

Strategies for Working with Dual-Career Couples in the Hope Focused Couples Approach

Joni L. Utley and Amy R. Robertson

[Regent University Hope Research Project](#)

Societal changes over the past few decades include a dramatic increase in the numbers of women in the workplace; women account for 47% of the U.S. labor force (U.S. Bureau of Labor, 2008). *Dual-career family*, a term introduced by Rapoport & Rapoport (1976), denotes a family structure in which the husband and wife simultaneously pursue active careers and family lives. More recent definitions describe the *dual-career couple* as two people who each have a career and a shared relationship (Arnold, 1997). *Career* is distinguished from the term *job*, as career involves a high level of commitment, specialized training, and involves a developmental sequence (Rapoport & Rapoport, 1976). Although there are many positive benefits associated with dual career couples (Rapoport & Rapoport, 1976; Bird & Schnurman-Crook, 2005; Haddock & Rattenborg, 2003; & Parker & Arthur, 2004), balancing the demands of work and home responsibilities contributes to increased stress and taxed coping resources in the marital relationship (Parker & Arthur, 2004). A couple's ability to manage these demands has important implications for marital satisfaction and marital conflict.

Multiple Identities

In dual-career marriages, partners each have commitments to their careers and to their families. Sense of self is interlinked with both these pursuits, as a career-minded spouse will have both a strong professional identity and family-identity. Threats to identity are generally perceived as very stressful and elicit self-protection responses (Thoits, 1991). Thus, when career and family commitments compete, intense conflict is likely to erupt as spouses seek to protect their senses of identity. Finding a satisfactory balance between family and professional identities is crucial for these couples.

Time, Responsibilities, and Values

The way in which dual-career couples devote their time and divide their responsibilities gives insight into the importance they place on work and family roles (Papp, 2000). A line of thinking that has gained traction in terms of helping dual-career couples negotiate their time is to re-conceptualize their lives as consisting of three careers – his, hers, and the career of the family (Levner, 2000). This model can be used in therapy to challenge the couples' values and promote a dialogue that goes deeper than basic delegation of tasks (Levner, 2000). Dual-careers can be a very complicated issue to address in therapy, as it involves attitudes about gender roles, a topic that is value-laden. Oftentimes, even couples who claim to be egalitarian have ingrained views about gender-specific roles within the family that underlie many of their conflicts. For Christian couples, gender-specific roles in the household may be part of their religious beliefs. The therapist must be careful to respect clients' values but to gently challenge attitudes that are inconsistent or contribute to the couple's conflicts.

Crossover of Stress

Research has consistently shown that job stressors have a negative impact on psychological well-being of not only the worker, but his/her partner as well. The most recent term used to describe this phenomenon in psychological literature is 'crossover' (Westman, 2002). Crossover of stress from one partner to another has been linked with decreased well-being and diminished marital satisfaction (Crossfield, Kinman, & Jones, 2005). Strategies to mitigate this crossover are particularly important with dual-career couples, as the crossover is bi-directional.

Benefits of Career/Family Identity

Despite the crossover of job stressors contributing to strains in the relationship, dual-career couples also report benefits to being dually employed (Haddock & Rattenborg, 2003). In addition to the financial gains of the double income, a majority of parents believe that holding both professional and parental roles made them better parents (Marshall & Barnett, 1993). Likewise, for women, the work-role may alleviate familial stressors, and contribute to a more egalitarian marital relationship (Haddock & Rattenborg, 2003) which can increase the quality of the relationship (Gottman, 1999). In working with these couples, assessing each partner's perceived benefits and struggles of their dual-identity can be essential in the understanding any conflicts or strengths in the relationship.

Case Vignette

Sarah, a thirty-year-old Latina female and Tom, a thirty-four-year-old Caucasian male present to couples therapy with complaints of frequent disagreements which they believe are due to their hectic schedules. Both are employed full time and also attend weekly church services. Tom reports growing up in a single parent home where his mother worked two jobs and raised him and his siblings in what he called a "strict Christian home." Sarah was raised in an intact, dual-career family. The couple has been married for just over six years. They have a four-year-old son and a two year old daughter. Both spouses claim that the other is disorganized and does not hold up his/her end of the housework. Tom stated that "Sarah leaves dishes in the sink, does not make the bed, and rarely cleans the house." The two rarely spend time together and their sexual intimacy has become almost non-existent. On weekends, when they do see each other, arguments usually ensue and the result is that the couple does not speak to each other for the rest of the day. Sarah also reports moderate levels of depressive symptoms. The couple would like to work on their communication and want be close to one another again.

Counseling Strategies to Increase Marital Solidarity with Dual Career Couples

- First examine your own biases and stereotypes concerning dual career families. This is a special case of gender-related diversity. What have you been taught growing up, in church or through the media that may influence how you perceive the couple?
- Be aware of the current literature and research findings on the benefits and challenges that couples in dual-career situations may face.
- Become familiar with the beliefs and traditions that people of cultures and ethnicities different than your own hold regarding gender roles and dual-career families. This can be accomplished through research and learning directly from your couple.
- Explore each partner's own thoughts, feelings, values and religious beliefs concerning gender roles and dual-career families.
- Explore the couple's ideas about gender-specific household chores and how their values have been shaped by their upbringing and the roles their parents filled.
- Help couples explore and adjust expectations about responsibilities and division of work that may be hindering the relationship.
- Help the couple with time management. Practical interventions that involve scheduling strategies such as those in the "closeness" chapter particularly the CLEAVE intervention (Worthington, 1999) may be particularly helpful.
- Correct misconceptions about dual-careers causing marital conflict/stress or taking a toll on the parent-child relationship (if applicable). Remember, the mother-child relationship has not been found to be harmed due to the mother's employment alone (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 1997), and recent research has found benefits in many dual-career families (Haddock & Rattenborg, 2003).
- Educate the couple about the unique impact that crossover of stress causes (Westman, 2002). Normalize this for them, and use the psychoeducation as a tool to motivate the couple to take practical steps in adjusting their behaviors to match their values.
- Explore the strains and benefits in the couple's lives so that their strengths and areas where they may need extra work can be emphasized.
- Adjust your interventions based on the unique challenges the couple faces. For example, if the couple's interactions tend to be brief exchanges due to a hectic schedule, extra time might be spend on communication and intimacy interventions.

References

- Arnold, J. A. (1997). *Managing careers into the 21st century*. London: Paul Chapman.
- Bird, G. W., & Schnurman-Crook, A. (2005). Professional identity and coping behaviors in dual-career couples. *Family Relations, 54*, 145-160.
- Crossfield, S., Kinman, G., & Jones, F. (2005). Crossover of occupational stress in dual-career couples: The role of work demands and supports, job commitment and marital communication. *Community, Work & Family, 8*, 211-232.
- Gottman, J. M. (1999). *The marriage clinic: A scientifically-based marital therapy*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Haddock, S. A., & Rattenborg, K. (2003). Benefits and challenges of dual-earning: Perspectives of successful couples. *The American Journal of Family Therapy, 31*, 325-344.
- Levner, L. (2000). The three-career family. In *Couples on the fault line: New directions for therapists* (pp. 29-47). New York: Guilford Press.
- Marshall, N. L., & Barnett, R. C. (1993). Work-family strains and gains among two-earner couples. *Journal of Community Psychology, 21*, 64-78.
- NICHHS Early Child Care Research Network (1997). The effect of child care on infant-mother attachment security: Results of the NICHD study of early child care. *Child Development, 68*(5), 860-879.
- Papp, P. (2000). *Couples on the fault line: New directions for therapists*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Parker, P., & Arthur, M. B. (2004). Giving voice to the dual-career couple. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 32*, 3-23.

- Rapoport, R., & Rapoport, R. (1976). *Dual-career families re-examined*. London: Martin Robertson and Co., Ltd.
- Thoits, P. A. (1991). On merging identity theory and stress research. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 54, 101–112.
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2008). *Labor force participation rates, 1975-2008* (Unpublished tables). Washington, DC: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Retrieved March 23, 2009, from <http://www.bls.gov/opub/home.htm>
- Westman, M. (2002). Gender asymmetry in crossover research. In *Gender, work stress and health* (pp. 129-150). Washington, DC: APA Publications.
- Worthington, E. L. (1999). *Hope-focused marriage counseling*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.