

More Equal Than Others

Women and Men in
Dual-Career Marriages

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Preface

My objective is to ask a big question in a small way. What will it take for men and women to be truly equal? Philosophers and social critics have answered this question in many complex ways, but most agree that men and women must have equal positions in central social and economic pursuits. More to the point, men and women must be economic equals if they are to be equal in other spheres of social life.

I have studied a small but growing segment of American society in which men and women are economic equals: dual-career married couples in the corporate world. In this book I examine men's and women's paths to their careers—how they got there and why—and assess what relative economic equality has meant for crucial aspects of these couples' shared and individual social lives. The question that inevitably arises from such an exploration is whether success in the work world has fundamentally changed the nature of marriage and family.

Through an analysis of their experiences, I will suggest that dual-career couples are "more equal than others" in two senses. First, their relative economic equality has made possible important shifts in their roles as husbands and wives. They relate to each other and to their relationship as partners with equivalent goals, aspirations, and pressures. The boundaries between "breadwinner" and "homemaker" are difficult to see when neither spouse can lay claim to higher status or greater influence based on who is working outside the home or who is making more

money. Unlike two-paycheck marriages, in which the husband may have a career and the wife a job (or temporary employment), the dual-career couple holds greater potential for equality in marital roles. Second, “more equal than others” also refers to the ways in which equality for some couples may be contingent on the availability of other people, often married couples, for whom equality is not common. In drawing attention to how dual-career couples achieve labor market success and develop marital equality, it will also be essential to show how structures of occupational and family stratification aid in the process.

Dual-career couples are by no means the vanguard of the American population in consciously pursuing gender equality. Indeed, they are one of the results of a changing economy: the startling expansion of white-collar employment and the growth of career opportunities for female college graduates have combined to make two careers in one family a more likely option. The composition of the pool of potential mates for well-educated, occupationally mobile men and women has altered over the past two decades; when a career-oriented individual encounters a potential mate today, it is increasingly likely that the “candidate” will also have a career.

Although only a few of the men and women I interviewed for this book considered themselves “liberated,” most are grappling with questions of gender equality and marital equity in response to the pressures of their work. Equally demanding careers, similar incomes, and concerns about finding a balance between work and family have forced these couples to act differently than their more traditional parents and one-career family peers. These two-career couples negotiate household responsibilities and develop innovative solutions to managing finances. They talk about symmetry and equality in

the context of her career, his career, and their marriage. They cannot, as often happens in noncareer settings, devalue her career as supplemental or "targeted," without tarring his career with the same brush.

These men and women are participating in an important process of social change. That they do so *behaviorally* more than *attitudinally* argues for an often overlooked perspective on societal change: if behaviors are changed, attitudes congruent with the change will often follow. In this instance men and women who have benefited from the labor market shifts and the achievements of the women's liberation movement are becoming advocates of gender equality even though they were not initially proponents of this cause.

Becoming an advocate, however, is not quite the same as being one. The change process in which dual-career couples participate also requires that they cope with an extraordinarily powerful and robust system of societal values. As these men and women seek roles and relationships that will enable them to combine work and marriage, they run up against a conventional vision of success, which tempers their perception of what is possible. Success in this context means independence, self-sufficiency, and finding individual solutions to individual problems.

This definition of success is woven into the fabric of the American economy and, most important, into the very concept of a corporate career. Those who successfully pursue such careers adroitly combine personal drive and ambition with a commitment to organizational goals. Having a career in the corporate world means one must demonstrate uniquely individual qualities, while sacrificing excessive individualism in order to be a "team player." The economic rewards for playing the game—

as an individual and as part of the corporate team—are considerable.

Meshing two careers in one family stretches the conventional definition of success and may pose an alternative definition. The couples in this study have struggled to adhere to the conventional definition by using the economic rewards from their careers to buy independence and self-sufficiency and by developing individual solutions to problems such as housekeeping, childcare, and recreation. To compensate for two equal sets of demands on their time and physical energy, they hire somebody else to clean the house. Because they cannot be home to supervise their children, they hire someone else to do so.

In their efforts to cope with career, family, and household, they look to themselves, to the marketplace, and ultimately to their checkbooks for solutions. In only a few instances do they look to their employers, to other couples in similar situations, or to society for help. Making solutions part of the employment contract or becoming involved in communal efforts remains for most couples an unconventional and unlikely approach. "Because we make so much money," they say, "we should take care of ourselves."

Thus, for some gender equality may be achievable without fundamentally challenging the hegemonic notion of success. But, as I hope to show in this book, the process of change may still continue—led, paradoxically, by those whose personal drive for success stretches the limits of conventional definitions.

Besides wanting to explore the big question of male and female equality, I also felt compelled to study gender equality by my undergraduate students, many of whom are planning corporate careers. Currently, social work and teaching are out as career goals, and business careers

and making money are in—Lee Iaccoca and Mary Cunningham have replaced Abbie Hoffman and Betty Friedan as inspirations. Students preparing for careers in business make it a point to know about the career paths and salaries of investment bankers, securities brokers, and partners in accounting firms. Yet for all their research and networking, they know very little about how they will meet the simultaneous demands of corporate careers and family life. Goaded by newspaper and magazine articles that detail the lives of men and women who “have it all,” most students simply assume they can accommodate both work and family. The realities of juggling both these responsibilities escape even the best career strategist in the classroom.

Throughout the writing of this study, my dissertation committee (Janet Abu-Lughod, Howard Becker, Christopher Jencks, Janet Lever, and Allan Schnaiberg) offered support and encouragement, and I thank them for their patience and their comments on earlier drafts. The members of this committee had the wisdom to tell me to write a book, not a dissertation. Once I stopped worrying about what Marx, Weber, and Durkheim would say, I was ready to write the story of these couples in my own words. Several of my committee members have dual-career marriages; their personal experiences were of great help and insight. Allan Schnaiberg chaired the dissertation committee and guided my career as a graduate student at Northwestern University. I especially thank him for knowing when to challenge and push me and for knowing when to go easier.

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I am especially indebted to Bob Thomas, who read every word of every version—and there were many. He helped me find the important ideas buried beneath sometimes half-baked thoughts. On later drafts, as my “theory consultant,” he helped me to move beyond simply writing a “recipe book” for dual-career couples to confront the broader implications of these couples’ lives. Equally important was his courage in moving to Boston so we would not have to continue commuting between cities. This move enabled us to meld two careers and a personal life. His belief in me, even when I stopped believing in myself, made a difference.

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1

THE NEW "MODERN COUPLE"?

THE DUAL-CAREER COUPLE has been hailed in the 1980s as the new ideal middle-class marital relationship. The popular press has highlighted this phenomenon, filling lifestyle or social issues sections with tales of such couples: She's a doctor and he's a lawyer, or he's a diplomat and she's a corporate consultant. They went to graduate school together, and after completing school, both went on to pursue their chosen careers. Each morning they awake, jog together, eat breakfast, and are off to their respective jobs. She flies off on Monday for a three-day business trip, and he leaves on Wednesday for a two-day business trip. Candlelight dinners, cultural events, and shared sports activities fill weekends. The same zeal and energy couples bring to their work, they also bring to their relationships. The message: the dual-career couple is glamorous.

There are also couples who work in different cities. Every other weekend, Cindy Brown, a chemist, bundles her six-month-old daughter into her car and drives one hundred miles for a conjugal visit. Her husband, Seymour Katz, a financial analyst, lives in downstate Illinois. He drives to Chicago with the couple's twelve-year-old daughter on alternate weekends. They have been married for fourteen years, and they have lived apart for six

of them. And they are happy. So begins another exciting tale of the dual-career couple. The message: the dual-career couple is making it.

Stories of "America's New Elite," as *Time* magazine dubbed them, have captured the imagination and interest of the American population.¹ For years we've read such sagas, which are perhaps rivaled only by stories of the rich and famous. Earlier generations of young girls grew up on Cinderella and Snow White, dreaming of princes to carry them off so they too could live happily ever after. Young girls today dream a different plot. There is still the prince, but happily-ever-after now includes a career. The dreams of young men are not so easily characterized. For earlier generations, a man's success was envisioned in occupational and financial terms; boys dreamed of being rich, strong, and independent. Wives, for many, were beautiful, faithful, and supportive, important symbols of success, as were bright, cheerful children and a comfortable home. The dreams of young men today (willingly or unwillingly) often include a wife who also works, as well as a vision of building family, house, and future together.

There are seemingly no barriers to fulfilling this new

1. "America's New Elite" (*Time*, August 21, 1978). Other newspapers and magazines that have published articles in recent years about dual-career couples include *Business Week*: "The Upward Mobility Two Incomes Can Buy" (20 February 1978), "America's New Immobile Society" (27 July 1981); *Chicago Tribune*: "Jobs Keep Couples Cities Apart" (20 July 1980), "Love and Work" (8 March 1981), "Stress in Two-Career Families Puts Pressure on Employers, Too" (26 July 1981), "Couples' Dual Goals Pose Problems of Priorities" (12 October 1982); *New York Times*: "Finding the Right Career-Family Mix" (20 July 1980), "Many Young Women Now Say They'd Pick Family Over Career" (28 December 1980), "What's New with Dual-Career Couples" (6 March 1983); *New York Times Magazine*: "The Perils of a Two-Income Family" (27 September 1981), "Careers and the Lure of Motherhood" (21 November 1982); *Time*: "Marriage of the Minds" (6 March 1978), "The Perils of Dual Careers" (13 May 1985).

dream. Many young women believe not only that sex discrimination in the workplace is dead but also that the new 1980s man is looking for a wife who has an exciting, rewarding career just like his. The media offer an endless supply of stories about the successful female corporate executive and the happy dual-career couple. She knows how to dress, how to act in the board room, how to compete, and also how to be a team player with her colleagues. Not only is she accomplished in her chosen field, but she is also the perfect wife and mother. In her home dinner is served on time every night, the house is clean, her children receive "quality time," and she and her husband are mutually supportive of their respective careers. He remains aggressive in pursuit of career success, but his aggressiveness is now tempered by a "soft" side. He is an active participant in the broad range of family chores: he takes his turn at cooking, doing the laundry, cleaning the house, caring for the children, shopping, transporting the children and their friends, and participating in the P.T.A. and neighborhood groups. He takes parenting seriously—from prenatal care to birthing, nocturnal feedings, and beyond. In short, the traditional job of the wife becomes a shared career.

In this vision of shared careers and responsibilities, there are few, if any, conflicts and even fewer obstacles to happiness. It seems eminently feasible from these accounts that both a husband and wife should be able to devote themselves to their respective careers, find self-expression in their work, and also pursue a stable, intimate, and enriching family life. Therefore, young men and women not only assume that they can have it all—spouse, children, and career—but they also are encouraged to want it all. A full, well-integrated life is easy to come by, and it can be had at no personal cost.

DUAL CAREERS: A CONTINGENT PHENOMENON

There is no question that the dual-career couple exists. It is not simply a media creation designed to sell newspapers, launch new women's magazines, or placate the women's movement. Yet the origins, the working, and the potential consequences of this new development remain largely unexplored; the ideals of sexual equality in the workplace and the family have an allure far beyond what is actually the case. To separate myth from reality and to provide an accurate understanding of the phenomenon of the dual-career couple, we must first consider its special nature.

The attention paid to those situations in which career and family are successfully combined overshadows the fact that there are simply not many dual-career couples. Moreover, the vast majority of instances in which wives work do not result in equality in the home or reflect lessening inequality in the workplace. Married women who work are often expected to do double duty as wage earners and domestic laborers (homemakers). Their employment is viewed as secondary, even when their income is not supplementary or targeted for a specific purpose (such as purchasing a household appliance, a new home, or a vacation). The money they bring in does not count for as much as their husbands' salaries. Many more married women work because the ravages of inflation (especially in the 1970s) and debt have made two incomes necessary to support a family.

The dual-career couple is overshadowed statistically by the fastest growing category of family in the United States: the female-headed household. According to 1980 census figures, 12.4 percent of families were headed by a single parent, whereas 10.6 percent were single-parent households in 1970; 10.2 percent of all families were

headed by a female in 1980, as compared to 8.7 percent in 1970.² In contrast to single, female heads of households, married women with careers are glorified as "supermoms" or "superwomen"—women who have the ability to successfully integrate family life and work. Such honorific titles are not bestowed on noncareer working mothers. At best these women elicit sympathy for their lot; at worst they are blamed for creating the circumstances they must endure.

A major distinction must be made between "careers" and "jobs." Most women do not have careers; they have jobs. Careers involve employment in which some realistic expectation of upward occupational and financial mobility is expected and available. Careers most commonly begin within the salaried ranks of an organization (although they need not always do so) and provide a clear path for advancement from lower to higher levels of responsibility, authority, and reward (Wilensky, 1960). In contrast, jobs offer limited opportunities for advancement, responsibility, and authority, are paid by the hour, and promise little significant increase in financial reward for achievement or for longevity of employment. Despite the rapid increase in women's (especially married women's) participation in the labor force over the last twenty years, women still find, accept, or are relegated to jobs, not careers. The oft-cited statistics on women's overrepresentation in dead-end, low-paying work have been well documented (Oppenheimer, 1976). Women generally receive lower pay, work shorter hours (often part-time), and have less protection in employment than do men. Since far more women are likely to hold jobs than to have careers, the focus on

2. Alternately, the percentage of the population that is married has declined from 70.9 percent in 1970 to 60.9 percent in 1980. (Data from U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1980.)