SHE WORKS

How Two-Income Families Are Happy, Healthy, and Thriving

Rosalind C. Barnett & Caryl Rivers

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For our late colleague

GRACE K. BARUCH

In memory of the wonderful friendship

and colleagueship we shared for

so many years and that continue

to inspire our work.

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The Study

The Adult Lives Project

This book is based in great part on the results of a study funded by a four-year, 1 million-dollar grant from the National Institutes of Mental Health (NIMH) to Rosalind C. Barnett at the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women. It was designed to identify the stressful as well as the rewarding aspects of the lives of full-time-employed two-earner couples.

The study was conducted in two communities in the greater Boston area, chosen because they have a high proportion of two-earner couples and a wide diversity of income and occupations. This is not a study of an elite group. While one-third of the group had college degrees and one-third had some graduate training or a graduate degree, one-third had only a high school diploma. At the beginning of the study, the average age for the men was thirty-five; for the women, thirty-four.

We used a two-stage process to develop the sample for the study. First we identified all possible two-earner couples using town-census lists and screened them for eligibility. The pool of possible two-earner couples included all those with a male between twenty-five and forty years old who was living with a female of a similar age. We then screened the couples to be sure that they were married to

each other as well as both employed full time, both sufficiently comfortable with English (so that we could interview them), and both in their respective roles (employee, spouse, parent) for at least three months prior to being interviewed.

From an original pool of 1,058 couples, we identified 442 who were eligible and who could be interviewed within the specified interviewing period. Sixty-eight percent of these couples agreed to participate. And ninety-two percent of the couples stayed in the study for all three interviews.

Centering the study in one geographic area in no way lessens its impact or scientific validity. In fact, most major social science studies are conducted in this way. The famous Middletown studies were done in Muncie, Indiana. The major federal ongoing study of heart disease, the Framingham Heart Study, was done in one region of the Metro West area of Boston. Studies are routinely done in this way because, after long experience, there is no evidence that having a broad geographic range makes any significant difference.

What about those who say that because the pace of life in the urban Northeast is faster and more hectic than in other, more rural parts of the country, people living in our area experience more stress and therefore are unrepresentative of Americans as a whole? It may be that the level of distress is higher in the Northeast than elsewhere. But the important question from our point of view is not about the *absolute level* of distress, but about how certain aspects of people's lives relate to distress. If, for example, certain job conditions are associated with high distress among the men and women in our Boston-area sample, there is no reason to think that the same job conditions would not be related to distress among dual-earner couples in other parts of the country.

Studies done in a wide geographic area may, in fact, be less reliable than those done in a more controlled area with proper scientific methods. For example, if a national magazine sends a questionnaire to its readers and gets 50,000 replies from across the country, the study would not be considered scientifically valid because there is no way to know if its sample is representative. It is usually prohibitively expensive to set up a major, ongoing study on a wide geographic basis. In a

more controlled area, you can more easily set up a random sample, which gives you a valid base. In our study, for example, *all* the couples in the area who fit our criteria were selected from the voting lists. They were then assigned random numbers, and letters went out on the basis of those numbers. So we can be reasonably sure there was no bias in the selection.

Having our subjects in an accessible geographic area also allowed us to exert great control over our interviewers, to train them intensively, and to do lengthy interviews over a two-year period. The sequential interviews gave us a chance to examine issues at more than one point in time. With three sets of interviews at three different times, we were in a good position to look at how changes in people's lives affect their mental and physical health.

Each subject in the random sample of 600 people was asked the same set of questions in the same order, and the interviews covered many aspects of their lives: their feelings about their roles at home and at work; their mental and physical health; their smoking, eating, and drinking habits; their education; their financial situation; their attitudes toward men's and women's gender roles; and how often they feel angry at home and at work. Before each interview, subjects completed a questionnaire covering additional aspects of their jobs and their personal medical histories.

In this book, we primarily focus on those portions of the interviews dealing with our subjects' feelings about their roles as workers, partners, and, when applicable, parents. At the onset of the study, 60 percent of the couples had children; 40 percent did not.

The overall aim of the study was to learn how the quality of women's and men's experiences in these three major social roles related to their experiences of mental and physical distress. Role quality was defined as the balance between the rewards and the concerns the person experienced in the role. For each role, we asked the men and women in the study to think about the role as it was at the time, not as they wished it was, and tell us how rewarding and how much of a concern were each of a set of specific aspects of that role. Regarding their jobs, for example, subjects were asked how rewarding is "doing work you consider significant" and how much of a concern is "limited

opportunity for professional or career development." With respect to the marital role, sample questions asked how rewarding is "enjoying the same activities" and how much of a concern is "your partner being critical of you." For the parent role, subjects were asked, for example, how rewarding is "seeing your children mature and change" and how much of a concern is "your having too many arguments and conflicts with them."

Scores on the rewards and concerns were combined so that each woman and man received a score reflecting their overall subjective experience. These scores could vary from negative to positive. If the concerns outweighed the rewards, the score was negative; if the rewards outweighed the concerns, the score was positive. We then related these role-quality scores to various indicators of physical and mental distress.

We also conducted in-depth, open-ended interviews with four working couples. This allowed us to supplement the research data and it gave us a chance to explore in greater depth the special circumstances of our subjects' lives and how they were coping with them. These voices also flesh out the data that is the center of the study. Numbers can draw a picture for us, but only human emotions and human lives can provide the colors, shades, and richness to create a true portrait.

C O N T E N T S

CHAPTER I

Ozzie and Harriet Are Dead

The new American family is alive and well.

Both partners are employed full time, and according to the latest research, the family they create is one in which all members are thriving: often happier, healthier, and more well-rounded than the family of the 1950s.

That's the message of this new, myth-shattering study of such couples, funded by a 1 million-dollar grant from the National Institutes of Mental Health. Our study shows that the full-time-employed, dual-earner couple is a success. It is an excellent fit with today's economic realities. The men and women are doing well, emotionally and physically, and the children are thriving. This is not to say that families don't face many problems; but on the whole, the news about the two-career couple today is very good indeed:

- The women are not experiencing the high depression and anxiety rates characteristic of women in the 1950s—and while they have busy lives and often feel stressed, they are in very good health overall.
- The men with whom they are partnered are not the distant, work-obsessed fathers of the 1950s, who often felt wistful about their lack of

connection to their children; if they are fathers, they are closely involved with all aspects of their children's care.

- Both men and women report that their relationships with their children are close and warm, and they are generally satisfied with the jobs they are doing as parents.
- They know their children are facing the many pressures of a fast-moving, mobile society—drugs, violence, AIDS, and a competitive, uncertain job market in which the need to acquire skills means economic survival and creates pressures to get into good schools and do well there. They worry about their children, but not obsessively.
- Because they have two full incomes that help buffer them against the terrible wrenches of a changing economy, they do not feel the gut-wrenching vulnerability of standing at the edge of a precipice, ready at any second to topple off the cliff if a company downsizes or relocates. The terrible anxiety of economic uncertainty that can cause so many tensions in families is eased by two incomes, and the health of two-earner couples is bolstered as a result.
- Two-income couples are most often pictured in the media as hard-charging yuppies, but in our sample, both partners seem very much invested in family life. While they often enjoy their jobs and get a health boost from being involved with productive work, they understand that the implicit contract Americans used to expect from their employers—lifetime security in exchange for loyal and productive service—is gone, perhaps forever. Both men and women are committed to working, and what happens on the job is critical to their health. Nonetheless, most see their families as the center of their emotional lives.

But all this good news is too often obscured by a veritable tide of gloom and doom about the modern family, and by a nostalgic longing for a past that no longer exists: the heyday of Ozzie and Harriet, the breadwinner father and the homemaker mom.

This book, we hope, will help to dull the nostalgic glow and bring a sense of reality and optimism to our view of the present. The

two-earner couple that has become the norm today is a success story, and the adults and the children within it are thriving. We could do a lot more, as a society, to ensure their health and happiness if we stopped viewing the two-income family as a failed or aberrant lifestyle. For that to happen, we have to see past the fog of the 1950s and dim the wattage on the images from that era that engage us yet.

They dance through our heads—smiling, dashing off snappy one-liners, and solving problems in the blink of an eye—and it is hard to ignore them. Ozzie and Harriet Nelson, Ward and June Cleaver, and Carol and Mike Brady—with their seemingly limitless brood—are with us still. Even though it has been a long time since their first incarnations in the television sitcoms of the 1950s and 1960s, their images assault us in endless reruns on cable. At almost every hour of every day around the world, someone is watching Beaver struggle over problems with his math homework, or seeing David and Ricky Nelson bickering or Marcia Brady brooding about a date for the prom.

This omnipresence might only be a minor problem—like the advertising jingle that gets stuck in your head—until you realize how much politics, how many ponderous papers from how many think tanks, how much social policy, and how many personal decisions are based on a world that never existed in the first place.

For even as Ozzie and Harriet and their peers reigned supreme over the realm of television, the world they were supposed to reflect was slipping away—and that world was never as vast as we assumed. We tend to think that all mothers in those days were baking cookies in their shiny new kitchens, happily domestic. But studies show that by 1960, 19 percent of mothers with children under six were in the workforce, along with 31 percent of those with children between six and seventeen.[1] At the very time that the sitcom families were burrowing into our subconscious, their real-life counterparts were already starting to fossilize.

Today the so-called "traditional" family, with the breadwinner father and the stay-at-home mother, accounts for less than 3 percent of American families. The number of two-income couples has skyrocketed in the last decade from 20.5 million to about 31 million. By the mid-1990s, about 60 percent of all married couples were two-earner couples. In 1990, 40 percent of families had full-time-employed

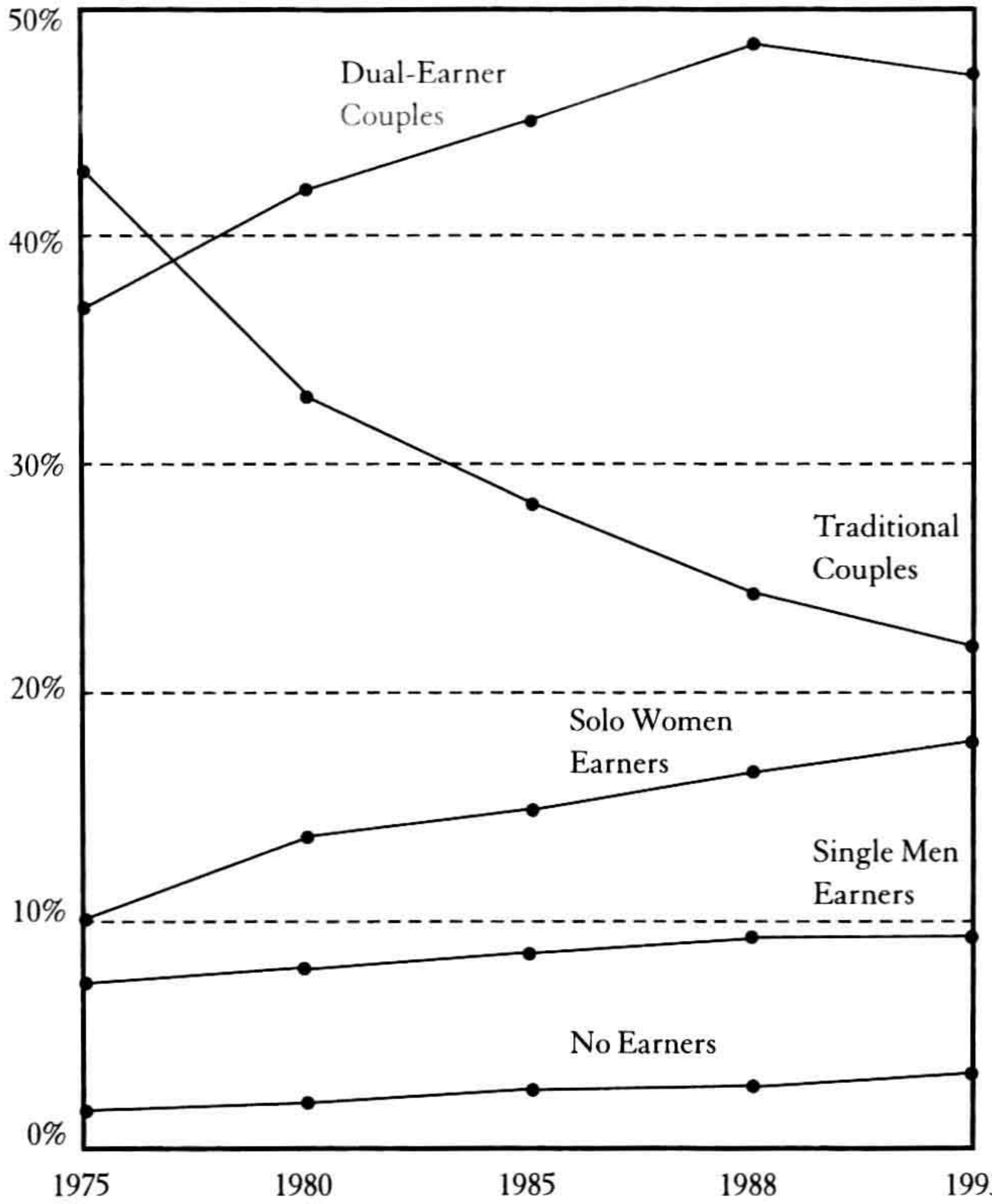

FIGURE 1

The Increasing Responsibility of Women Workers for Family Financial Needs

Source: Hayghe, 1990; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1993.

husbands and wives, up from 32 percent in 1980, and that percentage is expected to climb.[2] The graph above shows the dramatic way in which the face of the American workforce has changed.

The couples in our study were typical Americans, not some exotic breed. They were largely white and middle or working class; this book is not a picture of the urban poor or the underclass.

And while some critics may bemoan the fact that so many women are employed, the women in our study are helping to make life for their families, facing the uncertainty of the new global marketplace, free of white-knuckle worry. Because these families in our study have two full incomes, they are sheltered from some of the worst problems in American society today. They don't have to live in neighborhoods wracked by lethal violence; they can afford, for the most part, to live

in areas that have schools where guns and metal detectors are not part of the curriculum. They are not plunged into chaos or poverty if one partner loses a job; they do not have to depend on dwindling government services for food or shelter. In a time when the social safety net is rapidly shrinking, they are less likely to have to depend on it than other Americans. They have the flexibility to change career patterns, if need be. One partner can support the other if one has to go back to school or get new skills training or take a drop in income to enter a new field. They are less likely than single people or one-income families to drop out of the middle class and slip into near-poverty as the economy lurches from one extreme to another.

The dual-earner family offers economic stability, protection against financial disaster, and often offers both adults and children a close-knit, cooperative family style in which all members take an active part in keeping the household running. Men and women sometimes feel there isn't enough time in the day, that what drops off the map is personal and leisure time, and that they would trade job advancement for more time to manage their busy lives. But most would not trade their lifestyle for the Ozzie and Harriet one that gave women fewer opportunities—and today would give both partners much more economic vulnerability.

Is the two-earner lifestyle without problems? Of course not. No family style plays out on one vast flood plain of joy and light. But this book will puncture some of what has become the conventional wisdom about American families. We believe that we have to look at families today through a prism of data and reality, not through the lens of an exaggerated sunny past or the political prism of those who believe the only family values worth promoting are those of a brief, atypical era now past. Trying to examine today's issues through those outmoded lenses will bring us no solutions to current problems and no understanding of what is really happening inside the American family. In this book, we examine families as they actually are today. These are some of the findings of our study and other cutting-edge research, which we will examine in the chapters to come:

- Working women are in excellent health—far better than homemakers—and are not getting sick from stress or dying from heart disease.

- American couples are cooperating in both work and parenting in a style we call the collaborative couple—and feel good about themselves and their lives.
- Working mothers are not destroying their children—in fact, there is little difference on any of the indices of child development between children of working moms and those of at-home mothers.
- Fatherhood has become more central to the lives of men in dual-earner couples, and critical to their emotional health. More men are willing to trade raises and promotions to spend time with their families.
- Work is just as important to women's health and well-being as it is to men's.
- The so-called mommy track can be bad for a woman's health.
- Marriage is just as central to men's identity and sense of well-being as it is to women's.
- Gender-role differences are shrinking as men's and women's lives become more alike.
- Men and women find exactly the same aspects of their jobs satisfying or distressing.

We found, in fact, that working couples are coping well with many of the changes that have made the two-earner couple the American norm today. The couples themselves have proved much more flexible than America's corporate culture. The corporate world, stuck in the mentality of the 1950s, too often still operates on the notion that the American worker is a male with a wife at home to tend to all the family issues. Workers today—be they men or women—are often in a generational sandwich, facing problems with elderly parents and young children at the same time. The stress that such couples feel is often intensified by the rigidity of a corporate culture that for the most part refuses to adopt family-friendly policies that could do wonders for the bottom line as well as improve employees' quality of life. In this book, we'll argue forcefully that the outdated corporate culture has to change for the good of both the American family and American productivity.