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ABSTRACT

Home-career conflict may exist in varying degrees for both spouses in a dual-career couple. Home-career conflict exists when a dual-career wife values both homemaking and career and views some aspects of these two roles as incompatible. Home-career conflict results when a dual-career husband values his own career and that of his wife, but is uncomfortable with his wife's successes at work. Dual-career couples who hold traditional sex-role values are more likely to experience role conflict at a level that interferes with their effectiveness, while couples with less traditional values may experience some conflict and role overload. Smith's (1981) finding that egalitarian family decision-making was more characteristic of wives employed at professional levels, combined with Klein's (1984) finding that fewer dual-career wives were employed at levels commensurate with their training, suggest that women have a long way to go to achieve equity. The fact that role conflict exists, and may impact the level of career involvement for wives, and the level of family involvement for husbands, supports the need for approaches to reducing role conflict which incorporate values clarification for both men and women. Rational strategies to reduce overload and increase role efficiency are also useful. An egalitarian decision-making style between dual-career spouses can result in less conflict over home and career roles and more effective behaviors in both roles. (NRB)

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Dual Career Families

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The focus of this presentation is to point to the advantages of an egalitarian decision-making style between dual-career spouses. Such a style is likely to result in less conflict over home and career roles and thus to more effective behaviors in both roles. Some research on career satisfaction for dual-career spouses suggests that, for such couples with children, high self-esteem is critical. The relationship between career satisfaction and couple decision-making, however, needs further investigation.

Dual Career Couples Decision Making Style

One of the critical ingredients in any marriage is the way decisions are made. In the traditional marriage decisions are made by the man and the woman obeys. In some marriages decision-making is done with an equal sharing of responsibilities and privileges. Rarely is a marriage a pure type. Ideally, from a mental health perspective, decisions are made mutually by husband and wife, at least on important matters such as where to work and when to have babies.

In a recent study (Smith, 1981) Lu ann Smith, a student of mine at the time, examined the decision-making style of 45 dual-earner couples, all of whom had at least one child, had been married at least three years, and where both spouses were employed full-time for at least one year in positions of approximately equal prestige. The sample represented a range of occupational levels with 50% in the technical-professional level and 50% in the skilled and clerical level. Each spouse completed a questionnaire assessing career salience and their decision making style in relation to child care, career, housekeeping, and personal/social needs. Smith refers to her sample as dual-earner couples to distinguish them from couples who are employed at professional levels only.

Smith's findings indicated that these dual-earner couples ranged from fairly traditional to quite egalitarian or mutual in their decision-making style. On a scale from 1 to 5, with 1 meaning traditional and 5 egalitarian, mean scores for couples were 4.0 for child care, 3.9 for Career, and 4.2 for Personal/Social needs. About half the couples were classified as traditional, however, in their allocation of household responsibilities, the other half were classified as mixed or egalitarian.

For wives, egalitarian decision-making was associated with being employed in a higher status career. For husbands, egalitarian decision-making was associated with less career commitment. Thus, from Smith's study we can conclude that dual-career wives employed at professional levels such as academic faculty, compared to wives employed at lower professional levels and at skilled trades, are more likely to make their decisions about work and family roles in a mutual way. Unfortunately Smith did not analyze her data to determine the factors characterizing the spouse with a traditional decision-making style.

Dual-Career Couples: Home-Career Conflict

Home-career conflict may exist for both spouses in varying degrees in a dual-career couple. Some studies have estimated that most home-career conflict in dual career couples is related to role overload (Hall & Hall, 1978). This kind of conflict may be reduced (according to the Halls) by learning effective coping strategies, the most effective being negotiation with family members at home and supervisors and colleagues at work. The Halls' approach to home-career conflict uses effective egalitarian decision-making strategies to reduce role overload.

There are other types of home-career conflict which are less amenable to rational strategies. Role conflict may be the result of a conflict in

values and may be more subconscious than conscious. Such role conflict requires value clarification as a first step toward resolution, and exists within both men and women in dual career couples.

Home-career conflict results when a dual-career wife values both homemaking and career and views some aspects of these two roles as incompatible. Role values collide when such a woman is faced with choosing between the needs of her children and her work. If, for example, she believes that a mother has primary responsibility for the children, then, everytime one of her children is sick or needs special care she takes it on herself to provide that care at the expense of her work related responsibilities. A young mother who is nursing her baby and at the same time employed in a demanding occupation is a prime target for this type of conflict. The effect of such conflict in extreme cases is to produce depression and reduction in career involvement.

In a recent study (Farmer, 1984) we found that women in non-traditional careers (i.e, engineers) had lower home-career conflict than women in traditional teaching careers. One explanation would be that women who choose nontraditional careers have less traditional views of homemaking.

Another possible explanation of the Farmer (1984) data relates to couple sharing of parenting roles. One of the questions in the measure developed to assess home-career conflict in these women reads "Sally is waving goodbye to a man holding her baby." This cue produced significantly less conflict than another cue, "Judy is arriving home in the middle of the afternoon, her child is waiting for her." One conclusion from this data might be that a working woman who has a husband who helps with childcare is less conflicted than one who does not.

Home-career conflict results when a dual career husband values his own career and that of his spouse, but, because of his socialization, is uncomfortable with his spouse's successes at work. He wants her to be successful, but not too much. Rice (1979) and Commins (1980) have studied this type of conflict. Rice's analysis of the sex role socialization of males along four major dimensions provides the framework for his explanation of male role conflict. The male is socialized for competence, achievement, autonomy, and the rejection of traditional feminine role behaviors, especially expressive, nurturant behaviors. Thus for the traditional male, who tries to share career and homemaking roles, conflict results. To become equally involved in parenting with his spouse would mean to some men to be less manly with a resultant loss of self-esteem.

As social role expectations for men change some men are trying to be both instrumental and expressive but haven't quite integrated the two. These men also experience role conflict. Other men are not conflicted in this way, but are experiencing role overload by trying to fill both the traditional and the emergent father roles.

We can conclude that dual career couples who hold traditional sex role values are more likely to experience role conflict at a level that interferes with their effectiveness. Couples who hold less traditional values may experience some conflict and role overload. Approaches to reducing conflict require value clarification. Rational strategies that can be learned to reduce overload and increase role efficiency are also useful.

Dual-Career Couples: Career Satisfaction

Two studies of dual career couples conducted by Henya Klein (1984, in progress) have related career satisfaction, to a series of psychological factors (self-esteem, marital satisfaction, career salience, home salience,

and commitment to spouse's career) and socioeconomic factors (salary, education, promotions, number of children, age of children, age of spouse). In both studies Klein has found the psychological factors more influential than the socioeconomic.

Klein's sample included 252 spouses and was drawn from professional staff and faculty at the University of Illinois and from couples in the surrounding community employed at professional levels.

For dual career spouses employed at levels commensurate with their training, satisfaction with their career was significantly related to being career committed, and with having lower homemaking commitment. For dual career spouses with children, also employed at levels commensurate with their training, satisfaction with their career was significantly associated with self-esteem.

Dual-career wives were more likely to be underemployed in Klein's study, have lower occupational status, be less satisfied with their career, and be less likely to have been promoted in the last five years. Dual-career husbands were more likely to be satisfied with their careers, be employed at levels commensurate with their training, and have been promoted in the past five years. In sum, Klein's findings tend to confirm the bad news. For her sample of dual career couples, the wives are at a disadvantage, compared to the husbands on several counts.

Conclusions

Smith's (1981) finding that egalitarian family decision-making is more characteristic of wives employed at professional levels, combined with Klein's finding that fewer dual-career wives are employed at levels commensurate with their training suggests that women have a long way to go to achieve equity. There is a need to address the reasons for this less

equitable employment level for wives in dual career couples. Part of the answer continues to lie in the environment, in the employing agencies. The fact that role conflict exists, and may impact the level of career involvement for wives, and the level of family involvement for husbands, supports the need for value clarification for both men and women, a continuing need for consciousness raising.

When men and women share equally in the world of family and work what will they be like? I have suggested that they will share equally the decision-making, the responsibilities, and the satisfactions. They will be self-confident because they are expected to share, not to dominate or obey.

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