COMMENTARY ON STUDIES OF GENDER-MIX
IN LABOR MARKET RESEARCH

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What Was Said

In commenting on the papers by Nieva and Tenopyr I find myself, in a sense, somewhat conflicted. On the one hand, there is almost nothing in these papers that I can argue with or that I can even question. Both authors have highlighted and stressed some significant issues that we all need to be concerned with. Nieva's highlighting of the problems associated with the two-career family, and the difficulty of being a single parent in terms of career implications, should particularly be noted. We have, of course, seen considerable concern in recent years with the former group but comparatively little that I know of with regard to the latter. It is time that we started to think about work implications of being a single parent. I am delighted to see this issue confronted.

I am also pleased to see Mary Tenopyr, a past president of the Division of Industrial and Organizational Psychology of the American Psychological Association, cite the impact of economic (i.e., inflation) and technological variables on human affairs. These variables are real, they are important and they do influence how we think, how we feel, and what we do. While I am not sure that I agree with all of her discussion (e.g., I think that changes in our aspiration levels may moderate and perhaps eventually decrease inflation), I am glad to see that she has brought up these matters to help us generate a wider range of testable hypotheses to work with.

What Was Not Said

Yet I must confess that that I do have some problems with both these papers for what they did not say. I also, perhaps, have some
problems with the general logic underlying what I see as the major thrusts of our contemporary concerns with female labor-market participation. Let me be more specific.

In both of the papers, by Nieva and by Tenopyr, I see an underlying assumption that women = women; that black women = middle-class women = white women = Hispanic women, etc. In fact, I see the same assumption underlying much of our research and policy in this field. Is this a reasonable assumption? I think not; no more than the assumption that black men = middle-class men = white men = Hispanic men. In some situations, perhaps, the assumption is an adequate one; but certainly not in many others. After all, millions of women at the lower end of the economic scale held full-time jobs for many years before the impact of recent societal changes caught our attention. For them, as much as for their husbands, needs for income in order to survive were and still are much more important than the needs we hear expressed today from women with higher-level needs and backgrounds. I mean not to deprecate either group but only to plead for recognition of diversity among women as well as men and for the use of adjectival qualifiers when appropriate.

A second lack in these papers, and perhaps also in the field at large, concerns the continuing tendency to talk about female labor-market participation and the relevant cultural factors involved without talking about male labor-market participation and the relevant cultural factors involved there. How can one talk about one group apart from the other? After all, males could not have done the things they have done career-wise, both positive and negative, without the coerced or non-coerced assent of women. We are all in this together, men and women, and changes in one group affect changes in the other group. I do not believe that it is possible to understand or predict what will happen to women unless we also understand what will happen to men, and vice versa.

My third concern has perhaps a somewhat broader base in a societal sense. Let me begin by first stating that I believe strongly that we need to increase the ability of women to achieve their work potential. To this end, we need to focus on organizational and social sources of discrimination, the possible internal motivational problems of women in attaining their work goals, and on ways in which we can help women and men meet their child-bearing responsibilities while women attain their work goals. Our focus on work goals for men and women, organizational productivity, personal job satisfaction and, presumably (but not always), life satisfaction are laudable goals, all of them; they are to be defended strongly and not be apologized for at all.

Work-Family Conflict: The Major Question

What is my problem then? It may be briefly summarized. I believe that the work-family conflict is the major question of our