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DUAL EARNER COUPLES:
WORK COMMITMENT AND QUALITY OF LIFE WITHIN
CAREER STAGES

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ABSTRACT

The present study focused on the impact of dual earner couple status on work commitment, quality of life and the interaction between quality of work life and marital dissatisfaction, within career stages. The study was based on Super's career theory and theories of the work-family relationship. Dual earner couples were defined as couples in which both partners were employed full-time. A sample of 164 white-collar, dual earner men and women (79 couples and 6 individuals) were surveyed at an academic institution. Half of the couples were parents. There were no sex or parenting differences in work commitment (occupational commitment and job involvement) when income, age and career stage were used as covariates. High salience in work and family was not associated with diminished work commitment, but professional women who had non-professional partners had significantly lower job involvement than those who had professional partners. Secondly, quality of life and marital dissatisfaction were investigated. Quality of life and marital dissatisfaction did not differ across age, career stages or parenting. Furthermore, quality of life did not differ by couples' level of work and family salience, work commitment, or egalitarianism. Thirdly, a segmentation relationship was found which meant that people tend to compartmentalize their marital and work roles, rather than have spillover of affect between the two roles or compensate for dissatisfactions in one role with rewards in another. Unexpectedly, work-family conflict did not differ by age or career stage. However, parents of teenagers did experience significantly greater work-family conflict than all others. Men in egalitarian couples and men in couples for whom both family and work were highly salient for both partners perceived greater work-family conflict than other men. Professional women with professional partners experienced significantly less work-family conflict than those with non-professional partners. The trend of declining sex differences in work commitment, quality of life and work-family conflict is continuing. It is suggested that employers need not be wary of employing women and parents if they can provide good childcare facilities and equal employment opportunities policies.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Research on relationships between work and family only began in the 1970's, as prior to this they were treated as distinct from one another. Work-family conflict became more salient due to the increased numbers of women in the work force in the 1980's, and a vast amount of research was devoted to identifying the linkages between employees' work and nonwork lives. In the 1976-1986 period, female full-time participation in the workforce increased from 32% to 42% in New Zealand (Davey & Mills, 1989). Furthermore, over half the mothers of school aged children were in paid employment. In 1984, 58% of couples with children were dual earners and 60% of couples without children were dual earners in New Zealand (Household Expenditure and Income Survey, 1986). New Zealand women now entering the childbearing age group may be less likely to leave the labour force, for an extended period of time, than their counterparts of previous generations (Horsfield, 1988). This implies that there will be a continued increase in dual-career families. However, research has yet to adequately attend to the relationship between the work/family interface and physical, family and organizational well-being (Lambert, 1990).

Many of the studies done in the sixties and the seventies may no longer be relevant due to changing norms and attitudes towards women's employment. There have been major changes in social conceptions of gender, parenthood, and work identities (Beach, 1989). The 1960's view was that married women's participation in the labour force was threatening to marriage and family. The rise in number of dual earner families has been accompanied by a change from the traditional success ethic to one emphasizing 'quality of life' (Hall & Hall, 1978) and increasing concern for the fulfilment of social and personal goals (Management for the XXI Century, 1982). Women want to know the effects of a husband's career, his attitudes and behaviour, and children on their own career development (Nieva & Gutek, 1981). One of the fundamental questions raised in the study of dual-career families is whether both spouses can prosper as career persons and marriage partners (Sekaran, 1983a).

The family and the workplace have frequently been characterized as 'greedy institutions' because of the commitment of time and energy that each demands during the peak years of family formation and career mobility (Coser, 1974). The normative pattern of women's lives has been gradually transformed from one in which family (marriage and parenthood) and work roles were enacted sequentially to one in which work and family roles are held simultaneously leading to concern about the implications for well-being of multiple roles (Wortman, Bierhat & Lang, 1991).

Insights about the interdependence of work and family are unlikely to be generalizable across all work situations and all family situations. A distinction between types of work has been shown to be relevant for the effects of men's employment on their spouses (Burke, Weir & DuWors, 1980). High commitment to both career and family has been linked to increased conflict and stress (Price-Bonham & Murphy, 1980; Skinner, 1984). However, Pendleton, Poloma and Garland (1982) write that research has shown that marriages where both spouses pursue jobs demanding a continuous and high degree of commitment are basically rewarding for husbands and wives.

Quality of work life has been shown to be an important variable, in addition to type of work, when studying the impact of work and multiple roles on dual earner couples. Kotler and Wingard (1989) found that focusing on the quality of a role rather than just the fact that one has a particular role (for instance, professional role, parenting role or spouse role) when investigating the relationship between multiple roles and mental health is more effective. The quality of the role can be measured by the amount of stress and/or satisfaction derived from it. A spouse who finds marriage to be highly stressful is more likely to carry over negative affect to another role than a spouse who is not overly stimulated by his/her role.

For most men and women today, employing organizations and family are the two central institutions in life (Mortimer, Lorence & Kumka, 1986). Research is required on the motivations of men and women in dual career couples so that employers may make informed, fair decisions on hiring and company policy (Gilbert & Rachlin, 1987). If dual career couples are unable to integrate their work and family roles their career salience

and occupational commitment may be affected (Ridley, 1973). Furthermore, different expectations of men and women's work commitment can trigger work-family conflict and retard an organization's progress. Schwartz (1989) observed that employers expect mothers to have lower work commitment but fathers are never seen to be on a 'daddy track' of lower work commitment. Despite differences in approach to conceptualization, definition, and measurement, most analysts recognize gender, age, social origin, work context and family factors as important determinants of work and family commitment (Bielby, 1992).

The present study is based on career stage theory and work-family relationship theory as described in Chapter Two. Chapters Three, Four, Five and Six describe the relevant literature, highlighting areas requiring further research and then outlining the present study's research questions. The present study focuses on the impact of dual earner couple status on work commitment, quality of life and the work-family relationship. The method and results are described in Chapters Seven and Eight and findings are discussed in Chapter Nine.