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## Dual-Career Families

The Evolution of a Concept\*

### *Introduction*

The concept of the “dual-career family” was introduced in our research on “Women in Top Jobs” (Rapoport and Rapoport, 1969). This paper presents the core findings of that study together with an overview of subsequent developments.

The original paper saw the dual-career family as a variant pattern on a single norm—the traditional family in which the husband was the sole breadwinner and pursued a career in the outside world, while the wife looked after the children and ran the home. The families described were strategically important as vanguards in a social change process. We did not suggest that they were representative of contemporary families, nor that they should provide the exclusive norm for the family of the future. Rather we thought that in the logic of things their numbers were likely to increase and that the experiences of pioneer families might help others evolve such patterns with less stress and strain.

In the twenty years that have since elapsed their increase has been such as to make the dual-career family a recognized structure among forms the family is now taking in relation to social change.

The original study was based on thirteen functioning dual-career families and three in which the dual-career aspect was given up by the wife breaking off her career. People may drop out for various reasons and for differing amounts of time at different points in their careers—men as well as women. In some situations special provisions are made for career interruptions by women which may obviate the need to drop out in the sense of resigning from a position in an organization. In other situations dropping out may simply mean a slackening of

\*A requested overview.

the pace of activity. We use the term drop-out to refer to an indefinite cessation of activity whether in an organizational post or a less formal position.

The couples were chosen to represent a range of occupations for the women. They had to be intact families with at least one child still living at home. The sixteen families were interviewed by a pair of interviewers (one male, one female). There were ordinarily one or two joint interviews (husband and wife interviewed by both interviewers) and interviews with the husband and wife separately by individual interviewers. Each session lasted approximately three hours. Findings were checked in a follow-up interview.

Five foci of stress were identified: dilemmas of overload, personal norm, identity, social network and role cycling. In each area we shall discuss the sources of stress and the ways in which the couples have adapted to the ensuing strains.

### *Overload Dilemmas*

The old folk expression "behind every successful man there is a woman" stands not only for a social psychological situation where the wife gives emotional support, advice, etc., but also for a whole culture complex of activities and relationships within which the wife is a helpmate. One of the couples began the interview by reversing this, stating that "behind every successful woman there is a man," meaning that the man encouraged his wife to cope with problems arising in her work, provided consultation on financial matters, etc. They did not mean that he gave the same sort of backing—shopping, mending, cooking, child-minding, etc.—that would be the obverse of the traditional picture.

In the dual-career families studied there were no reversals of the traditional roles (though they are by no means non-existent). The most usual situation was a rearrangement of the domestic side of their lives. Some household tasks were delegated to others, some reapportioned between husband, wife and children. The degree of overload experienced seemed to have been a function of at least four factors:

- *The degree to which having children and a family life (as distinct from simply being married) is salient.* With the exception of one couple, family life in general and children in particular were highly salient. The couples were very concerned with the possible effects on their children of their both pursuing careers. This implied a limitation in the degree to which the couples were willing to delegate child-care, even assuming the availability of satisfactory resources. There is an element of psychic strain

involved in allowing two major areas of life, so different in their demands and characteristics, to be highly important. The overload, then, is not a simple arithmetical one of increased number of tasks to be accomplished, but one far more difficult to assess, which is related to the duality of emotional commitment and concern.

- *The degree to which the couple aspire to a high standard of domestic living.* Most of the couples aspired to a high standard—pleasant home and garden, cleanliness, good cooking. This made the management of the domestic side of their lives more complex, albeit by choice, than if they had kept to a lower standard. However, the notion of a lower material standard is almost a contradiction in terms to the notion of career success. The process tends to become circular in that once having acquired a taste for the high standards, the impetus to continue working and career development is increased.
- *The degree to which satisfactory arrangements for the re-apportionment of tasks is possible.* Here we found various combinations of conjugal role reorganizations and delegations of parts of the domestic work to children and helpers of various kinds.
- *The degree to which the sheer physical overload of tasks and their apportionment is adumbrated by a social-psychological overload.* This arises from struggling with the following conflicts: normative conflict, sex role identity maintenance, network management and role-cycling. Couples vary enormously in the degree to which these other sources of tension feed into the family system and the degree to which they can manage them.

For all the couples the overload issue was salient. They all emphasized the importance of physical health and energy as a prerequisite for making the dual-career family a possibility. They regarded it as important for their children to be healthy, too. Generally speaking, there was little room for illness in the systems that were evolved.

To deal with the overload issues much thought and effort was spent on arranging a system of domestic help. This had two sides: the availability of different kinds of domestic helpers and the couple's preferences as to which aspects of their domestic roles they wished to delegate. The delegation of the less desirable aspects of domestic labor was both the expected and the observed tendency. Given the low value placed on domestic work in our society, the dual-career couples have all had to devote considerable energy to improvising viable arrangements. A wide range is found: short term and long term; full-time and part-time; live-in and live-out; nannies, au pairs, dailies, students, secretaries-doubling-as-baby-sitters, couples with husband and wife dividing