

CHAPTER 3

Gender, Marriage, and Work

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YOUR TURN

Forty-one years ago a 14-year-old Albanian woman named Sema Brahimi decided to become a man. Sema's father had recently died, leaving a widow, four daughters, and an infant son to survive on their own. In Albania's heavily male-dominated society, such a task would have been hard enough. But in the isolated, mountainous, rural area in which the family lived, it was inconceivable that they could run a household without a man in charge. So Sema, the eldest daughter, decided to take the job (Demick, 1996).

She cut her hair short, put on men's clothes, and went to work in the fields. She changed her name from Sema to Selman (the masculine equivalent). Her mother and siblings began to use male pronouns when they referred to her. Gradually Selman assumed responsibility for tending the family's crops and making the regular 3-hour trips by mule to the nearest city to sell them. Later on, as the head of the household, Selman took responsibility for selecting a wife for her brother and wore a suit and tie to his wedding, taking the role of father of the groom.

Looking back on the decision, Selman, now 55, has no regrets:

I've lived my whole life as a man. I've got the habits of a man. . . . If anyone has a problem with it, I've got my gun to deal with them. . . . Until I was 18 to 20, I had proposals of marriage. My brother was old enough to work, and my mother said that I should follow the fate of my sisters and get married. But once something is decided, you can't undo it, and I already thought of myself as a man. . . . I've had to work very hard to earn bread for the family and to be honest and correct in my relations with others. But, no, I have never regretted the decision. I've not had a bad life as a man. (Demick, 1996, p. C8)

Interestingly, nobody *does* have a problem with it. Selman has long been accepted by men in the village as a man among equals. Under local law, women have few legal protections. They can be beaten or chained if they disobey their husbands and have no property or inheritance rights whatsoever. The only path to self-determination is to assume the life of a man. In fact, even in a country like Albania, where the expectations of men and women are sharply delineated, such a practice is actually part of an age-old tradition. The folklore of northern Albania is filled with stories of women who took an oath never to marry so they could fill voids left by a shortage of males. As "men" they often became fierce warriors and village leaders.

All over the world, gender plays a crucial role in the organization of family life. All societies have clear conceptions about what men and women are obligated to do or what they're entitled to, particularly when it comes to meeting the financial needs of the family. Gender and economics are tightly intertwined. In her male-dominated society, the only way Selman could support her mother and siblings and acquire some degree of authority in her community was to "become" a man. With no older brothers and a widowed mother, such an extreme step was the only viable solution.

In American society, earning capacity and professional credibility have always been linked in some way to gender. In the past, women had few opportunities to enter prestigious occupations, own property, or be financially independent. Today much has changed, and the traditional barriers to financial stability are no longer as impenetrable as they once were.

Yet despite advances, American women still lag behind men economically and politically and continue to encounter frustrating cultural barriers and closed doors. While not "becoming" men

in the literal sense that Selman did, women have nonetheless attained economic stability and social power only by drifting away from their traditional family roles and entering historically male realms of occupational life. In the 1996 film *The Associate*, Whoopi Goldberg plays a bright Wall Street stock analyst whose insightful ideas are repeatedly trivialized because she's a woman. So she quits her job in disgust, opens her own firm, and creates a fictitious, invisible male partner to whom she gives credit for all her best ideas. Her business thrives, and "he" soon becomes one of the best-known, most successful advisers on Wall Street. The message of the film is clear and not all that different from that conveyed by the experience of the young Sema Brahimi halfway across the world: It's easier to achieve economic power as a man than as a woman.

In this chapter we will examine the intersection of gender, work, and family. We will pay particular attention to how marriage and family life are influenced by the different work experiences and expectations of men and women both inside and outside the home.

Colliding Spheres

“Women’s world”

“A women’s place is in the home”

“Private, family life”



Traditionally, women’s place has been in the domestic sphere, an area of life removed, for the most part, from the stress and scrutiny of the “dog-eat-dog” world of the larger society. The public sphere has traditionally been male domain, with men doing most of the social planning and policy making.



This dichotomy has been breaking down over the past 25 years. As inflation hit in the mid-1970s, many women who once stayed home to raise children used their traditional skills of cooking and sewing to make money.



Some of the jobs women occupy reflect traditional assumptions about “women’s work.” But whether they’re cooking in the kitchen or serving doughnuts for minimum wage, women who work outside the home are trying to gain a measure of economic security. In doing so, they have helped redefine men’s and women’s adult roles.



This phenomenon has created serious workplace issues and some problems in the traditional family structure. As women have earned their spot beside men in the workplace, they feel entitled to a redistribution of household duties. Studies show, however, that in families with working wives, women still do more housework than men do.

On the surface, work seems like something separate from family life. But as technology and machinery advance, we are witnessing not only an erasure of occupational gender distinctions, but a blurring of traditional boundaries between family and work.

More and more people are finding their emotional and social needs met not by family members, but by colleagues and work mates.



WINDOWS ON FAMILY



Traditional ideas about family have changed, too. Although men are more likely to cook family meals than they were in the past, many families are finding that the notion of a family dinner hour is fast becoming a nostalgic memory.



Although family relationships continue to be important, more and more people are engaging in everyday activities by themselves. Many dine alone. Even fixing a meal at home may be a solitary activity as other family members are doing their own thing.

Ironically, when men are able to engage in family life, they often do so at work. Here we see a man playing with his kids at the corporate day care center in his office building.



For many women, the idea of bringing office work home is becoming increasingly popular. The term *home office* has rapidly become part of our everyday vocabulary.

**So what is family life as distinct from work life?
Will this be a relevant question in the twenty-first
century? What do you think your work and family
arrangements will look like?**

The Transition to Married Life

▲ Chapter 2 examines the process by which relationships are developed and maintained.

▲ Issue 3 provides a more detailed analysis of the role of privacy in family life.

Most adults experience the change from being single to being “coupled.” Such a transition requires some major adjustments, such as learning to live with someone else in the same house, pooling financial resources, changing insurance coverage, and so forth. It also requires a dramatic shift in identity. Becoming a spouse is more complicated and time-consuming than signing the appropriate papers and saying “I do” during a wedding ceremony. Spouses must learn to act and think like married people in a way that conforms to cultural expectations. ▲ The husband and the wife are now a social unit in others’ eyes; they must think of themselves as a couple and organize their activities accordingly (Berger & Kellner, 1964).

Because marriage is an *institutionalized* form of intimacy, we can anticipate what it will be like long before we actually marry. We come equipped with information from our parents’ marriage, the marriages of people we know, and the images of marriage we see in the media. But the unique qualities and expectations both partners bring with them means that each marriage will be experienced differently. Spouses must create a new identity for themselves as a *couple* and, through interaction with one another, reinforce this identity (Berger & Kellner, 1964).

Eventually couples create a consistent pattern of interaction—a set of habits, rules, and shared reality. They develop a sort of **private culture**—their own unique way of dealing with the demands of everyday married life (Blumstein & Kollock, 1988). ▲ The private culture includes things as mundane as a weekly dinner schedule or a Sunday morning ritual of breakfast and newspaper reading in bed, or as serious as the distribution of power and the handling of household finances. Some rituals and habits disappear as the composition of the family changes (for instance, with the arrival of children); others persist and are passed on to future generations. But one of the key elements of the private marital culture—and the one that is the focus of this chapter—concerns decisions about how work and family obligations are balanced.

Two Worlds: Work and Family

▲ For more on historical changes in family structure, see Issue 2.

Up until the mid-nineteenth century, the nation’s economy was primarily agricultural. ▲ People’s lives centered around the farm, where husbands and wives were partners not only in making a home but in making a living (Vanek, 1980). The word *housework*—distinct from work done in other places—was not even part of the language. Men and women performed different tasks, to be sure. But they worked together. Although the relationship between husbands and wives on the farm was never entirely equal—wives did most if not all of the housekeeping, child care, and care of the sick, in addition to producing many of the family’s basic necessities (Bernard, 1981)—complete male dominance was offset by women’s indispensable contributions to the household economy (Vanek, 1980).

With the advent of industrialization, though, things began to change. New forms of technology and the promise of new financial opportunities and a good living drew people away from the farms and into cities and factories where they could earn wages for their work. Many of the first factory workers were actually women. But as factory work came to be seen less as a peripheral activity and more as the primary feature of the new economy, men took control of this new

source of income, power, and prestige (Haas, 1995). For the first time in American history, the family economy was based outside the household, and the majority of families depended on wage labor for their financial support.

Industrialization relieved men of much of their domestic labor duties. And women no longer found themselves involved in the day-to-day supervision of the family's business as they had once been. Instead, they were consigned to the only domestic responsibilities that remained: the care and nurturing of children and the maintenance of the household. Since this work was unpaid and since visible goods were no longer being produced at home, women quickly found their work devalued in the emerging industrial economy (Hareven, 1992).

These historical changes reveal that the common notion of men as “good providers” did not always exist. It's been estimated that in hunting and gathering societies thousands of years ago, men provided only about a fifth of human subsistence (Boulding, 1976). In colonial times, women were viewed as performing a providing role in families. They ran inns and taverns, managed shops and stores, and sometimes even worked in the fields (Bernard, 1981). The good provider as a specialized male role emerged around the 1830s with the rise of the market-based industrial economy and “officially” ended in 1980 when the U.S. Census declared that a male was not automatically assumed to be the head of the household (Bernard, 1981).

The Ideology of Separate Spheres

In the first decades of industrialization, the divergence between men's and women's labor resulted in the ideology of **separate spheres**. Women's place was in the home (the “private” sphere); men's was in the work world outside the home (the “public” sphere). ▲ This ideal fostered the belief that men and women were *naturally* predisposed to different pursuits. Women were assumed to be inherently nurturing, demure, and sacrificial—a perfect fit for their restricted domestic roles. Women's “natural” weakness and frailty made them ill suited to the dog-eat-dog life of the competitive labor force and justified their limited job opportunities. The ideal image of men, on the other hand, was that of the rugged individual whose virtue came from self-reliance, power, and mastery of his job and family. Men were thought to be *naturally* strict, aggressive, calculating, rational, and bold—a perfect fit for the demands of the marketplace.

What's ironic about the power of the ideology of separate spheres is that the reality of American family life has never quite fit this image. Even in the late nineteenth century, well after the advent of industrialization, men weren't the only ones who left their homes each day to work in factories. Many children worked long hours to help support their families. At the turn of the century, for example, 120,000 children—some as young as 11—worked in Pennsylvania coal mines and factories; and children made up close to one-quarter of all workers in southern textile mills (Coontz, 1992).

Many women, too, entered the industrial labor force. By 1900, one-fifth of American women worked outside the home (Staggenborg, 1998). But the experiences of working women varied along class and race lines. For middle- and upper-class white women, few professions other than teaching and nursing were available to them, and these jobs paid poorly. Most entered and exited the labor force in response to family demands or took up volunteer work to fill up their free time.

▲ The implications this ideology has for power relations in contemporary marriages is discussed in Issue 5.

In contrast, poor women worked mostly in unskilled jobs in clothing factories, canning plants, or other industries where working conditions were often dangerous and exploitive. Female factory workers often faced exhausting paces and serious health risks, sometimes for 14 hours a day. Some were even forced to pay “rental fees” for the machines and equipment they used on the job (Staggenborg, 1998).

The conditions for women of color were especially bad. Black domestic servants, for instance, were often forced to leave their own families and live in their employer’s home, where they were expected to work around the clock. But most had little choice. Throughout history, black women have rarely had the luxury of being stay-at-home spouses and parents. In 1880, 73 percent of black single women and 35 percent of black married women reported paid jobs. Only 23 percent of white single women and 7 percent of white married women reported being in the paid labor force at that time (cited in Kessler-Harris, 1982).

Immigrant women, especially from southern and eastern Europe, rarely worked outside the home and would therefore seem to support the ideal of separate spheres. However, they contributed significantly to the family income by taking in boarders, sewing, making paper flowers and cigars, or taking on a variety of other money-earning tasks that could be done in the home. Italian men routinely employed their wives and sisters as helpers, though they weren’t officially considered employees.

But despite these discrepancies, the ideology of separate spheres became a powerful force. Its imagery was used to justify restrictions on women’s involvements in economic and political activity and men’s lack of involvement in family and community. The majority of women were excluded from full participation in the emerging industrial economy. Those who did work outside the home were paid significantly less than men and were confined to “female” jobs (Cowan, 1987).

At the same time, the unpaid work that most women did in the home was accorded little social value. This devaluation was the result of the difference in power between the public and private spheres (Sidel, 1990). As long as men controlled the public sphere, they could wield greater economic and political power within society and translate that power into authority at home. ▲

▲ For more on the economic basis of family power, see Issue 5.

The belief in separate spheres for men and women was the basis for creating a very popular national holiday: Mother’s Day. Most of us, when we think of Mother’s Day, think of a day for celebrating each mother’s devotion to her own family. However, a look at history reveals quite a different story.

The original proposal for a day for mothers occurred in 1858. Mothers’ (plural) Day was to be a day to celebrate women’s roles as community organizers and activists. These were women who acted on behalf of the entire generation of children, not just their own (Coontz, 1992). Later versions also stressed that Mothers’ Day ought to be a vehicle for organized social and political action by all mothers.

But the eventual adoption of Mother’s (singular) Day by Congress in 1914 represented a reversal of everything nineteenth-century mothers’ days stood for. Politicians now made speeches linking Mother’s Day to domestic life. They repudiated mothers’ roles outside the household. Merchants hung testimonials to their own mothers in their stores, hoping to entice others to buy things for their mothers. What was once an occasion for activism and controversial causes in the

community was reduced to an occasion for sales pitches and marketing, all cloaked in the image of mother as a domestic servant to her family.

▲ This historical trend is also discussed in Issue 2.

The doctrine of separate spheres has been weakened from time to time by larger historical, political, and economic necessities. During World War II, for example, the government initiated a massive public relations program designed to lure women out of the homes and into factories where they would take up the productive work of men who had gone off to fight in the war. ▲ Government motivational films depicted child care centers as nurturing environments where children would flourish while their mothers worked. Between 1940 and 1945 the female labor force increased by over 50 percent. Three-fourths of these new workers were married, and a majority had children (Coontz, 1992).

After the war ended, however, the message was very different. Women were encouraged to return to their “natural” domestic roles, and child care centers were depicted as horrible, dangerous places. Working mothers were labeled as selfish and irresponsible. Women were laid off in droves, despite the fact that the overwhelming majority wanted to continue working. Practically overnight, the political atmosphere had changed and with it the perception of women’s appropriate place in the family and in the economy.

The years right after the war represented the heyday of the separate spheres ideology. Media messages heavily emphasized women’s obligations to take their rightful position on the domestic front. Few women entered college during this era, and of those who did, two out of three dropped out before graduating. Most women left because they feared that a college education would hurt their marriage chances (Mintz & Kellogg, 1988).

But since the 1950s, the boundary separating men’s and women’s spheres has steadily eroded. Prior to 1960, about a third of female high school graduates enrolled in college (compared to over 50 percent of male graduates). By 1994, the percentage of women going on to college was 63 percent, slightly higher than for males (61 percent) (Bianchi & Spain, 1996). In 1950 a little over 30 percent of adult women were in the paid labor force; today, almost 75 percent of women between 25 and 34 work in the paid labor force (Haas, 1995). At the same time, men’s labor force participation has declined from about 87 percent in 1950 to a little over 70 percent today. About 46 percent of all people in the paid labor force today are women, compared to a little under 32 percent in 1950. Furthermore, 60 percent of American mothers with children under 6 are employed (Ahlburg & De Vita, 1992; Reskin & Padavic, 1994; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1995). (The Demo•Graphic Essay, “Patterns of Labor Force Participation for Women and Men,” at the end of this chapter, explores this trend further.)

Yet despite these trends, Americans still tend to perceive domestic work as women’s sphere and outside employment as men’s sphere:

Few Americans admit that job discrimination against women is acceptable, yet most feel uncomfortable when confronted with a female mechanic or a CEO in a dress. . . . When it comes to marriage and family life, Americans are even more ambivalent about women’s roles, wanting them to be generous self-sacrificing mothers even if they are also expected to be dedicated professionals. Although women are encouraged to go to college and pursue their careers as never before, they are still held accountable for what was once called

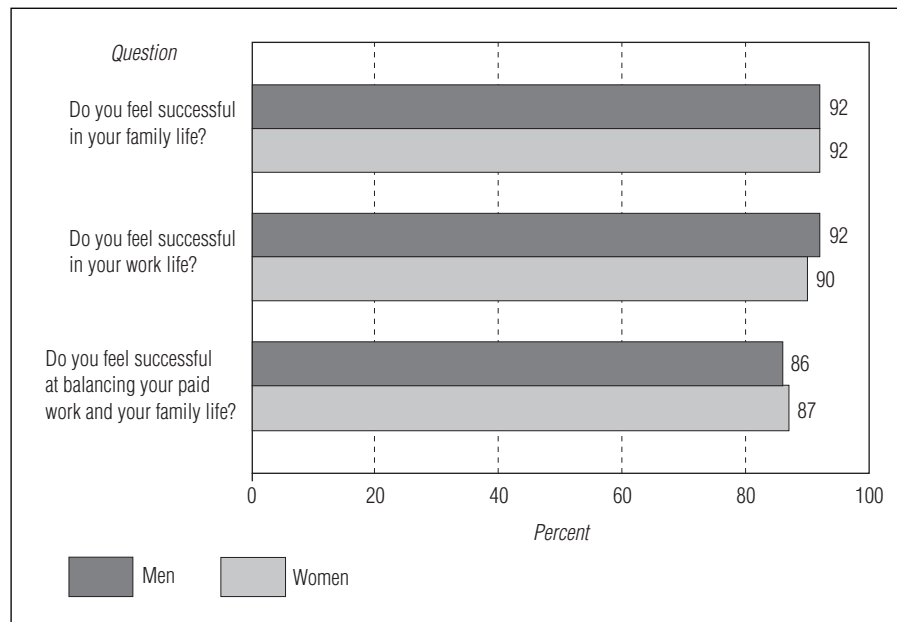
“women’s work.” If their houses are a mess, or if their children are unkempt, women . . . are still subject to blame. . . Although eight out of ten Americans believe it is OK for women to work, half still think that men should be the real breadwinners. Americans want fathers to be more involved with their children, but most feel uncomfortable if a man takes time off work “just” to be with his kids. (Coltrane, 1996b, p. 26)

▲ Issue 8 explores the impact of working wives and mothers on the institution of family.

Indeed, in some corners of American society, calls can still be heard for a return to the traditional male breadwinner–female homemaker division of labor. ▲ A statement of beliefs issued at the 1998 national convention of Southern Baptists included a declaration that a woman should “submit herself graciously to the servant leadership of her husband,” while a husband should “provide for, protect and lead his family” (quoted in Niebuhr, 1998, p. 1). She has the God-given responsibility to respect her husband and serve as his helper. A women’s organization called “Heritage Keepers”—an offshoot of the large men’s organization “Promise Keepers”—teaches women how to “let go of the reins” of family control. Their credo is “Submission is a place of honor” (“The Promise Keepettes,” 1997, p. 15).

But how likely is it that vast numbers of American women will willingly withdraw from paid employment and happily return to the domestic sphere? A growing number of women are now the primary source of financial support in their families. And it’s not just the money. A recent national poll found that only about a third of working women said they’d prefer to stay home, even if money were no object, because of the respect, esteem, and friendship networks their jobs provide (cited in Coontz, 1997). Furthermore, women are just as likely as men to feel successful in their work lives as well as their family lives (see Exhibit 3.1).

Exhibit 3.1
 Success in Family and Work Life:
 Survey of 973 Married Men and Women
 United States: 1996



Source of data: National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, *General Social Survey*, 1996.

▲ Issue 5 looks at the role of gender ideology in shaping power relations between husbands and wives.

Gender Ideology in the Workplace

Although women and men are now both in the workplace, traditional gender ideologies still affect their experiences there. **Gender ideologies** refer to the ways people identify themselves regarding the work, marital, and family roles that are traditionally linked to gender (Greenstein, 1996a). ▲ Gender ideology is what distinguishes the man who believes that breadwinning is “men’s work” and housework is “women’s work” from the man who believes that “being male” means sharing breadwinning and cooperating with household chores. Employers as well as the public at large still believe women and men are naturally inclined to do certain jobs in the paid labor force (Reskin & Hartmann, 1986).

To measure the power of beliefs about gender-appropriate work, sociologist Richard Levinson (1975) had male and female undergraduate sociology students make job inquiries in response to 256 classified advertisements. The jobs were categorized as “male” (security guard, truck driver, car sales, etc.) or “female” (receptionist, hostess, cosmetic sales, etc.). Working in male-female pairs, one partner made a telephone inquiry about a “sex-inappropriate” job—for example, the male would ask about a receptionist position, and the female would ask about a truck driver job. About 30 minutes later, the “sex-appropriate” partner called about the same job: The woman called about the receptionist job, the man about the truck driver opening. The students were instructed to be polite and to use identical words in their inquiries.

Levinson found clear-cut discrimination in 35 percent of the cases. The sex-inappropriate caller might be told that the person doing the hiring was out of town or that the position had already been filled. However, when the sex-appropriate caller phoned a half-hour later, he or she might be told that the position was still open or was even encouraged to come in for an interview. Ambiguous discrimination was found in another 27 percent of the cases. This type of discrimination ranged from expressions of surprise to subtle attempts on the part of employers to discourage the sex-inappropriate caller from applying for the job. A more recent replication of this study found that these forms of sex discrimination, while not as common as they were in Levinson’s study, still exist (Winston, 1988).

The standard assumptions that drive the typical workplace usually disadvantage women. Think for a moment about what you have to do to be considered a good worker by your boss. Obviously you have to show competence and a deep, serious commitment to the company. Evidence of such commitment might include working extra hours, traveling to faraway business meetings or professional conferences, attending training programs, working unpopular shifts, entertaining out-of-town clients on weekends, and so on. Such activities are possible only if your household setup allows you the time to place your job above other considerations, such as family. Because women, especially mothers, still tend to have the lion’s share of responsibility at home, they have more difficulty making time for these activities and therefore are less able to “prove” to their bosses that they are good, committed employees.

Assumptions about what constitutes an “ideal” worker can run deep. Imagine for a moment that you’re a boss who’s just been told that your most valuable employee, Chris, is engaged to be married. How will you respond?

If Chris is a man, chances are his impending marriage will be seen as a “stabilizing” influence. His carefree days of bachelorhood will soon give way to the serious responsibilities of

family life. Job security will now be extremely important to him, perhaps making him a more committed and dependable worker. He might even need a raise, since fatherhood is probably looming not far down the road. You'd be unlikely to think that these new family responsibilities will somehow prevent Chris from devoting himself entirely to his job. On the contrary, it's likely that they'll motivate him to work even harder so he can support his family.

Now suppose Chris is a woman. How might your response to the nuptial news change? Chances are that the impending marriage will now be seen as a potential impediment to career mobility. You might begin to question whether she'll be able to remain fully committed to the job. Will she move if her husband finds a good job somewhere else? Perhaps you begin to wonder how long it will be before Chris becomes pregnant and seeks maternity leave or quits altogether. Rather than making her a more dependable worker, marriage may actually make her less dependable, less stable, and less invested in the company.

In the real-life workplace, these gender-based expectations can play a decisive role in hiring and promotion decisions (Reskin & Hartmann, 1986). In addition, research consistently shows that mothers earn lower wages than women without children. This "wage penalty" doesn't disappear even when different levels of work experience are taken into consideration (Waldfogel, 1997). Not surprisingly, about 90 percent of male executives but only 35 percent of female executives have children by the time they turn 40 (cited in Schwartz, 1989). Notice, however, that these differences are not the result of outright sexism and overt discrimination but a more subtle consequence of a pervasive ideology that underlies our beliefs about gender, family, and the workplace.

The "Mommy Track" In recent years, many companies have attempted to accommodate larger numbers of women on their payrolls by developing alternative work arrangements, such as part-time positions, reduced workloads, temporary positions, flextime, irregular shifts, or jobs that can be performed from home. These innovations—sometimes referred to collectively as the **mommy track**—have provided many employed women with less demanding career paths that enable them to continue meeting their family obligations. The mommy track represents an important institutional recognition that many female workers take their domestic responsibilities very seriously. Not surprisingly, more than two-thirds of temporary and part-time workers in this country are women ("Ten facts about women workers," 1997).

However, these "irregular" jobs are not without problems. For one thing, they tend to be more insecure than "regular" ones. Because their jobs are the most expendable, these workers are the first ones pushed out of employment during hard times. They also tend to be paid less and lack the benefits that typically accompany full-time, regular employment.

Moreover, women in "mommy track" positions are often regarded as less committed to the profession and therefore are excluded from opportunities that might lead to monetary rewards and promotions (Barker, 1993). Career advancement can be permanently slowed by the belief that mothers' commitment to their children interferes with workplace efficiency (Schwartz, 1989). For instance, female lawyers in part-time positions are often given the lowest-status projects to work on, which are not only less interesting but also lead to a professional dead end. Clearly, the lawyer most likely to have a bright future in the profession is the one who can be to-

tally committed to the firm and who has no family at home or a family with a spouse at home to care for it (“Why law firms,” 1996).

The Wage Gap In the United States women have made remarkable progress in overcoming traditional obstacles to employment. Over the past several decades, women have increased their representation dramatically in male-dominated fields like engineering, medicine, law, and administration (Reskin & Hartmann, 1986). The representation of women in skilled trades has increased by over 80 percent (Sidel, 1986). One-third of all U.S. businesses, employing over 13 million people, are owned by women (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1996).

Although these figures are encouraging, women still face disadvantages when it comes to wages, promotions, and authority (Reskin & Padavic, 1994). In particular, women still face a **wage gap**: Their earning power—and thus their ability to financially support their families—lags behind men’s. In 1995 the average income for all men working full-time year-round was \$31,496 per year. All women working full-time year-round earned an average salary of \$22,497 per year (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1997a). To put it another way, for every dollar a man earns, a woman earns approximately 71 cents. The differences are even more pronounced for African-American and Hispanic women, who earn 65 and 55 cents, respectively, for every dollar a man earns. In addition, 61 percent of employed women have little or no ability to advance in their jobs, 40 percent of those over 55 have no pension plan, and 34 percent have no health insurance (“Working women’s woes,” 1994).

These figures are clearly an improvement over past wage differences. In 1973, for instance, all women earned only 56.6 cents for every dollar a man earned. Advances in work experience and job-related skills have enabled some women—particularly middle- and upper-class women—to improve their income levels relative to men’s. However, some sociologists argue that the wage gap has narrowed somewhat not because women’s earning power has improved but because men’s has worsened (Bernhardt, Morris, & Handcock, 1995). Also, the discrepancy between men’s pay and women’s pay has proved remarkably resilient over the years, despite the 1963 Equal Pay Act, which guaranteed equal pay for equal work, and Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which banned job discrimination on the basis of sex (as well as race, religion, and national origin).

I should point out that the wage gap is not an exclusively American phenomenon. To varying degrees in every country around the world, men earn more than women. In the developing countries of Latin America, Africa, and Asia, women commonly earn 25 percent or less of what men earn (Tiano, 1987). In some countries, however, such as France, Sweden, Australia, and Denmark, the wage gap is narrower than it is here, with women earning 80 to 90 percent of what men earn (Reskin & Padavic, 1994).

Why does the American wage gap continue to exist? Some economists and policy makers argue that the wage gap is an institutional by-product of men’s generally higher levels of work experience, training, and education. The U.S. Bureau of the Census, however, reports that gender differences in education, labor force experience, and seniority—factors that might justify discrepancies in salary—account for less than 15 percent of the wage gap between men and women (cited in National Committee on Pay Equity, 1995). For instance, the average income of

full-time female workers is significantly lower than men's with the same level of educational training. In fact, women with a bachelor's degree can expect to earn about the same as men with only a high school diploma (median annual income of \$26,841 for college-educated women compared to \$26,333 for high school-educated men) (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1997a). Hence, the continuing gap seems to have little to do with men's and women's different abilities or credentials.

A more likely reason for the wage gap is the types of jobs women typically have. The majority of employed women work in jobs, such as nursing, social work, and teaching, that are extensions of their traditional family roles. These jobs not only lack social prestige, they are usually on the low end of the pay scale. For the five "most female" job positions (that is, those more than 96 percent female) of secretary, receptionist, licensed practical nurse, private household worker, and child care worker, the average weekly salary is \$219. By contrast, the average weekly salary for the five "most male" job positions (those less than 3 percent female) of airplane pilot, construction worker, truck driver, firefighter, and miner is \$506 (adapted from Barrett, 1987).

Dual-Earner Families

Despite the wage gap, women remain committed to the idea of participating in the workforce. One obvious reason is that the financial strains of modern living—shrinking incomes, increasing cost of housing, and so on—have made it virtually impossible for most couples today to survive on one income. In 1990, 54 percent of families with at least one child under the age of 6 had two working parents. That figure is up from 32 percent in 1976. Of those families with children between the ages of 6 and 10, 68 percent consist of an employed mother and father (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991). The dual-earner family is now the single most common American family type. Even so, controlling for inflation, median incomes for American families have risen quite slowly over the past several decades—from \$32,229 in 1970 to \$34,076 in 1995 (both figures in 1995 dollars) (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1997a). ▲ Some types of families have been more successful than others, however. Hispanic families have seen their median income drop substantially between 1970 and 1995. Families with children have seen only a 2.4 percent increase in income, and the incomes of a subset of these families, single mothers, have not changed at all since the mid-1970s. At the same time, childless families have enjoyed a 19.6 percent increase in income (Peterson, 1994).

The image of the traditional family, in which Mom stays home to raise the kids, simply cannot work for most people given the economic realities of modern society. Nevertheless, social institutions, for the most part, are still built around the outdated belief that only one partner (typically the father) in a couple should be working. Historically, such beliefs have created serious burdens for working parents. Consider the case of a 32-year-old Minnesota woman. She was fired from her job as an accounting clerk at a computer company because she had to stay home from work frequently to care for her sick baby, who had a series of illnesses including pneumonia, influenza, and pinkeye. The company stated that she missed almost half the work time from January to May of 1990. The state commissioner of jobs and training said she was not eligible for unemployment benefits because she had "voluntarily" put family interests ahead of her employer's interests, which amounted to misconduct (Lewin, 1991). However, her husband was

▲ Issue 7 takes a closer look at the role that economics plays in family life.

unable to care for the child, and all her nearby relatives worked. In addition, she said, most day care providers do not accept sick children, and bringing somebody into the home to care for the child was far too expensive. Eventually an appeals court overturned the denial of benefits, ruling that her absenteeism was beyond her control and therefore did not amount to misconduct.

Many couples find they must make career trade-offs to try to balance their work and family lives. A survey of more than 6,000 employees of a major chemical company found that, at the managerial and professional level, 47 percent of women and 41 percent of men had told their supervisors they would not be available for relocation; 32 percent of the women and 19 percent of the men told their bosses they wouldn't take a job that required extensive traveling; and 7 percent of women and 11 percent of men turned down a promotion. Among those in manufacturing jobs, 45 percent of women and 39 percent of men refused to work overtime, and 12 percent of women and 15 percent of men had turned down a promotion (cited in Lewin, 1995b).

Some experts feel that the single most important step our society could take to help dual-earner families would be to help them deal with child care demands. ▲ As recently as 1990, only 52 percent of the nation's largest companies had some form of maternity leave guaranteeing that an employee can use 6 weeks of vacation or sick time and not lose her job (Aldous & Dumon, 1990). However, in 1993 President Clinton signed into law the Family and Medical Leave Act, which guarantees some workers up to 12 weeks of unpaid sick leave per year for the birth or adoption of a child or to care for a sick child, parent, or spouse.

This law represents a noteworthy shift in the government's recognition of the needs of dual-earner families, but it has some important qualifications that seriously limit its applicability to a significant proportion of the working population:

- The law covers only workers who have been employed continuously for at least 1 year and who work at least 25 hours a week. As a result, temporary contract or part-time workers—who, as we've seen, are predominantly female—are not eligible.
- The law is of no value to parents who can't afford to take unpaid leave.
- The law exempts companies with fewer than fifty workers; hence, only about 40 percent of the full-time workforce is covered.
- The law allows an employer to deny leave to any employee who is in the highest paid 10 percent of its workforce if allowing that person to take the leave would create "substantial and grievous injury" to the business operations.

Between 1994 and 1995, less than 4 percent of employees in companies covered by this law actually took leave from their jobs ("Impact of the family," 1997).

While this law represents an improvement over past conditions, the United States still lags behind other countries. According to a recent United Nations survey of 152 countries, the United States is one of only 6—along with Australia, New Zealand, Lesotho, Swaziland, and Papua New Guinea—that does not have a national policy requiring paid maternity leave (cited in Olson, 1998). By comparison, consider the policies of other industrialized nations:

- Both Germany and Japan guarantee a minimum of 3 months of *paid* family leave to all employees regardless of the size of their employer. Additional unpaid leave is available if it is needed (Shanker, 1990).

▲ Issue 8 and Chapter 5 examine the state of child care in American society.

- In Canada, mothers can take up to 41 weeks off and be paid 60 percent of their salary for 15 of those weeks (Reskin & Padavic, 1994).
- In Sweden, pregnant women are given 8 weeks of full paid leave *before* the baby is born, and either parent can remain at home for up to 9 months after the child is born while drawing 90 percent of his or her salary (Kamerman, 1985; Sidel, 1986). Swedish parents can take 60 days off a year with 80 percent pay to care for sick children or to visit children at day care or school. Both fathers and mothers also have the right to reduce the workday to 6 hours or the workweek to 4 days in order to care for children (Haas, 1995).

The Disappearing Boundary Between “Home” and “Work”

Many American families, especially those with young children, still struggle with lack of support from employers, government, and businesses. They face difficulty trying to fit in all the tasks that used to be performed by housewives, trying to find dependable day care, having to call in sick themselves in order to care for a sick child, having to use vacation time as maternity leave, and so on. But each year the number of employers who offer “family friendly” work policies grows. In some large companies you can now choose to work part-time, share a job with another worker, work some of your hours at home, or work on a flexible schedule.

Given the rhetoric about the importance of spending time with family, you’d expect workers to be rushing to take advantage of these opportunities. But relatively few employees appear to use them. A recent study of 188 companies found that, when available, less than 5 percent of employees made use of part-time shifts and less than 3 percent chose to work some hours at home. A Bureau of Labor Statistics survey asked a national sample of workers if they would prefer a shorter workweek, a longer workweek, or their present schedule. About 62 percent preferred their present schedule; 28 percent wanted to work *longer* hours; less than 10 percent wanted to work a shorter schedule (cited in Hochschild, 1997b).

In other words, while many working parents say they want to spend more time with their families and less time at work, relatively few are taking advantage of opportunities to reduce their work time. To explain why, sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild (1997b) interviewed 130 employees at a large public relations company she called “Amerco” over a period of 3 years. At Amerco, only 53 of 21,000 employees—all of them women—chose to switch to a part-time schedule in response to the arrival of a new baby. Less than 1 percent of the employees share a job or work at home, even though the company permits it.

From the information she gathered, Hochschild dismissed some widely held explanations for why people would forgo family-friendly policies:

- *They can’t afford to work shorter hours.* If this were true, you’d expect workers at the lowest end of the pay scale to be the most reluctant to voluntarily cut their hours. But at Amerco, the highest-paid employees were actually the least interested in using these opportunities.
- *They are afraid that working part-time or asking for time off would make them vulnerable to layoffs.* Hardly any of the workers Hochschild interviewed worked longer hours because they were afraid of being laid off. Indeed, she found that most layoffs had nothing to do with work schedules.

- *They don't know such policies exist.* The vast majority of employees were fully aware of the options available to them. In fact, many of them were quite proud to work for a company that had such an enlightened approach.

▲ Symbolic interactionism, described in Chapter 1, emphasizes the role of subjective meaning in everyday family life.

So why were these workers so unwilling to change their work lives to spend more time with their families? Hochschild believes the explanation can be found in the meanings people attach to their jobs and their families. ▲ For many Americans, work has become a form of “home,” and home has become “work.” Home has traditionally been defined as a soothing place where people should feel secure, relaxed, and comforted. Work, on the other hand, has traditionally been defined as a harried and insecure place where people often feel dehumanized (“just a cog in a machine”) and where their worth is judged not by who they are but by how much they produce. But things have changed.

New management techniques have transformed many workplaces into more appreciative, personal sorts of places. Ironically, according to observers, the increased presence of women in the workplace has led to a greater emphasis on cooperation and support.

At the same time, the home has become a frenzied place where efficiency is the overriding concern. When both partners have busy work schedules, their opportunities to spend time with one another or with children are reduced, making it particularly difficult to sustain emotionally gratifying family relationships (Kingston & Nock, 1987). Technological innovations like cellular phones, beepers, faxes, and electronic mail intrude even further into family life, making many workers accessible 24 hours a day. In the interests of getting things done, children are often subjected to factory-style “speedups,” hurried from one place to the next. Dinner must take 10 minutes or there won't be enough time to get the kids to soccer or violin lessons. Like business meetings, each family event must be planned in advance and entered in the time schedule. People are forced to cram all their emotional needs into the 30 or 45 minutes they spend with each other before bed.

▲ Chapter 7 examines the unique demands of stepfamilies; Chapter 8 describes the dilemmas associated with adult children caring for their elderly parents.

Because people aren't getting what they want and need at home, things there are messy. Children become sullen, spouses become resentful. To make things even more stressful, in addition to the traditional needs of children and spouses, there are now the needs of elderly parents as well as the blending and reblending of stepparents, stepchildren, ex-spouses, and former in-laws. ▲

And so for many people work has become a sort of refuge. Some of the workers Hochschild interviewed told her that they come to work early and stay late just to get away from the house. At work they can relax, have a cup of coffee, and share jokes and stories with friends without the hectic anxiety that characterizes modern home life. They use terms like *fun*, *carefree*, and *emotionally supportive* to describe their work. Not surprisingly, they are perfectly willing to flee a world of unrelenting demands, unresolved quarrels, and unwashed laundry for a world of relative harmony, companionship, and understanding. Work has become their main source of pleasure and personal satisfaction.

The tendency to see home as work and work as home is, of course, not something that characterizes everyone or even most people. And Hochschild's study looked at only one company. But the tension between work and home is a growing reality that must be faced. Increasing numbers of female workers are discovering what men have known all along: that work can be an escape from the pressures of home.

The unfortunate consequence, according to Hochschild, is that people “downsize” their ideas about how much care a child or a partner really needs from them. At the same time, families learn to make do with less time, less attention, and less support at home than they once imagined possible. Where couples once “needed” time with each other, they are now fine without it. Where parents once felt cheated if they couldn’t spend the entire weekend with their kids, they are now content with an hour or less each evening. In sum, neither men nor women are going to take advantage of family-friendly policies as long as the current realities of work and family remain as they are.

The Guilt Gap

Because of the lingering notion of separate spheres, men have historically been able to feel they are fulfilling their family obligations by simply being financial providers. A man may have to explain to people why he’s chosen a particular career, but he rarely, if ever, has to explain or justify *why he is working*. Most people would interpret his long hours at work as an understandable sacrifice for his family’s sake. In contrast, women’s employment is usually perceived as optional or, more seriously, potentially damaging to family life. Women have traditionally had to justify why their working outside the home is not an abandonment of their family duties. You’d be hard-pressed to find many journalists and scholars fearfully describing the perilous effects of men’s outside employment on the family. But the mountain of articles and editorials in popular magazines, newspapers, and academic journals focusing on the difficulties women have in juggling the demands of work and family and on the negative effects of employed mothers on their children’s well-being perpetuates the idea that their labor force choices are potentially dangerous (Faludi, 1991).

▲ Issue 8 assesses the evidence concerning the effect of maternal employment on family relationships.

Despite these concerns, research shows that wives’ and mothers’ employment actually has very little negative impact on their family’s well-being (Greenstein, 1995). ▲ And most Americans believe that working mothers are just as capable of establishing warm relationships with their children as mothers who don’t work outside the home (see Exhibit 3.2). Nevertheless, popular images die hard, and so it’s not surprising that few married women with children feel completely self-confident in the choice they make to enter or remain in the paid labor force. They agonize over whether their gains in financial well-being and personal independence are being purchased at the cost of their family relationships (Coontz, 1992).

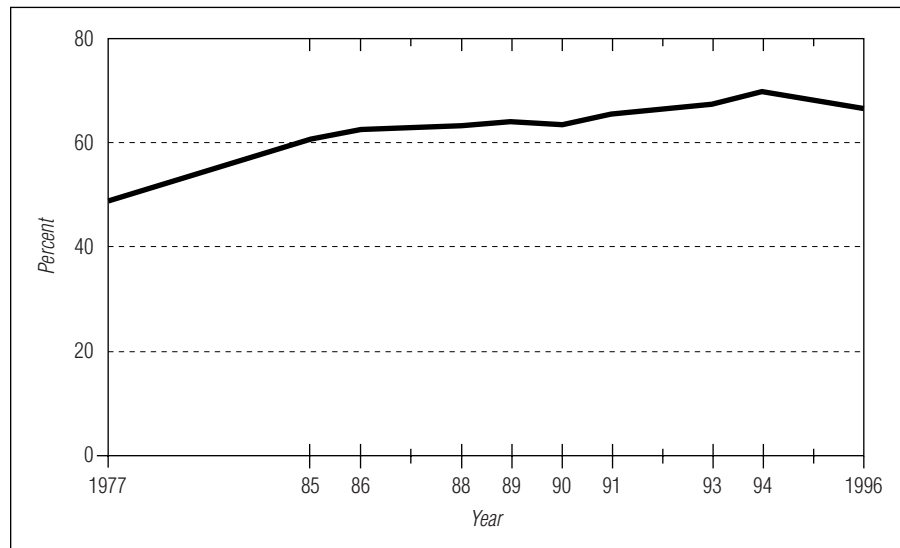
Men, on the other hand, rarely spend as much time worrying about the effect their work will have on their children as mothers do. This gender difference in worrying is referred to by some as the **guilt gap** (Hays, 1996).

The Dilemma for Working Women Sociologist Kathleen Gerson wrote a book in 1985 titled *Hard Choices: How Women Decide About Work, Career and Motherhood*. The book, a classic in the sociology of work and family, focuses on how women make the difficult choices between work and family commitments. Drawing on the life histories of working- and middle-class women, Gerson paints a vivid picture of the complex and competing forces women face: their aspirations, their commitment to motherhood, their beliefs about children, their perception of their place in their families and in society.

Exhibit 3.2

Adults Who Agree or Strongly Agree that a Mother in the Labor Force Can Establish as Warm and Secure a Relationship with Her Children as a Mother Not in the Labor Force

United States:
1977–1996



Source of data: National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, *General Social Survey*, 1977–1996.

The experiences of Gerson's subjects were quite diverse. Some of these women entered adulthood wanting to become mothers and homemakers; others began adulthood with ambivalence or downright animosity toward motherhood. Some continued on these early paths; others veered off, experiencing a dramatic change in their family plans and desires. But all of them faced tough decisions on how to balance work and family. More than a decade later, the choices for women remain hard.

Such difficulty stems from powerful and sometimes conflicting social pressures. We seem to have a profound cultural ambivalence regarding how mothers ought to behave. At one extreme is the image of the traditional mother who stays at home with the kids and devotes all her energy to her family. At the other extreme is the image of the “supermom,” effortlessly juggling the demands of home and work. She has a briefcase under one arm, a cell phone in one hand, a baby in the other, and a smile on her face.

The ambivalence comes from the fact that although both images are considered socially acceptable, both are also indicted for their failings. Add to the mix the fact that American culture also seems unwilling to embrace childless career women, and you can see how an adult woman faces a no-win situation (Hays, 1996). ▲ If she voluntarily remains childless, some will accuse her of being cold, selfish, and unfulfilled as a woman. If she is a mother who works hard at her job, some will accuse her of neglecting her children. If she has children, is employed, but puts her kids before her job, some will judge her to be uncommitted and place her on the “mommy track.” And if she is a full-time homemaker, some will call her an unproductive throwback to the 1950s, content with her subordinate family status.

These images lead many women to *feel* less than adequate. It's difficult for a stay-at-home mother to feel happy and fulfilled when she keeps hearing that she is mindless and bored. It's

▲ Chapter 4 examines gender differences in the cultural emphasis on parenthood.

difficult for the working mother to ably juggle her roles when she hears that she must dedicate *all* her energy in *both* directions to be considered successful.

Under these circumstances, it's not surprising that many employed mothers feel guilty and many stay-at-home mothers feel isolated and invisible to the larger society. Nor is it surprising that both spend a great deal of time making sense of and justifying their position. Employed mothers can come up with lots of compelling reasons why it's good and right to have a job and career, and traditional mothers can come up with equally compelling reasons why it's good and right to stay home (Hays, 1996).

Separate Spheres for Working Men The point here is that while many men make sacrifices regarding their careers or their families, in general they don't face the same kind of cultural ambivalence and hard choices that women face. In fact, men's choice, for the most part, is no choice at all. Since men are still expected to attach primary importance to their careers, they seldom feel stress over sacrificing family time for their jobs. The stress some men do feel over balancing their careers and their family commitments can be tempered by the knowledge that they are conforming to cultural expectations if they devote most of their time to work. Indeed, men have historically been more able than women to keep family commitments from intruding on their work time and have used job demands to justify limiting their family time. In short, while women's family obligations and work aspirations have always been tightly intertwined, since the nineteenth century men have typically been able to maintain separate spheres.

In fact, evidence suggests that fathers who are freed of the burden of family obligations—that is, whose wives stay home to take care of the house and children—actually earn 20 percent more and get higher raises than fathers whose wives work. Such differences hold even after taking into consideration the effects of the number of hours each group of men works, their experience and training, and their field of employment (cited in Lewin, 1994a).

Some argue that these differences exist because men who are the sole breadwinners in their families work longer, produce more, and push harder for raises. In other words, without having to spend time on child care and housework, these men are freed up to pursue their careers with their full attention and energy. Others suggest that the higher salaries of men with nonworking wives simply reflect the fact that highly paid husbands can afford stay-at-home wives. Still others argue that a sort of “daddy penalty” is at work—that employers are prejudiced against men with “nontraditional,” working wives.

We have no way to definitively determine which of these explanations is correct. However, some men with working wives do report feeling that they are being judged more harshly by their employers:

I do think my boss is very aware that my face time is a little bit less than some of the men who feel like they can work as late as they like because their wives are at home with the kids. I'm as productive as those guys. I work smarter now that I have kids. I take work home. I don't do all the meaningless social stuff that can take up a lot of hours. But I do worry that it's going to slow down my promotions. (quoted in Lewin, 1994a, p. A15)

But another man whose wife stopped working to be at home with their children, looks at his job differently:

Knowing a parent is with the kids all day long removes the terrible sense of conflict and guilt if I have to work late. I leave the house at 6:10 in the morning, before the kids are awake and if I don't get home before they go to bed at 8:30 I miss them, and that's hard for me, but I don't feel as worried as I used to that they're not getting enough parent time. . . . Now that my job is our sole source of income, striving to keep it secure and maximize it is more important than ever. (quoted in Lewin, 1994a, p. A15)

Work Expectations in Same-Sex Couples

How does the gender-skewed approach to examining the interconnections between work and family apply to those situations in which there are no gender distinctions, that is, with same-sex couples? Gay and lesbian households can transcend the limitations and inequalities of sex-based “husband” and “wife” roles. Family work and breadwinning responsibilities cannot be automatically based on sex. They must be negotiated.

For same-sex couples, the issue is not who has the right to work or, conversely, the obligation not to work. Instead, the issue is how can the relationship and the household be kept together given the career demands on *both* partners? The vast majority of same-sex couples emphasize sharing and fairness and believe that both partners in the relationship should work (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). ▲ Few consider either not working or supporting someone who chooses not to work. But the reasons for their feelings about this issue provide insight into the meaning of work for both men and women, regardless of sexual orientation.

For gay men, work remains a key aspect of male self-respect. Unlike many heterosexual men, they don't feel obligated to support their partners financially. Instead, each partner is expected to work because that is what it means to be a man (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). Hence, there is little interest in being a full-time homemaker. Housework in gay male households tends to be shared or is performed by outside hired help.

For lesbians, work means the ability to avoid being dependent on others and being cast into the stereotypical homemaker role. While they understand the importance of earning their own living, rarely do these women think they will have to support, or be supported by, another person. Lesbians don't expect to be the head of a household in the same way a husband expects to enter the breadwinner role in a heterosexual marriage. They are likely to see themselves as “workers,” not “providers” or “dependents.”

Men's Changing Commitments to Work and Family

In contemporary heterosexual households, too, the two partners' work responsibilities are more a matter of negotiation than they were in the days when husbands were expected to be the primary breadwinners. Working wives today make a substantial contribution to their household's income. For instance, in 45 percent of dual-earner households, women earn about half or more of the income (cited in Ingrassia & Wingert, 1995). By 1990, the percentage of American households that consisted of a married couple dependent on a sole male breadwinner had dropped to less than 14 percent, from a high of almost 60 percent in 1950 (Gerson, 1993). The heretofore unchallenged belief in the superiority of the male “good provider” has been replaced by uncertainty over men's

▲ Power imbalances can exist in all types of relationships, as Issue 5 explains.

▲ How such uncertainty affects traditional power relations in families is addressed in Issue 5.

▲ For more detail on the father role after divorce, see Chapter 7.

proper place in society. It's no longer obvious what goals men should pursue and how much energy they should devote to pursuing them. At a more philosophical level, it is no longer clear what it means to be a man. Because women are becoming just as likely as men to bear the responsibility for supporting a family, it has become harder for men to justify advantages based simply on being male. ▲

Along with such uncertainty, men today are facing new choices about how to structure their lives. Sociologist Kathleen Gerson (1993) interviewed 138 men ranging in age from the late 20s to the mid-40s. These men came from diverse social and occupational backgrounds. Less than half of them remained committed to the traditional male breadwinner role and expected women to occupy the traditional female homemaker role. However, these men felt that changes in women's lives had not—or should not—change men's traditional status as dominant breadwinner.

The remainder of the men Gerson interviewed rejected the traditional male breadwinner role. Of these men, the largest group—about 46 percent (or 24 percent of the total sample)—cited freedom from the breadwinner role as a reason to renounce marriage and parenthood. To these men, marriage always seemed more like a trap than a reward. They felt they had much to lose and little to gain by getting married. Many had negative experiences with other people's children, which convinced them that parenthood was not something they wished to pursue either. Fearing that becoming responsible for a family would rob them of the option to pursue unpredictable careers or nontraditional jobs, these men rejected the whole package of domestic and work commitments that constituted the traditional definition of male success. Freed from the social obligation to financially support a wife and children, these men turned away from family altogether. Those who had already fathered children were quite uninvolved in their lives. ▲

Another group of men Gerson interviewed—about 30 percent of those who turned away from the breadwinner role (17 percent of the total sample)—didn't consciously oppose marriage, parenthood, or steady work. They simply didn't think about the future at all. Such passivity, according to Gerson, came from two different and contradictory assumptions. One was that men had the luxury of not having to plan. Some of these men simply believed that everything would work out fine with or without planning. They tended to come from comfortable middle-class backgrounds, which they felt guaranteed them a good start in life. A second, more pessimistic, assumption was held mostly by working-class men. They felt that their restricted economic opportunities would take away any future "choices" anyway. They simply resigned themselves to the fact that nothing they could plan would work out, so why bother.

A small segment of men who rejected the breadwinner role (9 percent, or about 4 percent of the total sample) exhibited a more extreme version of this sort of pessimism. They expected to succumb to the dangers of being an adult long before they had a chance to face adult challenges and responsibilities. Future planning seemed, to them, irrational because they didn't expect to live that long. Such men turned to risky or dangerous pursuits like drugs, violence, or military service.

Finally, about 15 percent of this nontraditional group saw the decrease in breadwinning responsibilities as an opportunity to embrace a more nurturing parent role and construct a marriage based on equality and fairness. These men believed that a working wife would make a happier, more fulfilled companion than a homemaker. As one man put it, "I just could not see myself being attracted to somebody who was not gonna have their own career, and have the same kind

of interest and passion about what they want to do as I had about my career” (quoted in Gerson, 1993, pp. 65–66). They hoped that an employed spouse would lessen their own economic burden and give them the freedom to seek personal fulfillment and not just job security at work. They wouldn’t have to worry about earning a big paycheck. These men also showed a deep emotional attachment to their children and devoted much of their time at home to their care. They showed a willingness to parent not seen in their fathers’ or grandfathers’ generations.

Although statistically rare among Gerson’s subjects, such attachment is becoming more and more socially acceptable. Shortly after the 1996 presidential election, then Secretary of Labor Robert Reich wrote a letter to the *New York Times* lamenting the difficulty he faced in balancing his career and his family. Unable to strike the kind of balance he wanted, he made the tough choice to resign from his powerful cabinet position so he could spend more time with his family:

I have the best job I’ve ever had and probably ever will. No topping it. Can’t get enough of it. I also have the best family I’ll ever have, and I can’t get enough of them. Finding a better balance? I’ve been kidding myself into thinking there is one. The metaphor doesn’t fit. I had to choose. I told the boss I’ll be leaving, and explained why. (Reich, 1996, p. A33)

Mr. Reich’s story was a poignant one. Unfortunately, the best solution to his problem—and the problem of millions of other workers—lies not in personal decisions made by individuals but in a shift in structural arrangements. Few people have the economic wherewithal that Mr. Reich has to leave their jobs and devote more time to their families. A working-class father, for example, isn’t about to “resign” from his job to relax and frolic with his children. In fact, recent reforms in welfare laws may actually prevent him from doing so. Ironically, Mr. Reich, as labor secretary, was the person responsible for federal guidelines concerning workplace policy. He was the very person who could have helped to change the workplace culture to be more conducive to family obligations so that such difficult sacrifices wouldn’t have to be made in the first place.

Equality in Dual-Career Marriages

Sociologist Rosanna Hertz (1986) examined a smaller subset of dual-earner couples: middle- and upper-middle-class working couples in the corporate world. In these couples, not only are both partners employed, they are both professionals, committed to their careers. These individuals are, for the most part, economic equals.

Hertz points out that dual-career couples tend not to be politically or socially motivated individuals consciously pursuing an agenda of gender equality. Their desire for equal careers is not driven by any sort of ideology. Instead, they are the by-products of a shifting economy, where the expansion of white-collar employment coupled with the growth of career opportunities for female college graduates combined to make two careers—not just two jobs—in one family a popular option. Their unique position as marital equals is more behavioral than attitudinal. Labor market trends have made them advocates of gender equality, even if they weren’t initially supporters of this cause.

How does such equality play itself out in family life? Hertz found important shifts in the roles of these husbands and wives. They understand each other’s situation and tend to relate to each other as partners with similar goals, aspirations, and pressures.

The traditional “separate spheres” boundary, between “breadwinner” and “homemaker,” dissolves when neither spouse can claim greater power and influence due to working outside the home or earning more money. The marriage can no longer respond entirely to the demands of only one spouse or only one spouse’s career. Similar work schedules and employer demands muddy questions about whose work commitments should take precedence.

Indeed, the emergence of new and more complex forms of breadwinning—which typically emphasize greater sharing in the division of family responsibilities—have served to blur traditional gender boundaries in families. Breadwinners vary in terms of the amount of financial support they provide as well as the importance of their jobs in the experiences of other family members. For instance, some wives who earn significant income in their careers consider themselves employed homemakers, define their financial contributions to the family as supplementary, or stake a claim to the breadwinner role only with significant reluctance. Others, however, are highly committed to their careers. Because they believe that providing for one’s family ought to be as much the responsibility of women as of men, they consider themselves “cobreadwinners” (Potuchek, 1997).

Couples trying to make their new reality fit an old, traditional family model often feel frustrated. They constantly struggle not to fall back on the old rules and roles they witnessed as children, when any conflict over work and family was resolved by letting one person’s career atrophy.

Hertz found that the dominant mechanism couples used to negotiate these potential conflicts was to view their marriage as a third, shared career that requires commitment, attention, and hard work *from both partners*. Marital equality in this “third career” is not taken for granted; it takes substantial time and energy. As one husband states, “I certainly don’t think this is a gloriously equal marriage marching off into the sunset. I think we struggle for equality all the time. And we remind each other when we are not getting it” (quoted in Hertz, 1986, p. 55). In “reminding each other” of inequalities—keeping each other in check so that neither spouse’s career becomes favored—partners in dual-career marriages try to strike a livable balance.

Most of the dual-career couples in this study reported having to be very explicit about fairness in the relationship, adopting a “bookkeeping mentality.” ▲ They often instituted clear rules about job choices or relocation decisions should one spouse face transfer. For instance, one couple decided that if one spouse received a job offer that required a move to another city, the other spouse always had veto power, retaining the right to reject the city. This agreement operated as a constraint on the pursuit of one career to the possible disadvantage of the other person. Such rules may sound unromantic, but they serve to ensure fairness in the marriage.

Despite moments of doubt, ambivalence, or conflict, dual-career couples often create a communication style quite different from traditional marriages. Their lives outside the home, although rarely in the same profession, share a rhythm and structure. Such a situation is far different from the gulf that can sometimes separate the worlds of working and nonworking spouses. Dual-career couples have a deep understanding of each other’s lives that is at once intimate and empathetic. They both understand, for example, that a last-minute crisis in the office can mean a late night at work, or that one or the other will periodically need to travel out of town on business, or that going out for a drink with colleagues after a particularly rough day can be important. Furthermore, they can both understand inevitable bad moods and therefore can correctly attribute them to job tension and not to the individual. As one man put it, “She has a sense of

▲ The weighing of costs and benefits to determine fairness in relationships is a central feature of the social exchange perspective, described in Chapter 1.

what I'm doing because she's out there doing the same damn thing every day" (quoted in Hertz, 1986, p. 77). An advantage of this kind of situation is the increased potential for mutual respect stemming from the heightened understanding of each other's lives.

Hertz's research offers compelling insight into the ways couples strike satisfying balances between work and family. But it's important to note that this balance is still rare among less-affluent dual-earner couples. Furthermore, it is always a struggle. For one thing, these couples still must cope with a culture that assumes male and female roles in the family ought to be divided into separate spheres of influence and responsibility, with one partner (usually the husband) given final authority. Hence, they are likely to go through periods in which they worry about their futures and the futures of their children. Partners who've made compromises in their careers, for example, must face parents, in-laws, and fast-track friends who frown upon those who don't try to maximize potential financial success. As one sociologist puts it, "Forgoing income is almost a cardinal sin in this country" (Schwartz, 1994, p. 186).

While the marriage of two careers brings a level of autonomy and financial freedom unavailable to most families that rely on a single source of income or on two modest incomes, such arrangements are always contingent upon the availability of careers in the labor market, people to help with housework and child care, and the ability of couples to adapt to competing employer demands. In other words, dual-career couples are always dependent upon others outside the relationship. Lack of adequate day care or a sudden downsizing at one's place of employment can destroy the delicate balance a couple may have achieved.

Nontraditional Lifestyles of Dual-Earner Couples

Clearly, couples who want to work and remain committed to their families are subject, to some degree, to the whims of the workplace. For instance, nearly one in five full-time workers finds him- or herself working long, nonstandard, or erratic hours and struggling to find a family arrangement that will match (Hays, 1995). As the economy has become more global, more companies require around-the-clock shifts to meet the demands of international customers in different time zones. Therefore, many dual-earner and dual-career couples have had to construct nontraditional lifestyles in order to adapt to the demands they experience.

Shift Work Among dual-earner couples in the United States, approximately one-third consist of one spouse employed during the day and the other employed during the evening, at night, or on some form of rotating schedule (Presser, 1994). According to the Department of Labor, 60 percent of women with children under 6 and 78 percent of women with school-age children work nonstandard hours (cited in Hays, 1995).

The perception of shift work can vary along class lines. ▲ Young, middle-class couples might perceive it as an attractive alternative for the flexibility it offers. For working-class families, however, shift work is likely to be an arrangement over which workers have little control. Parents earning the lowest incomes are the ones who are more likely to be assigned to work weekends and on unstable or rotating schedules. As political pressures to get people off welfare and into the workforce increase, more parents may be forced to take undesirable jobs with nonstandard hours, further complicating their family lives.

▲ Social class variations in family experiences and recent welfare reforms are discussed more fully in Issue 7.

Although shift work is attractive to some couples, for most it is a source of tension. It can reduce marital happiness and the amount of interaction that occurs between partners, increase sexual and household problems, and ultimately increase the likelihood of divorce (White & Keith, 1990). Irregular work arrangements are particularly difficult for parents of very young children. Few child care centers operate 24 hours a day or on weekends. (By one estimate, only about a dozen 24-hour day care centers exist in the country.) So most parents of young children must either rely on friends and relatives or work opposite shifts, sacrificing time together so that one of them can be with the children (Hays, 1995).

Commuter Couples Another nontraditional solution to the problem of balancing work and family is to live apart. Over a million married couples living in separate residences—so-called **commuter couples**—are estimated to exist in the United States today (Baca Zinn & Eitzen, 1996). It is often difficult to pursue two careers in the same geographic area. The conventional solution, of course, is that one spouse—usually the wife—takes a less desirable job or chooses not to work at all. But more dual-career couples are choosing to meet the incompatible demands of work and family by adopting a commuting lifestyle, living apart for at least 3 nights a week.

Living apart is not unique to dual-career couples. Some occupations—like sales or politics—and some circumstances—like war, immigration, imprisonment, and seasonal work—have always required some marital separation. However, the husband has historically been the one to leave for some period of time (Anderson & Spruill, 1993).

Research shows that today's commuter couples tend to be well-educated professionals in their mid-30s. But their commuting characteristics vary widely. The time that separate residences are maintained can range anywhere from a few months to a dozen years or more. The distance between the residences may be short (40 or 50 miles) or span the entire country. Some couples reunite every weekend; others don't see each other for months at a time. Some have children; others don't (Anderson & Spruill, 1993). What they all have in common, though, is that the separation is motivated not by problems in the relationship but by both partners' desire to maximize success in their demanding careers. And it is perceived not as a freely chosen, perfect arrangement but as a necessary, temporary, accommodation (Gertsel & Gross, 1987).

Nevertheless, the commuting situation can *create* problems in the relationship. It is a lonely, inconvenient, and expensive lifestyle that takes tremendous effort. Communication, sexual activity, and the economics of maintaining a marriage are issues that must be worked out during infrequent visits.

Yet despite the potential problems, most commuters maintain that the career benefits outweigh the strains of separate living. Spouses report satisfaction with the freedom they have to continue working in their chosen occupations. They can devote long, uninterrupted hours to their jobs without worrying about missing dinners or social events at home. Furthermore, as in long-distance dating relationships, the time spouses in commuter marriages do spend together can be intensely arousing.

Women tend to be more positive about their commuting arrangements than men. Their gains in independence and professional mobility may counteract the costs of reduced emotional

▲ To some critics, women's increasing emphasis on independence has reduced their commitment to family obligations, a topic addressed in Issue 4.

closeness. ▲ The arrangement can validate the belief that their career is as important as their husband's. Consider the highly positive comments of two commuter wives:

I was really unprepared for the fierce joy I have felt at being my own woman, being able to concentrate on my own activities, my own thoughts, and my own desires. It's a completely selfish, self-centered existence. It's almost a religious experience when you're fifty years old and have never felt that before.

Every night I bring work home. If he was here, I'd have to let it go. I would have prepared real meals, made sure the house was neat, had more laundry to do. Oh, you know, the whole list. But, being alone, it's just easy to do my work. I'm kinda lured into it. (quoted in Gertsel & Gross, 1987, pp. 427–428)

The Domestic Division of Labor

In the pursuit of equal relationships, men have had a much easier time relinquishing some responsibility for the traditional breadwinner role than taking on more of the responsibility for the traditional homemaker role. Men's involvement in family work (defined here as doing household chores, caring for children, tending to others' emotional needs, keeping up relationships with kin, and so on) has not kept pace with women's increasing commitment to paid employment. Some sociologists have referred to this situation as a "stalled revolution" (Hochschild & Machung, 1989). That is, American families are indeed changing, but men are dragging their feet (Hunt & Hunt, 1987).

Even in dual-career couples where wives have prestigious careers, domestic matters are typically assumed to be outside the repertoire of male responsibilities. Consider the swirl of controversy that enveloped the 1993 confirmation hearings of the first two female nominees for U.S. Attorney General, Zoe Baird and Kimba Wood. These two women, both highly successful professionals, had employed undocumented immigrants as nannies for their children and thereby avoided paying Social Security taxes. These practices, while technically illegal, were commonplace among middle-class and upper-middle-class working parents. Nevertheless, the news was enough to sink the nominations of both women. Up to that point no male nominee for any Cabinet post had ever had his household so thoroughly scrutinized, even though such scrutiny would have no doubt found similar transgressions. Questions about nannies would have been considered completely irrelevant to his capacity to perform as a member of the presidential Cabinet. Clearly the assumption regarding these two women was that, despite their professional stature, they were the ones accountable for what went on in their homes. Interestingly, the woman who eventually was confirmed for the post of attorney general, Janet Reno, is single with no children.

Many conflict sociologists explain this sort of lingering bias as a by-product of patriarchy and our capitalist economic systems. ▲ Family work is invaluable to the entire economic system. However, the people who perform the majority of family work—that is to say, women—earn no money for providing services like cooking, cleaning, and caring for the needs of others. Mothers also provide an important service to society by physically and emotionally nurturing the next generation of workers. If a woman were to be paid the minimum going rate for all her

▲ The basic assumptions of conflict theory are described in Chapter 1.

▲ Issue 5 describes the pivotal role that money plays in determining power relations in families.

labor as mother and housekeeper—child care, transportation, errands, cleaning, laundry, cooking, bill paying, grocery shopping, and so on—her yearly salary would be over \$35,000, more than the average salary of male full-time workers (“Mom’s market value,” 1998). In 1990 unpaid household work was equal to about 44 percent of the gross national product, or over \$1 trillion (Strong & DeVault, 1992).

Such work does not afford women the prestige it might if it were paid labor because societal and family power are usually a function of who earns the money. ▲ It’s not that homemakers don’t work, it’s that they work invisibly outside the mainstream economy, in which work is strictly defined as something one is paid to do (Ciancanelli & Berch, 1987; Voyandoff, 1990). Furthermore, defining unpaid household labor and child rearing as women’s responsibilities upholds male privilege in society. Free from such obligations, men are able to enjoy more leisure time and take advantage of the opportunity to pursue their own careers and interests. Women burdened with domestic responsibilities have less time and energy to devote to their careers. Hence, the division of labor in the home reinforces the division of labor in the workforce, further solidifying the gender-based power structure of American society.

Debate over the devalued perception of housework created a national controversy in Canada a few years back. In 1991 a Canadian housewife took issue with a question on her census questionnaire that asked, “How many hours did you work in the last week, *not including volunteer work, housework, [home] maintenance or repairs?*” (Smith, 1996). She had run her household for 19 years, raising three children in the process, and she was furious that her hard work was considered irrelevant. So she refused to fill out the questionnaire, a crime according to Canadian law. Under threat of prosecution, she embarked on a protest campaign, which eventually drew in women from all over the country. She formed a group called the Canadian Alliance for Home Managers, which threatened to boycott the next census if unpaid work remained uncounted. Five years later, Canada became the first country in the world to count the hours spent performing household labor and child care without pay on its national census.

Women’s Work, Men’s Help

It’s true that men do more around the house than did their counterparts 30 years ago and that they play a more prominent role in the raising of children. And it’s also true that women, because they are more likely to be in the paid labor force than in the past, are doing less. But despite these changes, family work responsibility continues to be predominantly female (Brines, 1994).

Research consistently shows that women spend on average about 50 hours a week doing family work, while men contribute a maximum of about 11 hours (Cowan, 1991; Levant, Slatter, & Loiselle, 1987). On average, men are responsible for between 20 and 35 percent of the domestic work (Shelton & John, 1996). The average American wife puts in about 15 hours more each week than her husband on all types of work—paid and unpaid—amounting to an extra month of 24-hour workdays a year (Hochschild & Machung, 1989).

Moreover, the housework men do tends to be quite different from the work their wives do. Their chores are typically infrequent, irregular, or optional:

They take out the garbage, they mow the lawns, they play with children, they occasionally go to the supermarket or shop for household durables, they paint the attic or fix the faucet;

but by and large, they do not launder, clean, or cook, nor do they feed, clothe, bathe, or transport children. These . . . most time-consuming activities . . . are exclusively the domain of women. (Cowan, 1991, p. 207)

▲ The structural functionalist perspective is introduced in Chapter 1.

From a structural functionalist perspective, traditional gender disparities in household responsibilities may actually reflect an equitable, functional, interdependent division of labor that maximizes benefits for the entire family. ▲ Families work most efficiently when people are responsible for the tasks for which they are best suited: men caring for the family's economic needs and women caring for its emotional needs.

If this were the case, you would expect family work to be shared equally if both partners work full-time, right? There is some evidence that husbands perform more of the mundane household tasks traditionally performed by wives when their wives have a long history of extensive work in the paid labor force (Pittman & Blanchard, 1996). However, in general, the gender discrepancy in household responsibilities does not diminish all that much as a result of women's full-time employment.

Several national studies have found that, on average, employed women spend over 33 hours a week on housework, compared to 18 hours a week for husbands (Lennon & Rosenfield, 1994; South & Spitze, 1994). Other studies place the figure for men closer to 7 hours a week (Brines, 1994). Women employed outside the home continue to be primarily responsible for the upkeep of the household and end up working what amounts to two full-time jobs (Demo & Acock, 1993). Interestingly, this discrepancy holds even among couples who profess egalitarian, non-sexist values. Husbands who say that all the housework should be shared equally still spend significantly less time doing it than their wives do (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983).

▲ Racial and ethnic variation in a wide variety of family experiences is addressed in Issue 6.

Race and ethnicity play an important role in the domestic division of labor. ▲ For instance, Asian and Hispanic men tend to do less family work than other men. This is particularly true in ethnic neighborhoods, where the high proportion of recent immigrants ensures a steady flow of people with traditional, patriarchal values. According to one study, despite stereotypes about black men abandoning their families, they are actually *more* likely than white, Asian, or Hispanic men to be intimately involved in family work and child rearing (Rubin, 1994). Indeed, black men employed full-time may actually spend *more* time doing household labor than unemployed black men, indicating that when men are attached to the provider role they are also committed to their family obligations (Shelton & John, 1993).

▲ Social class does, however, account for differences in other family matters, which you can read about in Issue 7.

On the other hand, social class appears to have little impact on the gender-based division of domestic labor. ▲ The common assumption is that working-class men are less “enlightened” and therefore do proportionately less family work than middle-class men. Stereotypically, the macho factory worker whose masculinity is threatened by doing laundry and cleaning the bathroom is contrasted with the “yuppie” father happily cooking meals and pushing a stroller in the park. But research shows that class has little to do with how much housework husbands perform (Wright, Shire, Hwang, Dolan, & Baxter, 1992).

However, men's economic standing *relative to their spouse's* does have an effect. When men earn more than their wives, the fulfillment of traditional gender roles fits well with the exchange of resources: his financial support for her domestic services. But when women earn more, couples sometimes resort to a traditional division of family power in order to reinforce the gender differences that could be undermined by the switching of traditional economic roles. To shore

▲ Chapter 4 provides a more detailed examination of motherhood and fatherhood in American society.

up their threatened masculinity, men who earn less than their wives may try to avoid “feminine” household chores and thus do less of the housework than other men. Men who have suffered through prolonged joblessness are prone to entirely disavow housework, the performance of which would be further evidence of their “failure” at the male provider role (Brines, 1994).

For those couples who do share household tasks, imbalances still exist. For instance, the arrival of children often signals a return to a more traditional division of household labor (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). In fact, employed men may actually *increase* their time at work upon becoming parents while women significantly decrease theirs (Shelton, 1992). ▲ In other words, having children often means more work *inside* the house for women and more work *outside* the house for men.

Many women whose husbands make significant contributions to household work and child care report frustration over the fact that they are still “household managers” who are ultimately responsible for planning and initiating household activities. They complain that they must instruct and remind their husbands before the men begin to notice and take care of the tasks necessary to run a home (Coltrane, 1996a). Some women have found that if they want their husbands to do certain household tasks, they must prepare itemized lists every time they leave the house, spelling out exactly what needs to be done (Hays, 1996). Others complain that men seem so blind to what needs to be done that it is often easier just to do the job themselves.

Men’s literal and figurative distance from family work is also reflected in the ways they define their domestic contributions. Some men distance themselves from the activity by indicating to others that it is not the sort of thing they typically do. Rather than defining the work they do around the house as an ordinary, expected aspect of their family responsibilities, they may define it as “help”—implying that they’re assisting the person who’s usually responsible for such tasks.

Even men who assume major responsibility for planning and initiating housework and child care tend to define their role as “helper” (Coltrane, 1989). The tendency of many fathers to refer to their child care behavior as “babysitting” verbally aligns them not with the general category of parents for whom taking care of children is a taken-for-granted element of their family role, but with outsiders who periodically care for other people’s children. Mothers rarely refer to the time they spend with their own children as “babysitting.”

A key social element of “help”—as distinct from “work”—is that it requires expressions of gratitude or at least some acknowledgment on the part of the person “receiving” the assistance (Hochschild & Machung, 1989). Compared to his father or perhaps other men in his community, a husband who does the laundry, dusts the furniture, and washes the dishes may feel that he is providing more help than his wife could reasonably expect from a man. Given such a frame of reference, his domestic tasks are something extra—a helpful gift. And his wife should feel grateful.

But she has a different frame of reference. If, in addition to her full-time job, she is still responsible for 70 to 80 percent of the family work, her husband’s contribution might be perceived as little more than what she deserves—not something extra and certainly not a gift.

Hence, he may see her failure to thank him for watching the baby a few hours each afternoon as a lack of appreciation for “all he’s done.” She, on the other hand, thinks he’s just done what he should do as a parent and therefore she’s not obliged to express any special gratitude. She may even resent him for demanding that she acknowledge his domestic contributions, which, relative to her ordinary responsibilities, are quite small.

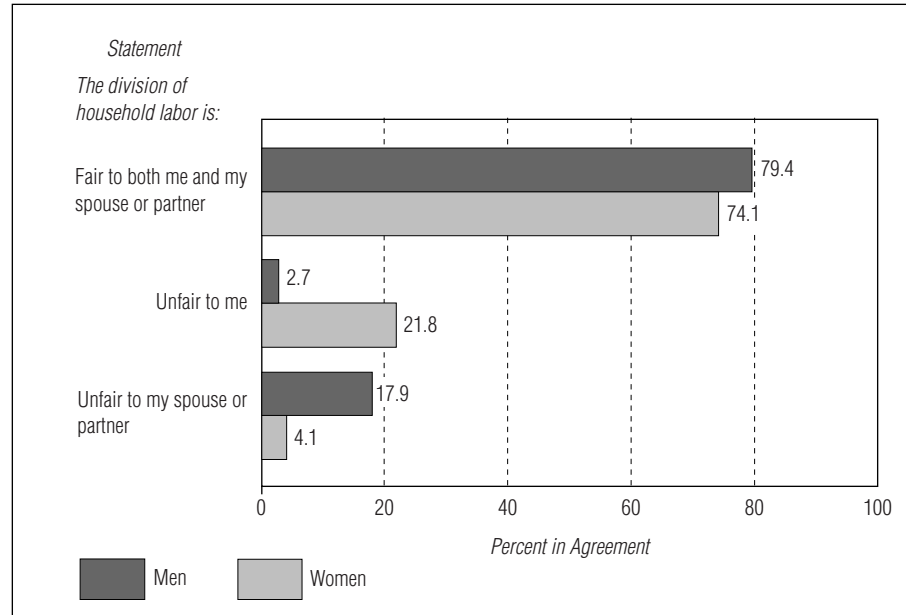
Perceptions of Inequity

Imbalances and inequalities exist in most families. However, actual, objective inequality in domestic responsibilities is less important than the *perception* of inequity and unfairness. As you might expect, men in general are less likely than women to perceive the unequal distribution of household labor as unfair (see Exhibit 3.3), although their perceptions of fairness may vary across racial lines. Since, as we've already seen, African-American men tend to spend more time on housework than white men, they are less likely to view the household division of labor as unfair to their wives. When comparing their household labor to other men's, African-American men may conclude that they're contributing their fair share more than other men (John, Shelton, & Luschen, 1995). What's striking is that relatively few wives (estimates range from one-third to one-fourth) regard the unequal division of labor as unfair. White, African-American and Hispanic women are equally unlikely to report unfairness (John, Shelton, & Luschen, 1995).

Research indicates that men and women in general agree that wives should do about twice as much family work as husbands do (Lennon & Rosenfield, 1994). Even among professional wives in dual-career marriages, only a small percentage say their husbands do *too little* work around the house (Yogev, 1981). In a study of couples of relatively equal economic and professional status, 62 percent of wives said their husbands did a satisfactory amount of domestic work, and 13 percent actually felt their husbands did *too much* (Biernat & Wortman, 1991).

Gender Ideology and Family Work Some people do feel an unbalanced household division of labor is unfair to women (Hochschild & Machung, 1989). But under what circumstances do

Exhibit 3.3
 Division of Household Labor:
 Survey of 759 Adults
 United States: 1996



Source of data: National Opinion Research Center, University of Chicago, *General Social Survey*, 1996.

these perceptions arise? People's perceptions are, in part, contingent on their beliefs and ideologies about gender. In general, husbands with egalitarian gender ideologies tend to see the typically gender-based division of family work responsibilities as more unfair to their wives than husbands with traditional ideologies (DeMaris & Longmore, 1996), even though there's no evidence that egalitarian husbands are particularly motivated to increase their contribution to domestic labor.

Women's perceptions are somewhat different. Wives with a "traditional" gender ideology are likely to value stability and harmony in their relationships, but "egalitarian" wives might be more concerned with independence and autonomy (Greenstein, 1996b). If a wife truly believes that married women—no matter what their employment status—are *supposed* to do most of the housework, she will probably view inequalities as legitimate and not see them as unjust. On the other hand, a wife who enters marriage expecting her husband to share in the household work will perceive the inequalities as unfair because her expectations are being violated. Such unmet expectations are likely to decrease marital stability and marital happiness.

It should be noted that gender differences in family work don't just reflect a culturally learned pattern. Women don't do most of the household chores just because they are taught that doing the family work is part of their gender identity. If women believed that doing household chores was part of being a woman, gender differences in family work responsibilities would be noticeable at all stages of family life, including singlehood, cohabitation, and remarriage. But research indicates otherwise. Although the amount of family work that men do is quite similar across different marital statuses, the amount that women do fluctuates considerably (South & Spitze, 1994). Single women do about the same amount of housework as single men. Significant differences between women and men exist only among married and cohabiting couples and are especially pronounced among couples with children.

Differences in contributions to family work based on marital status apparently reflect different expectations of how one "does gender" (West & Zimmerman, 1991). Perhaps women believe that doing the housework is a means of displaying their love of or subordination to men. Single women don't do more housework than single men because they don't feel any pressure to do so (Perkins & DeMeis, 1996).

A recent comparison of first-married and remarried couples offered some support for this explanation. Women in their second live-in relationship contribute significantly less time to housework than women in first marriages or first cohabiting relationships. Men's housework time, predictably, was uniformly low across all situations (Sullivan, 1997). The women in second relationships may have had lower rates of housework because they started their first marriage under one set of norms and reexamined it later under a different one. In another study, a majority of previously divorced women did in fact say they'd left their first marriage because of inequitable treatment (Schwartz, 1994). So a woman who perceived the domestic division of labor in her first live-in relationship to be unfair might be inclined to seek a more equal division in subsequent relationships.

Because family work is a feature of *all* households, no family type is exempt from facing decisions about how it ought to be divided. As in heterosexual couples, lesbians and gay men do more housework if they are not fully employed (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). But since same-sex couples cannot assign housework on the basis of who is male and who is female, the division

of household labor can be quite complex. A study of gay male couples, for instance, showed that the handling of household chores varied by the stage of the relationship (McWhirter & Mattison, 1984). In the early years, partners make a conscious effort to share all household chores. As the relationship progresses, however, tasks are assigned primarily on the basis of skill or work schedule.

Compared to both married and gay male couples, lesbians are more likely to espouse an ideology of equality and share household tasks evenly (Kurdek, 1993; Sullivan, 1996). Some researchers have found that lesbian couples tend to be more egalitarian than heterosexual couples both ideologically and behaviorally (Blumstein & Schwartz, 1983). Any inequalities that do exist are attributed to differences in the resources each partner controls. When children are present, lesbian parents seem to divide their domestic duties such that neither partner assumes a disproportionate share of the work load nor is rendered economically dependent on her partner. Such an approach reflects explicit, self-conscious commitments to equity that extend beyond the tight proscriptions of gender ideology (Sullivan, 1996).

▲ Issue 5 and Chapter 2 provide further discussion and application of the social exchange perspective.

Social Exchange and Household Inequity The social exchange perspective can also shed some light on how men and women perceive domestic arrangements. ▲ This perspective argues that people can feel deprived without feeling dissatisfied if they conclude that they are getting what they deserve out of their relationships. People with few outside alternatives tend to have lower expectations of a relationship because they stand to lose more from its disruption than people who have more options available to them (Lennon & Rosenfield, 1994).

Thus, the women who have fewer alternatives to marriage and fewer available economic resources are more likely to view an unequal division of family work as fair. If wives have low wages and sense a high risk of divorce in their marriages, they may lower their expectations and feel grateful for whatever household chores their husbands do (Hochschild and Machung, 1989). On the other hand, women who are self-sufficient and who perceive available alternatives to their marriage are less dependent on their spouses and are less fearful of divorce. Hence, they are more likely to view unequal family work as unfair. These women tend to be more distressed and depressed by an unequal division of household labor than women who accept inequality as fair (Lennon & Rosenfield, 1994).

According to psychologist Brenda Major (1993), feelings of entitlement and deservedness can come from several sources:

- *Gender differences in comparison standards.* Husbands and wives typically compare their situation to others of the same sex (Hochschild & Machung, 1989). So wives will compare themselves to other wives (perhaps including their own mothers), and husbands will compare their situations to those of other men (perhaps including their own fathers). Given the social changes that have occurred over the past generation, men may see their contributions to the household as quite extensive compared to those of their fathers, who lived in an era when men did virtually nothing around the house.
- *Social norms governing married life.* Norms about the priority of motherhood and homemaker roles for women or breadwinner roles for men can be deeply ingrained. If women define household work as “women’s work,” the unequal distribution of household labor will

not violate their sense of entitlement or lead to perceptions of injustice—even if they are employed and still do three times as much housework as their husbands. Some research has shown that the greater a wife’s income relative to her husband’s, the worse she feels about her performance as a spouse, presumably because she thinks she is falling short of social expectations regarding women’s traditional family roles. In contrast, the more the husband earns, the better a spouse and parent he perceives himself to be, presumably because he is meeting or even exceeding expectations regarding men’s family roles (Biernat & Wortman, 1991).

- *Perceived availability and attractiveness of alternative arrangements.* If a working wife with a heavy load of housework, for example, compares her situation to the alternative of *not being employed*—rather than the alternative of being employed with an equal division of household labor—she may conclude that things aren’t so bad after all. Moreover, many women feel that they are highly unlikely to obtain a better division of labor in another relationship. Under these circumstances, as Major (1993) puts it, “Doing 60 percent of the family work seems better than the alternative of doing it all” (p. 152).

Women may also see imbalances in the household division of labor as justifiable if they earn significantly less than their partners. They may come to believe—or believe based on prior socialization—that they are exchanging their responsibility for family work for their husband’s more substantial income. Even though members of the same household have the same standard of living, the question of who earns the family’s income and how it is shared has a great deal to do with the distribution of power and influence within families (Okin, 1989). Perceived responsibility for the “breadwinner” role, then, can be a critical justification for the unequal distribution of domestic labor (Ferree, 1991). But as you know from the statistics on household labor presented earlier, earning more money excuses men from housework, but not women. In fact, some studies show that, as women’s income increases, they actually perform *more* household tasks (Biernat & Wortman, 1991).

In short, what’s important is not just the income difference but the meaning attached to that difference. A wife may earn more than her husband, but her earning power won’t have an impact on her household responsibilities if she and he don’t perceive her as being *responsible* for breadwinning (Potuchek, 1997). One study found that only 16 percent of American working wives are “willing breadwinners” who believe that their primary responsibility is to support the family financially (Haas, 1986). But those wives who do believe they are the family breadwinner are likely to feel entitled to more assistance around the house.

Manufactured Equity

Inequity in relationships can be uncomfortable for all involved. In an effort to create the *appearance* of equity in inherently inequitable relationships, some couples engage in a process of “family mythmaking.”

Sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild’s qualitative study of gender and family work employs detailed case studies to provide insight into the mechanisms couples use to artificially create feelings of equity (Hochschild & Machung, 1989). She describes one couple, Nancy and Evan Holt, who struggled for years over the wife’s desire for a more equitable division of labor and the husband’s continual opposition to sharing housework. At one point, an exasperated Nancy of-

ferred to split the responsibility for cooking dinner so that each would cook 3 days a week and they would go out or cook together on Sundays. Evan's response was that he didn't like "rigid schedules" but he'd try it anyway. The first week he forgot his cooking responsibility 2 out of his 3 scheduled days.

As the pattern continued, Nancy became more frustrated. When the conflict became so great that it began to threaten the marriage, Nancy and Evan created the myth that their marriage would be equitable if Nancy would shift her work hours from full- to part-time and do all the "inside" housework while Evan would be responsible for "outside" work, like cleaning the garage and feeding the dog. Nancy convinced herself that taking care of the dog was an onerous task she wanted nothing to do with. In doing so, she elevated this task to a level of importance akin to that of her career—which she was willing, in part, to sacrifice. The solution further "allowed Nancy to continue thinking of herself as the sort of woman whose husband didn't abuse her—a self-conception that mattered a great deal to her. And it avoided the hard truth that, in his stolid, passive way, Evan had refused to share" (p. 44).

Such intricate "solutions" highlight a growing problem facing American households at the close of the twentieth century. Increasing numbers of couples find themselves negotiating the complex dilemma that arises from the clash of the changing cultural perceptions of fair relationships and the actual gender-based division of labor in their own households. The complexity of trying to "create" equity in inequitable situations results in elaborate perceptual shifts and justifications. These solutions also show, as has much of the research, that women and men similarly view men's housework as critical to fairness (Sanchez, 1994), despite the fact that, by and large, men still don't see family work as "their issue" (Coltrane, 1996b).

In sum, men's participation in household tasks has increased only slightly over the years, despite their growing attachment to fatherhood and the dramatic increase in employment outside the home among married women. But as the gender attitudes of men and women gradually become more egalitarian, both sexes may be predisposed to expect men to do more family work in the future. Whether these expectations eventually translate into actual behavior may depend on such factors as the relative power of partners, as indicated by differences in resources like education and earnings. Furthermore, as more and more people turn to irregular work shifts and couples thus find little overlap in their work schedules, housework and child care may become more equally shared by necessity.

One study, for instance, found that the more hours husbands are not employed during times when their spouses are employed, the more likely they are to do housework traditionally performed by women (Presser, 1994). Thus, for example, day-shift husbands whose wives work night shifts are in a situation bind: They're the only ones around to cook dinner or put the kids to bed.

Conclusion

What seems quite clear is that, both in fact and as an ideal, the division of labor that assigned wage-earning responsibilities to men and unpaid family work to women is breaking down, and it will likely never return to the form it occupied a century ago. Women are in the labor force to stay. Yet as we approach the end of the millennium, women still aren't able to share equally in

providing the family income because of persistent inequalities in the labor market and men's persistent lack of interest and full participation in domestic work.

Nevertheless, men's and women's interests are beginning to converge. Women, in some respects, have become more career oriented but remain committed to family; men, in some respects, have become more family oriented yet still find their primary source of identity in their careers.

Unfortunately, these changes have not been matched by changes in the workplace. Many employers continue to value a workaholic ethic that leaves little time for a family life. Couples who equitably share work and domestic responsibilities continue to face a culture that doesn't quite know what to do with them. These couples may shrug off or angrily reject others' disapproval, but they still are called on to justify their nontraditional division of labor. Why is he in the grocery store or in the park with his 3-year-old in the middle of the day? Why are they moving to another city to accommodate her career?

As the twenty-first century approaches, we face the crucial task of integrating family and work as smoothly and effectively as possible without sacrificing too much of either. We can resist the social changes that are uniting the once "separate" spheres of work and family—or we can accept these changes and work with them. We can encourage men to sacrifice their family lives to fit into the rigid structure of the conventional workplace and encourage women to sacrifice their careers to meet their family responsibilities—or we can learn to value family caretaking and economic productivity in equal degrees. Piecemeal adjustments on the part of individual workers and couples will not be enough. What are needed are adjustments in institutional support systems so men can feel free to act on their emerging parenting values without fearing a risk to their careers and women can feel free to pursue their careers without fearing they are placing their families at risk.

CHAPTER HIGHLIGHTS

- The contemporary belief that work life and family life are separate spheres emerged with industrialization in the nineteenth century. Along with this shift came an expectation that family life was women's domain and work life was men's domain. However, the notion of "separate spheres" has never applied equally to members of different classes and different ethnic groups.
- Work and family are never completely separate. Nevertheless, the ideology of separate spheres was, and continues to be, a powerful force in economics and politics. Consequently, women's experiences in the labor force—from the jobs they occupy to the wages they earn—are still tied to broader cultural assumptions about gender.
- Lingering notions of separate spheres shape the way men and women today perceive the balance between their family lives and their work lives.
- Recent decades have witnessed a dramatic increase in dual-earner families. This change has placed unprecedented demands on the workplace to accommodate employees with family obligations and on families to find ways of tending to their needs when time at home is limited.

- Couples in which both partners have careers challenge the principles that have traditionally guided married life.
- The growing presence of women in the paid labor force has not been accompanied by an increase in the responsibility men take for household work. An inequitable division of household labor continues to be a source of strain for many families.

DEMO•GRAPHIC ESSAY

Patterns of Labor Force Participation for Women and Men

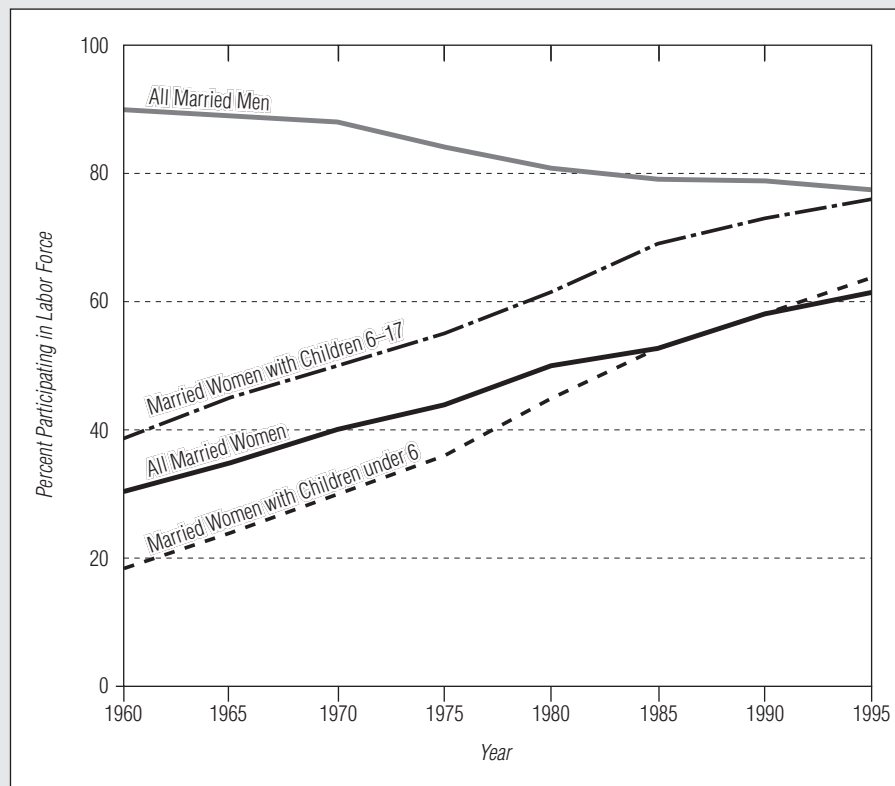
It is widely known that since 1960, the labor force participation rates for married women have increased. Surprisingly, however, as Exhibit 3-A shows, the labor force participation rates for men have *decreased*. What do these trends indicate about the relationship between work and family in the late twentieth century?

Notice in Exhibit 3-A that the increasing labor force participation among married women has been especially great among those with children under age 6. Furthermore, the labor force participation rates of married women with children ages 6–17 are greater than the participation rates of married women in general. One possible explanation is that mothers of school-age children tend to be younger than married women in general. Indeed, Exhibit 3-B shows that in 1996 age was more important than marital status in determining labor force participation rates of women. Women ages 25–34 and ages 35–44—the likely ages of mothers

Exhibit 3-A

Labor Force Participation Rates of Married Men and Married Women (by age of children for women)

United States:
1960–1995

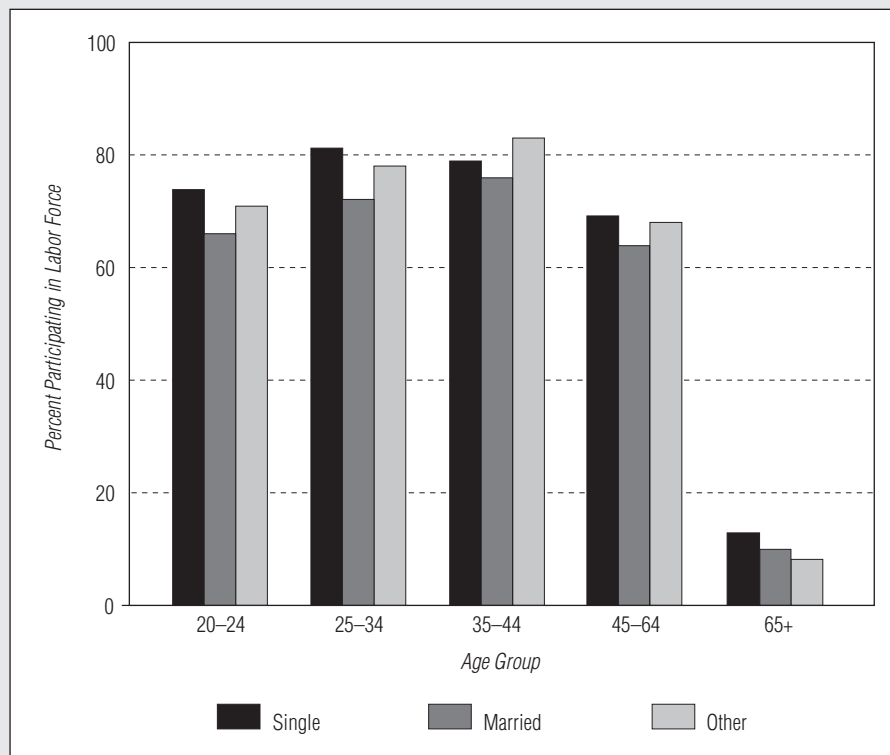


Source of data: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1997* (117th edition). Washington, DC, 1997.

Exhibit 3-B

Female Labor Force Participation
(by marital status and age)

United States: 1996



Source of data: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1997* (117th edition). Washington, DC, 1997.

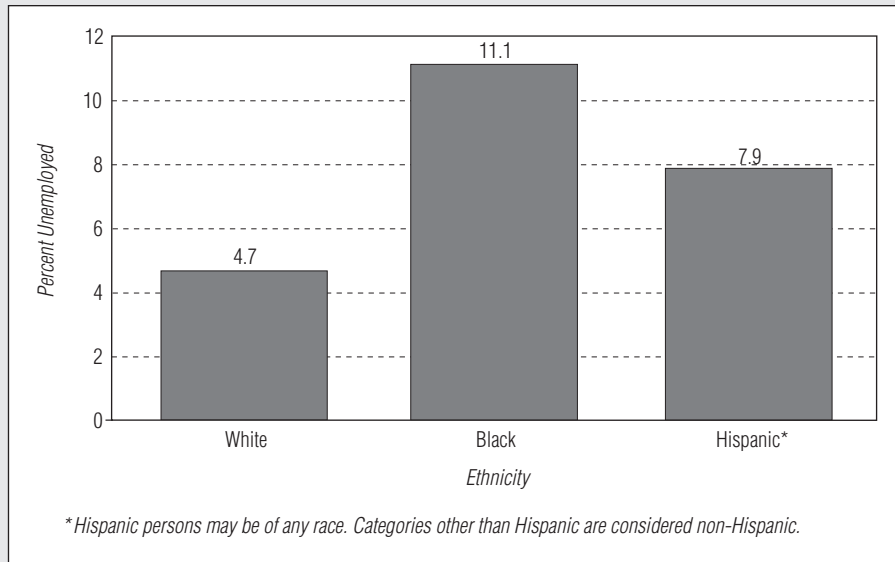
with school-age children—tend to have higher labor force participation rates than women in younger or older age groups. Even though married women have lower labor force participation rates than other women at most ages, married women ages 25–44 have higher labor force participation rates than all women ages 45 and older.

Now let's turn to the declining labor force participation rates for married men. A key contributor to this trend has been rising unemployment rates. However, unemployment does not threaten all men equally. As Exhibit 3-C shows, black and Hispanic men are significantly more likely than white men to be unemployed. In general, taking on the role of husband (and father) requires being able to earn an income. One reason for the relatively low rates of marriage among black and Hispanic men (shown in Exhibit 3-D) could be their relatively high unemployment rates. To the extent that a job is a prerequisite for a man to marry, ethnic differences in unemployment rates can help to explain ethnic differences in marital status among men in the United States.

Exhibit 3-C

Unemployment Rates by Ethnicity
Men Ages 18 Years
and Older

United States: 1996

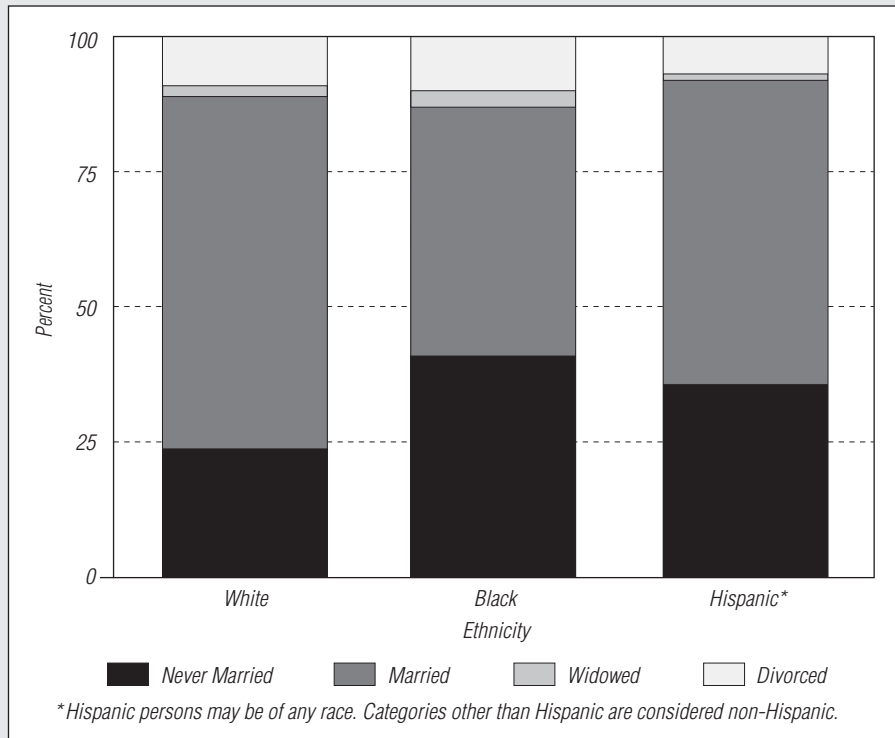


Source of data: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1997* (117th edition). Washington, DC, 1997.

Exhibit 3-D

Marital Status by Ethnicity
Men Ages 18 Years
and Older

United States: 1996



Source of data: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States: 1997* (117th edition). Washington, DC, 1997.

Questions for Further Study

1. What explanations other than age can account for the relatively greater labor force participation rates of married women with school-age children? Can you think of other reasons that could explain the age patterns of female labor force participation?
2. What might be some reasons that white men have lower unemployment rates than black or Hispanic men? What characteristics other than unemployment could explain ethnic differences in marital status?
3. Are ethnic differences in marital status and unemployment for women similar to those for men? Look in the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* for the data. Then speculate on some of the reasons for the patterns.

YOUR TURN

The intersection of gender, family, and work is where we see most clearly how expectations and beliefs can be translated into action. Locate at least one of each of the following types of couples in which both partners work full-time outside the home:

- Cohabiting heterosexual
- Cohabiting homosexual
- Newly married without children (married less than 1 year)
- Married with at least one child living at home
- Married without children (married 10 years or more)
- Stepfamily

Ask each person in each couple (partners must not be in each other's presence when answering these questions) to make a list of all the household chores that need to be done during the course of a week. Ask them to be as specific and exhaustive as possible (for example, "cleaning windows" rather than "cleaning the house"). After the lists are completed, ask each person to indicate which of these tasks he or she is primarily responsible for, which his or her partner is responsible for, and which are shared. Ask the participants also to estimate the total amount of time spent each week on all these tasks combined. Finally, ask them about how many hours they work outside the home during a typical week.

Compare responses of the following to see if you can find any differences in time each partner spends doing housework and the number of tasks for which each is responsible:

- Partners in the same couple
- Men and women
- Younger and older couples
- Married and cohabiting couples
- Couples with and without children at home
- Married and remarried couples
- Heterosexual and homosexual couples

Do the women still bear the primary responsibility for housework? Are household responsibilities more equitably split by certain types of couples? If partners within the same couple had different ideas about housework responsibilities, to what can you attribute this lack of agreement? Describe the tensions men and women experience when trying to balance work and home responsibilities.