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Life Course Patterns of Career-Prioritizing Decisions and Occupational Attainment in Dual-Earner Couples

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Pixley's research examined life and career patterns of dual-career couples and their approach to making major career decisions. The study looked at careers at the family level, rather than at the individual level, and identified five patterns which were predictive of income and career gains. Additionally, the study examined multiple job and career decisions over time rather than one decision as previous research has done.

Findings:

- The results showed that the best outcome for the wife was when the couple took turns that alternatively favored first the husband's career, then the wife's career equally.
- The best outcome for the husband was when the couple first prioritized the wife's career and thereafter made decisions that substantially supported the husband's career.
- When the husband had only moderate income gains, the couple had the lowest outcome of the decision patterns.

AUTHOR INTERVIEW

How did you get interested in this topic of career choices for working couples?

I had planned to look at life course patterns of women's career trajectories, their decisions over time, and how they differed from men's trajectories. But with so many of these men and women in dual-earner couples, I realized that they are making these decisions

together, and it makes more sense to analyze them in that context. This paper is part of a broader research agenda where I study how having the secondary career can result in a "partnership penalty" for women, and test whether the effects are as strong for men when their careers are secondary.

Were you surprised by the findings?

When people asked me for career advice based on my preliminary research, my joking response was that if you and your partner are planning to take turns with your career decisions, take your turn first. So I was surprised to see the pattern where men earn much more when an early decision favors the wife's career but later decisions greatly favor the husband. When I looked closer, these were mostly couples in which the wife worked while the husband finished schooling. By contrast, when decisions favor the husband and then the wife, wives earn more, making me wonder if taking the second turn might not be so bad after all.

What do you think are the most important implications of your findings for dual earner couples? For human resource practitioners?

For couples, I think the most important finding is that decisions about whether and where to move, and the pattern of those decisions over time, still matter for income five, ten, and even twenty years down the line. So before you make a decision based on the immediate situation, talk very openly and honestly with each other about your long-term plans and expectations for your two careers.

The most important takeaway for human resource practitioners is the reminder that workers' lives are often intricately linked with those of other workers, and that this affects how they approach major decisions. Expanding the dialogue around this issue, especially in terms of what resources and information sources could be mobilized to help dual-earner workers balance their two careers, could not only help companies hire and retain the best workers, but also help reduce the apparent earnings penalty so many women face for having the secondary career.

TOP 10 TAKEAWAYS FROM KANTER AWARD FINALISTS...

1. Has the era of the ‘trailing spouse’ shifted to the reign of the ‘dual-career couple’?

- a. **Career decisions** of one spouse greatly affect the income, mobility, and position of the other; a couple that takes turns making favorable career decisions shows the greatest amount of income gains for wives (Pixley).
- b. The degree to which **a man feels his domestic duties are fair** has a large impact on his wife's health (Stolzenberg & Williams).
- c. A father's **stress from work** is associated with a mother's **difficulty in balancing work and family** (Fagan & Press).

2. Can managers have a life?

Yes! Studies have shown that **positive perceptions of work-life balance are associated with career advancement potential** for both male and female managers. In addition, successful managers are viewed by their peers, supervisors, and themselves to have a positive work-life balance (Lyness & Judiesch).

3. Whose health does your work environment impact?

- a. The **global economy** is increasing the need for employees to work nonstandard hours which can negatively influence their health (Davis et al.).
- b. A wife's discontentment with the **appreciation she receives at work** can negatively affect her husband's health (Stolzenberg & Williams).

4. What strategies can prevent work stress from leading to home stress?

- a. When employees are given greater **control over creating their work schedules**, they have lower work-family conflict and greater life-course fit regardless of home demands (Moen et al.).
- b. **Negative moods often have short lifespans** (Song et al.). Allowing employees time to decompress before heading home, offering Employee Assistance or counseling programs, or simply checking in with employees before they leave, may help decrease the negative impacts of work stress on home life.

5. Can we change employees' perceptions of work-family balance?

When employees believe their **work and life roles complement and enrich each other**, they have an easier time balancing work and family. Intervention programs, such as reading an article that discusses how work and life enrich one another can help alter employee perceptions of work-life balance, improve employees' capacity to cope, and decrease feelings of anxiety associated with combining work and home roles (Steenbergen et al.).

6. Why aren't there more ‘good’ part-time jobs?

- a. Women who work part-time earn considerably less than full-time women, largely due to the fact that **part-time jobs are concentrated in low-paying occupations** (Bardasi & Cornick).
- b. Mothers tend to absolve organizations of **discrimination against part-time workers**, because they view their part-time career as a necessary sacrifice for their families (Webber & Williams).

7. How can we help employees help themselves?

- a. Senior and executive women can be more successful and satisfied at work and in marriage if they learn to **negotiate needed support** from their spouses (Ezzedeen & Ritchey).
- b. Blurring between work and home roles is associated with work-family conflict, particularly with the increasing use of technology (Schieman & Glavin). Open discussions between employees and managers regarding the use of PDAs and smart phones during working and non-working hours can help **decrease the stress associated with the 24/7 environment**.

8. Are today's workforce issues different from those of yesterday?

- a. It is now common for workers to have **multiple positions in their lifetimes**, so employee retention and engagement efforts are more important than ever (Fuller).
- b. Men in the United States are caught between **traditional and nontraditional gender roles**, and report high levels of marital happiness when their wives are either not working outside the home or are high earners (Lee & Ono). This diversity of family structures requires employers to offer a wide variety of work-life policies and programs.
- c. The perception of work-life balance in relation to career advancement potential for managers has changed significantly in the last 40 years, where **work-life balance is now considered an asset** instead of a liability (Lyness & Judiesch).
- d. **Single mothers are the fastest growing segment of the female labor force** in the US (Lleras), with dual earner couples being the largest segment, resulting in an increase in the demand for flexibility and related policies.

9. How can we support single mothers in the workplace?

- a. A single mother's positive employment conditions (wages, hours, and shift worked) may be as important as her personal factors (i.e. education, housing, family support) in influencing the **quality of care** that she is able to provide to her children (Lleras).
- b. **Rotating schedules** provide single mothers the ability to exchange shifts with others more easily. This control over work schedules may allow single mothers to have greater success in both their home and work spheres (Lleras).

10. Can mothers help diminish the 'motherhood bias'?

- a. Mothers can combat supervisors' stereotypes by **directly expressing their desires for advancement** and the commitment they have to their organizations (King).
- b. Rather than excusing employers from the responsibility of creating "good" part-time jobs (Webber & Williams), mothers can **advocate for fair wages, benefits, and career advancement** to help improve the quality of opportunities available.

THE KANTER AWARD

Named in honor of Rosabeth Moss Kanter, who has been identified as the most influential contributor to modern literature on work and family, the Kanter Award is given for the best research paper(s) published during the year. The rigorous nomination process for award selection involves 43 scholarly reviewers from 11 countries who decide on the Kanter winners from among over 2500 articles published in more than 75 scholarly journals. This award raises awareness of excellent work-family research, fosters debate about standards of excellence, identifies the "best of the best" studies on which to base future research and outlines specific implications of the research for work-life and human resource professionals.

The Center for Families at Purdue University and the Boston College Center for Work & Family developed the Rosabeth Moss Kanter Award to raise the awareness of high quality work-family research among the scholar, consultant and practitioner communities. Through the generous sponsorship of the **Alliance for Work-Life Progress (AWLP)**, the standards of quality for work-family research will continue to rise, and actionable findings from the best studies will become more commonplace in business communities to inform policy and best people practices.

KANTER TOP 20 NOMINATED ARTICLES

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- Davis, K., Goodman, B., Pirretti, A., & Almeida, D. (2008). Nonstandard Work Schedules, Perceived Family Well-Being, and Daily Stressors. *Journal of Marriage and Family* 70, 991-1003. kdavis@psu.edu
- Diamond, L., Hicks, A., & Otter-Henderson, K. (2008). Every Time You Go Away: Changes in Affect, Behavior, and Physiology Associated With Travel-Related Separations From Romantic Partners. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 95(2), 385-403. diamond@psuch.utah.edu
- Dierdorff, E. & Ellington, J. (2008). It's the Nature of the Work: Examining Behavior-Based Sources of Work-Family Conflict Across Occupations. *Journal of Applied Psychology* 93(4), 883-892. edierdor@depaul.edu
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- Fagan, J. & Press, J. (2008). Father Influences on Employed Mothers' Work Family Balance. *Journal of Family Issues* 29(9), 1136-1160. jay.fagan@temple.edu
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- Lleras, C. (2008). Employment, Work Conditions, and the Home Environment in Single-Mother Families. *Journal of Family Issues* 29(10), 1268-1297. clleras@uiuc.edu
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- Schieman, S. & Glavin, P. (2008). Trouble at the Border?: Gender, Flexibility at Work, and the Work-Home Interface. *Social Problems* 55(4), 590-611. Scott.schieman@utoronto.ca
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- Steenbergen, E., Ellemers, N., Haslam, S., & Urlings, F. (2008). There is Nothing Either Good or Bad But Thinking Makes it So: Informational Support and Cognitive Appraisal of the Work-Family Interface. *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 81, 349-367. E.F.vanSteenbergen@uu.nl
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