considerable detail about this movement of wives through a variety of work and domestic stages. Until women have children, there is little to distinguish the working patterns of married and unmarried women. Once becoming mothers, however, less than half of women's time on average is spent in paid employment, with only about one-quarter of this time spent in full-time work (Martin and Roberts, 1984:123-32). Furthermore, multiple breaks from employment over the family formation phase and after childrearing is completed remain the norm for the majority of women with children, as Dex has shown in her re-analysis of the WES data. Over 60 per cent of mothers surveyed aged 30-49 years had had two or more periods of *not working* during the course of their working lives, rising to 74 per cent of mothers aged 50+ years. These figures contrast sharply with those for women without children: only about one-quarter of childless women aged 30-49 years had taken more than one break from paid employment, rising to 38 per cent of women fifty years and older (Dex, 1984:114). Thus, although there is some evidence that younger women are returning to paid work more often between births and more quickly after completing their families (Martin, 1986), it remains true that the majority of wives follow discontinuous or interrupted work patterns in order to accommodate paid work with family life. Constructing typologies of family types tempts one too easily into forgetting that almost all families potentially fit into almost all of the types enumerated at some time in their histories. Recognition of this

movement, moreover, invites understanding of the variety of ways a single family may be linked to the labour market over the course of its lifetime (cf Wilson and Pahl, 1988:236).

These comments aside, it is clear that changes in women's lives and participation in the labour market have been occurring over the past few decades. The marked increase in married women's labour force participation noted earlier is only one of these changes, and in some ways perhaps the least surprising. For in fact, the overwhelming majority of the oldest women included in the *Women and Employment Survey* – women in their fifties – had worked at some time since the birth of their first child. What are new among younger women are significant changes in the timing of their return to work. Martin (1986) demonstrates that for each successive age group covered, women have become more likely to return to work before their families are complete and have returned to work sooner after the birth of their final child. The youngest women surveyed had, in fact, the fastest rates of return after final birth and the highest rates of return by the time their youngest child was aged 16 years. Furthermore, it is these changes in the lives of women – increasingly earlier returns to employment after completion of childbearing and increasing experiences of employment between births – which, according to Martin, accounts in some measure at least for the marked growth in women's employment (1986:29).

Families in Britain in the 1980s are, then, at once different from families in earlier decades by virtue of the changed patterns of wives' labour force participation, and similar by virtue of the fact they are still families – mothers, fathers, and dependent children. Families in Britain in the 1980s are also different from one another, depending upon where they are at any given time in the family life cycle and in the wife's work cycle. And, of course, from these differences flow differing consequences for both family life and men's and women's work participation. In the next section, an overview of recent research concerning work and family life is given. First, however, the financial consequences of wives' employment for family life are outlined.

Despite the widespread participation of wives in the labour force, women's earnings are often regarded as secondary in terms of the total family income, a situation which has been noted in a variety of studies of family life and one which is confirmed by the *Women and Employment Survey*. On average, working wives surveyed in WES earned only half of what their husbands earned, with only seven per

cent earning the same or more than their husbands. Rainwater (1984), in examining national data for Britain for the years 1968 to 1973, found that wives' contribution to family income across all levels of husbands' income stood at about 20 per cent of total family income. This difference in earnings between husbands and wives arises in part from the shorter number of hours worked by wives, and in part from women's generally lower hourly earnings (WES, 1984:99). Generally, wives work fewer hours than husbands in order to accommodate the demands of raising children – a decision which carries financial penalties. As noted earlier, Joshi and Newell (1987) calculate the cost of motherhood to be equivalent to approximately 30 per cent of the earnings of childless women over the course of women's employment careers. In addition, occupational segregation in the labour market reduces women's earning potential by confining them to typically low-paid, low-skilled occupations. The net result is that women's earnings normally cannot, and usually are not expected to supplant men's within family finances. Despite generally low earnings, the contribution wives make to family finances is nevertheless often of considerable importance for raising their families' standard of living. Layard et al (1978) calculated that three times as many families would be living below the official poverty line were it not for the contribution made by wives. Hence, for many families, wives' employment is not only desirable, it is essential. In the following section, the ways in which such employment is accommodated within family life are discussed.

Work and family life

As noted above, research on the relations between work and family life has revealed that these two spheres are highly interdependent, and rarely as insulated from each other as some might believe. There is, in fact, often a *spill over* of stresses from the workplace to the home (Staines, 1977; Piotrkowski, 1980; Staines and Pleck, 1983; Kohn and Schooler, 1983), with job preoccupations, physical exhaustion, paperwork, and the telephone all bringing the public world of work into the private world of the family. Conversely, the stresses of living in a family may enter the workplace, as when worries about money, family discord, children's needs or illnesses, or unfinished housework are carried to work in the worker's mind (Crouter, 1984; Piotrkowski and Stark, 1984; McRae 1986; Moen, 1989). Neither working nor being at home is inherently non-stressful, although each has potential

gratifications as well as the reverse. Nor would it be desirable, even if it were possible, to eliminate all stress or all points of contact between work and family life. A certain amount of stress is normally beneficial, constituting a challenge and a stimulus to cope. But when stress is high and interferes with productivity, satisfaction or well-being, it merits attention. The interdependence of work and family, and the demands of both are all too often the source of such stress.

The greatest potential for stress in family life as a consequence of work arises during the times in marriage when both husband and wife are in paid employment (although even the times when wives are not in employment are not always free from the stress that may arise from men's work, a point which is discussed below). Hence, most studies concerned with the relations between work and family concentrate upon the dual-earner cycle within families' lifecycles. In studies of the dual-earner pattern in which wives as well as husbands have occupations demanding high commitment and responsibility – dual-career families – a high level of tension has been found, although not necessarily accompanied by any overt symptoms of stress or by interference with job performance (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1971, 1976; Aldous, 1982). This is attributed not only to satisfaction in the job, but also to the capacity of highly skilled or highly educated husbands and wives to deal with the dilemmas they characteristically face: role overload, identity problems, role cycling so as to minimize conflicting demands between their two jobs, reconstructing social support networks when traditional ones fail or are counterproductive, and working through satisfactory self-conceptions even in the face of social disapproval. Studies of dual-career families revealed that these families were able to cope with higher levels of stress than other families, and that they were favoured in this by a number of enabling conditions. Dual-career family members are high earners, thus they could afford domestic help; they tended to be in occupations offering considerable flexibility of working time – as entrepreneurs and professionals. Finally, women in dual-career marriages tended to have husbands who supported the idea of equal opportunities and were prepared to put themselves out to some degree in order to facilitate equality. This might only have consisted in lowering their demands for personal services at home, but often it entailed a degree of sharing in the tasks of domestic work.

Other families, however, lack the resources of dual-career families and, as a result, may endure considerable stress either through the

effects of work conditions entering the home or by carrying familial stress into the workplace. Such stress has been found to be associated with symptoms such as apathy, accidents, absenteeism, high job turnover, psychological complaints and marital discord (Rapoport and Sierakowski, 1982). It has been noted previously that the rising divorce rate is associated with the rise in women's employment. Divorce is, of course, only one manifestation of stress. Alcoholism among women is also increasing, particularly among working wives. This has been attributed in part to increased earnings, in part to increased stress, and in part to exposure to the formerly male lifestyle of job-related drinking (Bailey, Haberman and Alksne, 1965). However, it is important to note that just as family-work linkages vary enormously by social class, type of occupation, age, and family circumstances, so too do the consequences of such linkages whether stressful or beneficial.

Reviewing the varying consequences of work-family interaction is made easy by the existence of three recently published sources. Gowler and Legge (1982) review British studies of dual-worker families, identifying the range of such families, exploring their defining characteristics and examining the external forces which affect the lives of such families. Rapoport and Sierakowski (1982) review the trends in the relationships between work and families in Britain, covering families in a variety of different circumstances. Rapoport and Sierakowski outline the characteristics of contemporary stress and strain in work-family relations, and examine the issues which confront individuals, families, employing organisations, and governments as they seek solutions to these stresses and strains. In the United States, Vogdanoff (1984) has edited a collection of twenty-four articles which together examine the interrelationships between work and family from three perspectives. First, the effects of work on family life economically; second, the impact of occupational conditions on family life; and third, the influence of family responsibilities on labour force participation and commitment to work. One overriding conclusion from each of these reviews is that individual family members are left very much to themselves to solve the problems inherent in juggling the dual demands of work and family life. In other words, devising coping strategies is the task of individuals, given that few structural or societal approaches to resolving conflict and strain exist. Moreover, the individuals most likely to devise – or be forced to devise – strategies for coping are wives.

Since the publication of these three collections, a number of small scale, qualitative studies of family life in Britain have been published. These studies document, first, why it is wives, and not husbands, who are likely to be the ones making the adjustments necessary to accommodate the demands of work and family; and second, the continuing tendency for wives to carry almost the entire burden of and responsibility for housework and childcare. As it is, in fact, the completion of domestic tasks and the provision of adequate childcare that present the greatest difficulties to families in which both husband and wife participate in paid employment – and hence carry the greatest potential for stress – a brief overview of these studies is given. For more detailed analyses of the consequences of work-family linkages under differing family circumstance, the reader is directed to the three works noted above. The report then turns to an examination of existing evidence concerning whether husbands and wives, given the double burden of work and family life and their concomitant stresses, want more flexible working arrangements of the type presented in the opening sections.

Two recently published studies approach the investigation of family life from quite different perspectives and come to remarkably similar conclusions. Sharpe (1984) interviewed 120 women with dependent children throughout Britain who were working either part-time or full-time. Sharpe's aim was to explore the practical ways in which these women combined work and childcare, as well as to understand the personal and psychological consequences of employment for the women themselves and their families. Sharpe's analysis reveals very clearly why it is women who devise the strategies necessary for coping with work and family. Pervasive among the women she interviewed was the assumption that mothers, but not fathers, can choose whether or not to undertake paid employment. This assumption was reinforced by a widespread belief that, for mothers, children and family come first and therefore, mothers should be willing to give up their paid work if their children suffered from their absence. As a result, women who would be financially unable to give up their jobs whatever their stated intentions, as well as women who simply would prefer not to relinquish paid employment, organise their domestic work, paid work and childcare arrangements extremely carefully. Domestic work and children, they believe, are their responsibility; paid work is their choice. Hence, like many other women, those interviewed by Sharpe share the continuing *universal*

problem of all working wives and mothers: simultaneously fulfilling the demands of the workplace and of the family.

Yeandle (1984) focuses her attention on the varying relationship between women's paid labour and domestic bargaining between husbands and wives over the division of labour within the household by investigating the employment and family strategies devised by 62 women in Kent. Like Sharpe, one of Yeandle's aims was to explore how women with children organise their lives so that they can undertake both employment and family responsibilities. Here too, as with the women in Sharpe's study, the women interviewed by Yeandle view their families' lives as primary in importance. This importance is reflected in the highly flexible approaches to employment adopted by these women, with a wide variety of types of jobs, industries, and conditions of employment considered acceptable. Underlying such flexibility is a desire to minimise any inconvenience caused for husbands and children as a result of mothers' employment. Just as Sharpe's women considered their own employment to be a matter of choice, the women interviewed by Yeandle sought, if not always permission, then at least the compliance, of their husbands in respect of their taking up paid work. Husbands, according to Yeandle, held the balance of power within family life – a situation which is reflected by their wives taking ultimate responsibility for domestic labour and childcare in addition to their burden of paid work.

A third qualitative study of family life in the 1980s has for its focus families in which one might expect that the balance of power between husbands and wives would be different from that uncovered by Yeandle. McRae (1986) examined the family and work lives of 30 cross-class families where the wife was employed at a professional level and the husband as a manual worker. In these families, the wives were usually better educated than their husbands; their earnings often exceeded their husbands'; they frequently had greater job security; and their jobs, not their husbands', normally determined the position of the family in society. Under these conditions, it would be plausible to expect very different consequences for the domestic division of labour and childcare. However, although McRae interviewed a small number of families in which husbands and wives did share both responsibility for, and performance of, household tasks, in the majority of families wives continued to do both. In fact, in some families, McRae suggests that it is the occupational superiority of the wives that causes them to retain control of the domestic division of labour, as one way of

compensating for exceeding the attainments of their husbands in the workplace. The link between *proper* enactment of feminine roles and doing the housework is sufficiently strong to overcome any advantages which potentially accrue to cross-class wives from their occupational positions. Even here, then, among cross-class families where the wives do not work for pin money or extras, or to supplement their husbands' earnings, but because they have careers and superior labour market capabilities, many wives carry the double burden so common in women's lives. And like other wives, they devise strategies which make it all possible.

These three small scale studies reveal clearly how little has changed within many families' lives with the entry of women into paid employment. Wives may work outside the home, but they continue to work inside the home as well, and to bear ultimate responsibility for domestic tasks and childcare. These three studies provide illuminating detail to the large scale surveys which have, over the 1980s, revealed that nationally women do continue to assume responsibility for the smooth running of family life in addition to their paid work. They highlight the fact that flexibility in the workplace alone would be an insufficient remedy for easing the double burden women carry. What is needed to accomplish that is a radical shift in the internal organisation of family life – domestic tasks and childcare in particular – so that the needs of wives and mothers can be better met. Husbands, in other words, need to do more.

It is, however, often thought that husbands are in fact taking a greater share of family-related tasks and responsibilities. The coming of the *New Man* or the *New Father* has been heralded by both journalists and academic researchers. But if a *New Father* is coming, some day, that day seemingly has yet to arrive: a fact made clear by a recent major publication bringing together new evidence from Britain, the United States and Scandinavia. In their introduction to *Reassessing Fatherhood*, the editors write:

Evidence for the 'new father' is, in reality, hard to find and the paternal role persists in being limited by social, institutional and personal forces (Lewis and O'Brien 1987:3).

The collection of articles goes on to document that the rate of change in men's behaviour inside family life is leisurely at best, findings confirmed in a recent British study of the changing roles of men and women which found that 90 per cent of domestic tasks

continued to be done by wives (Henwood et al, 1987). Writing on the same subject, Pleck (1985) suggests that although husbands' involvement in the family is increasing (however slowly), the fundamental problem of role overload facing women who combine paid work with family life still remains. Most of the increase in men's domestic labour is, according to Pleck's analysis of time budget studies, in the area of child involvement and in a few very specific household tasks. Outside these areas, increase is minimal, and wives continue to be ultimately responsible for domestic tasks and children. Pleck's work in the United States is echoed in Britain by a variety of studies as noted above. One possible clue to the apparent paradox between belief in the increased involvement of husbands in the domestic sphere and wives continuing to carry the major burden can be found in the analyses of the household division of labour in the *Women and Employment Survey*. During the course of this survey an interesting contradiction between the pilot stage and final interviews arose. In the final interviews, significantly more women stated that they shared the housework with their husbands than did so during pilot interviews. At the pilot stage, women gave seemingly endless lists of the domestic work they did, and very short reports of the domestic work their husbands did. Hence, the findings of the main study came somewhat as a surprise. What appeared to be behind this contradiction was the fact that women frequently reported having housework-sharing husbands so long as *when both husband and wife were at home, both did housework*, despite the fact women continued to do housework in their husbands' absence, while men, when home alone, did not. Similar results are revealed by Gershuny (1988) who, in an intensive analysis of time budgets, reports that in 1984 British women spent on average over three hours more per day on domestic tasks than men.

It appears, then, that change in family life is occurring as slowly as change in the workplace. But as with the workplace, change inside the family is happening. Brian Jackson (1984) argues that evolutionary forces are at work comprising something of a 'silent revolution' in the paternal role. Sonia Jackson (1987) sees a good deal of incipient movement towards equality. For each, it is fathers' involvement in childcare that is providing the impetus for change, as Sonia Jackson writes (1987:53):

...fathers are now expected to attend their children's birth even if they are not formally married to the mother. They are considered

competent to care for mother and child and any other children in the family during the post-partum period. The ideology of more equally shared parenting is dominant, even if the reality may fall short of it.

The importance of fathers' involvement in childcare should not be minimized. Not only does it remove some part of the double burden most women bear, it creates a wedge in the door marked equal opportunity. Thus, as the authors noted above argue, men's family roles are changing and with such change will come, eventually, greater freedom for wives in the labour market. At present, however, women remain generally responsible for household work and the bulk of childcare. A vicious circle keeps women in these roles, even where new ideas of equality are present. *Believing* that men could do the cooking, cleaning, child-minding and nursing as well as, or in place of, women loses some considerable part of its force when men continue to command better jobs and higher earnings. In the majority of families, if a choice is to be made between spouses' working patterns, then it is more economic for men to go out to work on a full-time basis, for women to work part-time or not at all. And because men do go out to work, it is considered only fair that women do the bulk of the domestic work. Ideology, in other words, gives way to economics.

Given this, it is important to ask if husbands or wives want more flexible working arrangements and more free time to spend with their families. The next section therefore examines the little evidence which exists in this regard.