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Conflicting evidence regarding married couples’ time use trends has recently emerged in the literature. A critical review of this literature suggests that variations in data quality and methodological approaches may be responsible for many of the observed differences. Capitalizing on the insights gained from this review, a trend analysis of couples’ time use is presented in this paper. The analysis is based on two cross-sections of time diary data collected from two-parent, two-child households. The results suggest that the relationships between socioeconomic variables and couples’ time use changed during the period from 1977-78 to 1987-88. On average, these changes lead to an increase of over seven hours per week in married women’s productive work time (i.e., market work plus household work). Correspondingly, the productive work time of husbands increased by an average of three and one-half hours per week. Both increases came at the expense of time that was formerly spent in more leisure-oriented activities.

There is a growing debate among family scholars regarding how and why household time-use patterns are changing. Optimistic accounts show that during the past couple of decades women increased the time they spent in mar-

1Financial support for the collection of the data used in this study was provided by the Utah State Agricultural Experiment Station and the University of Utah Research Committee. A grant of computer time from the Utah Supercomputing Institute, which is funded by the State of Utah and the IBM Corporation, is gratefully acknowledged. Additional support has been provided by the Department of Home Economics and Consumer Education at Utah State University where Dr. Zick was on leave during the 1989-90 academic year. W. Keith Bryant, Ken R. Smith, and an anonymous reviewer each gave helpful comments on an earlier draft of this article.
ket work while decreasing the time they spent in household work. Concurrently, men decreased their market work and increased their home work contributions—particularly in the area of child care (Douthitt, 1989; Gershuny and Robinson, 1988; Robinson, 1988a, 1989). This literature leaves one with the impression that families are profiting from a change in sex roles and the resulting redistribution of market and nonmarket work. Children benefit by spending time with both parents while husbands and wives gain because they have more time for leisure activities (Robinson, 1989, 1988a).

In contrast, more pessimistic accounts show that while married women have been entering the labor force in increasing numbers during the past twenty years, there has been little decline in their housework commitments. To the extent that their household work time has declined, there was generally no concomitant increase in the time their husbands spent in housework (Berardo, Shehan, and Leslie, 1987; Hochschild, 1989; Kingston and Nock, 1987; Vanek, 1974). The vision one has after reading this literature is a troubling one. It suggests that married women are increasingly feeling time pressures from two jobs—the one they do in the market and the one they do at home (i.e., what Arlie Hochschild has termed the "second shift"). In this picture, husbands seem unable or unwilling to make adjustments in their time use to relieve their wives' time pressures and so the increase in the wives' productive work comes at the expense of their ever-shrinking leisure activities.

Given such disparities in the description of family time-use trends, it is not surprising to find that there is also general disagreement regarding possible explanations for the observed trends. While family economists argue that shifts in household time allocation are attributable to changes in household technology, asset income, and the wage rates of men and women (Becker, 1965; Gronau, 1977; Kooreman and Kapteyn, 1987), family sociologists appeal to changes in sex role ideologies, shifts in relative resource distribution (between wives and husbands), and adjustment in household demands (Coverman, 1985; Barnett and Baruch, 1987; Hochschild, 1989). Yet a third group, social demographers, argue that life-cycle stage and changes in household composition are the crucial factors that explain any movements in household time use (Gershuny and Robinson, 1988; Rexroat and Shehan, 1977; Robinson, 1988).

How have family time-use patterns changed in recent years? To what extent are the observed descriptive differences simply a function of variations in analysis control variables, sampling restrictions, data collection methodologies, and/or time-use definitions? How much of the observed changes can actually be attributed to shifts in economic, sociological, and demographic factors? To answer these questions accurately, one must give careful attention to both methodological and theoretical concerns. This paper critically reviews the literature on historical changes in household time use.