

Jobs, Marriage, and Children: How His and Her Jobs Affect Child Well-Being

Extended Abstract (2-4 pages)

Although employment of both parents in married-couple families is now common in the US, men and women continue to face gender-differentiated labor markets, workplaces, and earnings, and gender-differentiated expectations regarding responsibility for children. Social norms require that fathers have at least full-time employment, and expect that his employment will provide the majority of the family's income. In contrast, mothers' employment, even if it is very important to total family financial well-being, is still expected to be less, in terms of total hours spent, dollars earned, and centrality to the family, than is fathers'.

Conversely, while expectations that fathers participate in family household work and particularly children's care have been rising, fathers are still typically cast as "helping out" mothers, who continue to have primary responsibility for household and family functioning. As Thompson and Walker (1990) have summarized, even when their own behavior departs from these ideals, both husbands and wives actively re-interpret their relative contributions to shore up gender specialization and to exaggerate their conformity to these social scripts.

Some prior research has suggested that the quality of each parent's occupational experiences affects marital relationships, family home environments, and children's well-being. However, there are also suggestions that these effects may vary depending on the sex of the parent. For example, Reed Larson and Maryse Richards (1994) suggest that fathers are more apt than

mothers to bring work stress home, so that variations in how stressful fathers' workdays are explain more about resulting tensions and dynamics within families than do variations in mothers' work experiences. On the other hand, Menaghan and Parcel (1991, 1995) argue that given the dominant responsibility of mothers for direct child care and the more extensive and intensive mother-child interaction, mothers' experiences and work hours will have a greater impact on family life than will fathers.

Gender specialization arguments also suggest that the direction of difference between mothers' and fathers' work experiences will shape outcomes: when mothers' occupational quality/prestige and earnings exceed that of their husbands, effects may be more negative than when differences are in the more culturally accepted pattern of greater male achievement. Similarly, when mothers' extent of participation in work, as tapped by usual work hours, is greater than that of their husbands, marital quality and child outcomes may be more adversely affected. Finally, some studies suggest that the effects of each parent's work experiences may in part depend on the other's, with, for example, the combination of two highly complex occupations less beneficial than an additive model would suggest.

This study focuses on dual-earner families and examines how mothers' and fathers' work conditions affect their own relationship, the home environments they provide their children, and their children's well-being. Using data from the Child-Mother data set of the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979, I examine families with two employed parents and an early school-age child.

Children aged 6-7 in 1988, 1990, 1992, and 1994 are pooled to create a synthetic cohort of 2,865 children and their families, who are followed to ages 10-11. I focus on work complexity, usual work hours, and hourly earnings.

I hypothesize that both parents' greater work complexity and higher hourly earnings will be associated with lower marital conflict, better home environments, and better child-well-being, but that the effects for fathers' occupations will be stronger than for mothers'. Work hours are expected to have curvilinear effects with full-time work schedules more positive than both very low hours and extensive overtime for both parents. However, consistent with gendered expectations regarding the optimal balancing of work and family responsibilities, I hypothesize that mothers' extensive overtime, but fathers' less-than-full-time hours, will be especially problematic. I also explore how parents' occupational circumstances interact with each other, and with family variables including family size, to amplify or minimize their impact on their children.

The findings suggest that two-parent families continue to be affected by larger societal beliefs about what men and women should contribute to marriage, family and parenting, in ways that limit their flexibility in responding to occupational challenges and employment uncertainties over time and may have enduring effects on the next generation.