Part I

Studying working families: an experiential approach
1 Why study working families?

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Nanette Foley, sales representative for a telecommunications company and mother of two teenagers, rushes in the door of her suburban home frantically worrying if her husband, an accountant, remembered to pick up their daughter at basketball practice and whether she can get dinner ready in time to take their son to his math tutor. Opening the mail while turning on the oven and talking on the cell phone to her daughter, who impatiently waits outside the high school for her ride, Nanette reflects on the pace and demands of her life and how it differs from that of her mother. Was life this hectic and stressful? Were her parents better communicators about their feelings toward each other and their children? How did her parents negotiate the sharing of family and household responsibilities? Did her father regret not being more involved in the lives of his children? Did she have a more satisfying life than her mother who stayed at home? Would the lives of her family be happier and more satisfying if Nanette worked part time?

Today, one experience of family life shared by most children under the age of eighteen is that their fathers and mothers are both working. This is not only the situation for families with limited resources struggling to make ends meet; rather it is the predominant pattern for middle-class families (US Bureau of the Census 2000). Working mothers and fathers are now splitting three jobs between two people as they divide responsibilities for the family in addition to managing their own professional careers or jobs (Christensen and Gomory 1999). Yet despite the fact that most middle-class parents are employed, how work affects the lives and well-being of parents and their children remains relatively unexplored. To understand how marital relationships, child development, and family life are being influenced by the dramatic movement of married women with children from home to the workplace, the Alfred P. Sloan Center on Parents, Children, and Work has undertaken a major research initiative: the 500 Family Study. This study of middle-class dual-earner families across the US includes 300 families with adolescents and 200 families with kindergarten children. Surveys, time diaries, and personal
Studying working families interviews were used to gain a holistic view of the complexities of work and family life experienced by middle-class parents and their children. Nanette’s experiences during the “arsenic dinner hours,” where the burdens of household tasks overwhelm the already tired worker, highlight the challenges working families face in achieving a feasible balance between work and family demands. How families negotiate the conflicts between home and work is the cornerstone of the 500 Family Study.

The intersection between family and career demands has been the topic of several recent books written by US scholars who initiated the field of working families. *It’s About Time* (2003) by Phyllis Moen is based on the Cornell Couples and Career Study, a rich database of over a thousand middle-class dual-earner households. Focusing on how work influences decisions in the life course, Moen finds that work demands often conflict with worker preferences, resulting in delays in child bearing, career choices, and time spent in leisure activities. When families make decisions about their employment, these decisions are not strictly determined by economic needs but by other factors, such as the availability of good schools or adequate childcare.

*Working Families: the Transformation of the American Home*, edited by Rosanna Hertz and Nancy Marshall (2001), emerged from a 1998 conference on working families. Multiple data sets and various analytical tools inform the chapters in this book, which present a broad range of issues confronting working families. Lynn Casper and Suzanne Bianchi (2001), Jennifer Glass (2000), Arlie Hochschild (1997), Jerry Jacobs and Katherine Gerson (2004), and Harriet Presser (2003), leading figures in work and family research, have recently published or are in the process of releasing new studies that offer strong critiques on how working families are coping and modifying their life styles to meet the demands of an uncompromising workplace traditionally organized for fathers who were the single earners in their families. This is not just a US phenomenon; internationally, scholars such as Catherine Hakim, an economist, have been studying women’s work issues, and assessing how work policies affect women’s employment decisions. Taking a global perspective, Hochschild and Ehrenreich (2003) draw the connection between the international labor market and US working mothers, arguing that middle-class families are importing childcare providers from other countries to act as surrogate mothers for their children.2

This book differs in several important ways from previous publications and offers a unique and comprehensive assessment of the lives of working families. First, it is a study of working parents and their children, so the unit of analysis is the family, not just the working couple. Second, because of its innovative methodology, the study brings the lives of the families
under the social scientist’s microscope to reveal the intricate complexities of work and family life, including aspects of family life that bear the brunt of work–family conflict. Third, all the chapters in the book are based on the 500 Family Study, which provides an intellectual and methodological coherence achieved by multiple authors who shared ideas, arguments, methods, and interpretations with each other over the course of several years.

Charting the types of activities working families engage in, including how they allocate their time and how these allocations affect their feelings about themselves and others, the chapters in this volume coalesce around four overriding themes: Experiences at Work and at Home; Marriage and Family; Making it Work at Home; and Parenting and Adolescent Development. Often addressed through overlapping methodological approaches, these themes form the conceptual nexus of the volume. Consequently, this is not an edited volume, but rather the integrated product of a team of graduate students, postdoctoral fellows, and faculty from multiple disciplines taking different perspectives on problems that confront working families. To place each of the chapters in a broader framework, commentaries were sought from leading experts in the field represented within each chapter. The book includes contributions by twenty-four individuals affiliated with the Center on Parents, Children, and Work as well as critiques by twenty-seven distinguished scholars from a variety of disciplines.

The design of the 500 Family Study, described in chapter 2 by Lisa Hoogstra, draws its families from eight sites across the US varying in their degree of urbanization, labor force composition, and socioeconomic characteristics. To obtain a detailed picture of work and family life, mothers, fathers, and their children were asked to complete a series of instruments, including surveys, in-depth interviews, and time diaries. These instruments were designed to be complementary and provide information about work, marriage, childcare and parent supervision, management of household tasks, time allocations, coping strategies, and psychological well-being. Several items from national studies were included in the parent and adolescent surveys, allowing for comparisons between the study and nationally representative samples.

One instrument used in this study is the Experience Sampling Method (ESM), a ground-breaking method for examining how individuals spend their time, who they spend it with, and what activities they are engaged in over the course of a typical week. Developed by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and his colleagues (Csikszentmihalyi and Larson 1984; Csikszentmihalyi 1997), the ESM provides detailed information regarding participants’ subjective interpretations of their daily life experiences. The ability to
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capture individuals’ subjective evaluations of events at specific moments
during a week is particularly valuable for studying emotions such as stress,
since it is possible to determine a person’s overall feelings of stress as well
as identify instances when it occurs. Unique to the 500 Family Study,
members of the same family, at nearly the same moments, report on
their own activities and feelings.

Even though the ESM has certain advantages over other methods for
understanding emotions and time use, it is not without its own set of
methodological issues, including individuals’ failure to respond to sig-
als when beeped. The authors have taken this non-response issue into
account in their analyses. One innovative solution to this problem is
described by Jae-Gea Jeong in appendix A. Another technical limitation of
the 500 Family Study, which occurs both in national and small-scale stud-
ies of families, is the coding of household income. When annual income is
reported in surveys, the response categories tend to be broad, since many
individuals are reluctant to report their exact income and other assets.
Consequently, reported income data are often imprecise. Appendix B
describes a method developed by Yona Rubinstein and Casey Mulligan
for obtaining more accurate estimates of income.

Experiences at Work and at Home

Jane, a psychiatrist, places her patient files in her briefcase; there hadn’t been enough
time during the day to fill out the newest forms requested by the insurance company.
Reflecting back on her day she wonders “Where did the hours go?” Now it is time to
start the hour commute home and plan her evening: dinner, homework, and patient
calls – the extension of the eight hour day to fourteen. Despite the flurry of activity in the
office and the vanishing hours, it was a successful day and she looks forward to seeing
her husband and hearing about her daughter’s presentation on Harriet Tubman. Pulling
into the driveway, she meets her daughter, whose enthusiasm over her report envelops
Jane; the patient files remain locked in the trunk. Why is it that some parents feel positive
both at work and at home? What do women find satisfying about their jobs? Are there
conditions at the workplace that increase a busy parent’s ability to manage stress? Does
a good or bad day at the office influence the emotions of other family members?

Work plays a significant role in the lives of working families, not only
in terms of time spent in work-related pursuits, but also with respect to
parents’ attitudes toward work and how these experiences and emotions
spill over into the home. The majority of the parents in the 500 Family
Study are employed or looking for work and 75 percent of them work full-
time (93 percent of fathers and 61 percent of mothers). Many of these
couples are working more hours per week than the national average, with
16 percent working more than 50 hours per week (31 percent of fathers
and 7 percent of mothers). These additional work hours often intrude on
family life. Nearly all mothers and fathers report conflicts between work and family, and when these conflicts occur, the family is more likely to suffer than work. For most working parents, trade-offs and compromises between family and work obligations appear to be unavoidable.

Overworking is pervasive among the families in the study. Approximately 40 percent of the parents report arriving early to work or staying late for three or more hours in a given week; nearly 60 percent report working at home, with 54 percent indicating that they feel pressured to bring work home in order to keep up. Among the parents in the 500 Family Study, long work hours appear to contribute to higher levels of stress. High-stress mothers and fathers are twice as likely as low-stress mothers and fathers to work three or more hours at home on weekends; these high-stress parents are also more likely to work three or more hours at home during the week. With both parents working a longer work week, and many of them taking their work home, working families confront multiple constraints in trying to balance their busy lives.

Long work hours do not necessarily represent a desire to devote large amounts of time to work, particularly on the part of mothers. Among mothers in the sample, 64 percent express an interest in working part time. Most fathers who are currently working feel that they do not have the choice to work part time. Given the long hours and the stress of work, why do parents work in such demanding jobs? If mothers would rather be at home at least part time and fathers are working full time because they feel they have no choice, how do they feel about their jobs? How do both positive and negative experiences at work cross over into family life?

Focusing on the kinds of tasks parents are engaged in at work, chapter 3 by Holly Sexton describes what tasks people do, how much time they spend engaged in various activities, and how they feel about these activities. Sexton finds that people employed in management jobs and professional careers spend, on average, only one-fourth of their workday engaged in primary tasks – a surgeon, for example, repairing a blocked artery. Being involved in primary work tasks is associated with higher levels of positive affect; individuals are significantly more engaged and have a higher sense of self-esteem than when performing work tasks perceived as less central to their professions.

Sexton suggests that one reason people may want to work in demanding jobs is that they feel significantly more cognitively engaged and have higher self-esteem when at work than at home. For many parents, work provides an environment of challenge and interest that does not occur elsewhere. One reason mothers work is not because they are unhappy at home, but because they gain intellectual satisfaction from working. Job autonomy also appears to contribute to more positive feelings about work.
Individuals who perceive that they have high degrees of self-direction in their jobs have higher levels of positive affect, engagement, and self-esteem compared with those who perceive themselves as having jobs with less self-direction. When work experiences involve greater self-direction, mothers and fathers also tend to have higher levels of positive affect, engagement, and self-esteem at home.

The emotional effects of being at work and at home thus appear to be more complex than suggested by Hochschild (1997). Overall, individuals have higher positive affect at home, yet they are more engaged and experience higher self-esteem while at work. Perhaps engagement in work tasks is necessary to increase positive affect both at work and at home. However, there appear to be distinct benefits of spending time at home that are not found at work. Sexton finds that while parents feel more intellectually engaged at work, they feel more relaxed at home. These findings suggest that sources of dissatisfaction among some employed parents may be associated with the type of work they perform, the control they can exercise in their jobs, and their general outlook on work.

In chapter 4, Sylvia Martinez also provides a potential explanation for why parents work in demanding jobs. Drawing on the psychological literature on intrinsic and extrinsic task motivation, Martinez identifies mothers as having primarily an intrinsic or extrinsic work orientation. Mothers with an intrinsic orientation are more likely to report that they work because they like the challenge and enjoy their tasks, whereas those with an extrinsic orientation work primarily for financial security and job benefits such as health insurance. Martinez finds that mothers who are intrinsically motivated have higher levels of job prestige and autonomy, and lower levels of boredom at work. Her work supports that of Sexton in that enjoyment and challenge in one's job or career is associated with autonomy and self-direction at work. On the other hand, women who are extrinsically motivated tend to work longer hours, which diminishes enjoyment of work and intrinsic motivation. For mothers, just as for fathers, the challenge is finding a balance between financial security and job satisfaction.

In contrast to studies that examine general workplace characteristics (e.g., hours worked, type of work, occupational prestige) and how they affect individual well-being, our work focuses on what parents actually do at their jobs, how they feel about their work, their motivations for working, and what happens when there is emotional spillover from work to home or home to work. In chapter 5, Emma Adam takes a cutting-edge biobehavioral approach to analyzing the relationship among engagement in activities at work, at home, and in public, emotional well-being, and levels of stress. A subsample of the 500 Family Study participated in
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This innovative study which determined stress from time-diary reports in conjunction with samples of saliva that were used to measure cortisol, a stress-sensitive hormone. It is important to underscore that social scientists are becoming increasingly aware that the experiences of family and work extend beyond cognitive and emotional responses to physiological functioning. Essentially Adam, along with other social scientists such as Cacioppo et al. (2000) and Booth, Carver, and Granger (2000), argues that the behavior of individuals cannot be understood without taking into account their physiological and emotional states; conversely, physiological functioning cannot be understood without reference to emotions and the social contexts in which they occur.

Adam confirms the expected pattern of cortisol levels, which are highest in the morning, decline throughout the day, and approach zero at bedtime. Negative emotional states are associated with higher levels of cortisol, and this is more the case for fathers than mothers. For parents, feeling positive, cheerful, friendly, and caring is associated with lower levels of cortisol than would be expected at a given time of day. Similar effects are found when individuals feel hardworking and productive: their cortisol levels are lower than expected. When taking environment into account, Adam’s results are consistent with those of Sexton. Parents experience greater feelings of productivity and higher levels of involvement when they are at work, and cortisol levels are correspondingly lower when in work settings independent of time of day. A positive work environment, including tasks that are challenging and rewarding, reduces stress. These results do not indicate that being at home, on average, elevates stress for working mothers and fathers. Rather, experiences at home, like those at work, produce lower stress levels than expected when they are positive and engaging; such experiences may help to maintain good physical health in the long term.

In chapter 6, Jennifer Matjasko and Amy Feldman examine not only the carryover of emotions from work to home, but how these emotions affect the transfer of feelings between parents and adolescents. In other words, if a parent is happy or angry at work, is he or she more likely to be happy or angry when returning home and, if so, does his or her teenager react similarly by becoming happy or angry? The authors find evidence of emotional crossover between parents and adolescents. In general, fathers who have positive relationships with their sons and daughters are more likely to shield their children from negative experiences they encounter at work. Even if they work long hours, fathers seem to be able to leave work at the office. Mothers, on the other hand, tend not to separate emotions at work from those at home. When happy or angry at work, mothers are more likely to transfer their happiness or anger to their adolescents.
Surprisingly, for mothers, taking more time for oneself does not positively affect their adolescents’ happiness, suggesting that an afternoon of exercise or other forms of recreation does not reduce negative or increase positive work–family emotional crossover. These analyses suggest that transitions from work to home are more emotionally challenging for mothers, who have greater difficulty compartmentalizing emotions at work from emotions at home.

Marriage and Family

George and Angela, parents of twin sixteen-year-old sons, have been married for nineteen years. George is a software consultant for several major companies and Angela is a second grade teacher at the local elementary school. Every night before they go to bed, they have a daily routine that starts, “How was your day? Tell me all about it.” It is during this time that the stresses and demands of the day are intimately reviewed, and new strategies for dealing with the pressures of the next day are discussed. One topic that always comes up is how they will celebrate their twentieth anniversary. What makes for a satisfying marriage, particularly among dual-earner couples with children? Do conditions at work influence how couples relate to one another? Do couples feel the same when they spend time with each other and when they spend time with their children?

Work–family conflict appears to affect two important dimensions of family life: parent–child relationships and husband–wife relationships. Research has clearly demonstrated that marriage provides positive emotional, health, and economic benefits for spouses and their children (Waite and Gallagher 2000). However, one might expect that when both partners in a marriage are working, feeling pressure and stress at work could create tension and dissatisfaction between spouses and in their relationships with their children. Turning attention to couples, we begin by examining how working parents experience their everyday lives, their perceptions of each other, and the core of the relationship, their marriage. Using couples rather than individuals as the unit of analysis, the authors explore what factors are associated with marital satisfaction, how the emotions of wives and husbands vary from work to home when they are alone, with each other, and with their children, and what activities at home are associated with emotional well-being for husbands and wives.

Chapter 7, by Chi-Young Koh, is an in-depth analysis of couples’ day-to-day emotions as they move through different locations and activities in their daily lives. Koh asks if spouses feel the same way when they are together, if they feel similar levels of responsibility toward their children, and whether the well-being of their children is of equal importance to each of them. When describing the emotional landscape of couples over the course of a week, spouses tend to look similar with respect to how positive and in control they feel, how responsible they feel about a given
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situation and how important it is to them, and how much they enjoy and willingly participate in the activities they are engaged in. It appears that the emotions experienced at work and at home are not gender specific.

There are consistent differences, however, in husbands’ and wives’ emotions that occur when they interact with their children. Compared with work or chores at home, spending time with their children is one of the most positive experiences for husbands. On the other hand, while spending time in family activities is a positive experience for wives, they experience higher positive affect, self-esteem, and intrinsic motivation when engaged in social activities. The complexity of working mothers’ emotional lives is further complicated by their interest, participation in, and satisfaction from multiple domains, including work, home, and public arenas. These findings suggest that women enjoy both time with their families and time away from home, whereas working fathers feel most comfortable at home.

In chapter 8, Mark Nielsen finds that highly satisfied couples are those in which both spouses tend to agree on the positive and negative aspects of their relationship. Highly satisfied couples feel that they perform their roles well, make decisions and resolve disagreements amicably, communicate effectively, and are comfortable with each other. In contrast, less satisfied couples focus their energy on external aspects of their relationship such as parenting, but tend not to agree on emotional aspects of their relationship with each other. Couples who feel less satisfied with their relationship may focus their emotional energy on their children rather than themselves.

Probing deeper into the lives of both satisfied and dissatisfied couples, Nielsen finds that husbands with lower levels of marital satisfaction experience a higher number of depressive symptoms than husbands with higher levels of marital satisfaction. On the other hand, dissatisfied wives are more likely to report lower levels of self-esteem than wives who have high levels of marital satisfaction. However, these psychological characteristics are mediated by the couples’ relationship, particularly role management, spouse’s personality and traits, communication, and affection and sexual relations. These results suggest that marital satisfaction involves not only role clarity but intimacy and communication.

Making it Work at Home

The dishes are piled high on the sink. Gloria knows it was Richard’s turn to scrape and load: What happened? The garage is still not clean, the laundry is not folded, and Roger needs someone to help with his bar mitzvah speech. Gloria thinks, “What I need is a housework technician – that or more hours in the day.” Turning off the television