Commitment to and Role Changes in Dual Career Families

Robert A. Apostal
University of North Dakota

Carol Helland
Grand Forks, North Dakota Public Schools

Children born between the years of 1946 and 1964 comprise about one-third of the nation's population today. Though these "Baby Boomers" were socialized primarily in traditional households, a distinctive number of events and experiences have shaped this group and influenced their definitions of family life. They were the first generation to experience the contraceptive revolution, to establish new norms of fertility patterns, to expect paid work as a central feature in women's lives, to have women attend college and graduate school in record numbers, and to experience the societal impact and consciousness raising associated with the Women's Liberation Movement (Wattenberg, 1986).

One highly significant result of these events and experiences has been the emergence of the dual career family in the United States (Gilbert & Rachlin, 1987). This new family structure wherein both the husband and wife espouse long-term commitment to their careers while maintaining a family that includes children has developed during the last two decades as a viable and dynamic alternative to traditional (Rapoport & Rapoport, 1971) and dual earner families (Sekaran, 1986). However, this development has not been without problems; the dual career family has produced conflict and stress among its members over the roles, tasks and responsibilities that such a framework requires (Bebbington, 1973; O'Neil, Fishman, & Kinsella-Shaw, 1987).

Requests for reprints should be sent to Robert A. Apostal, Department of Counseling, 308 Montgomery Hall, Box 8255, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, ND 58202.
Ideological Commitment and Negotiation of Roles

Nonetheless, partners in dual career families strive toward achieving an equality of worth and opportunity for each other, including equality of obligations, entitlements and rewards (Smith & Reid, 1986). Moreover, they marry with the understanding that both spouses have strong temporal, intellectual and emotional commitments to their respective careers (Rice, 1979). Also, they embrace a notion of interdependence and agree to give of their skills, energy and time to both work and family (Prince, 1987; Moen, 1982). Conscious choices, a self-understanding of motives, and mutual agreement on the nature of the relationship are implicit (Jones & Jones, 1980). Multiplicity in roles is seen as positive and desirable (Hellerstein, 1987). The partners make a commitment to the equalization of power and domestic responsibilities, and to each other's career advancement (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1984).

Positive characteristics related to such an ideological commitment are not always achieved in practice (Goldenberg & Goldenberg, 1984). Couples do not have role models (Campbell, 1987), conflict resolution skills (Jordan, Cobb & McCully, 1989) or adequate normative guidelines (Hopkins & White, 1978) to negotiate work and family roles. Their childhood socialization, which conditioned patterns of role separation, makes role negotiation difficult as well (Ericksen, Yancey & Ericksen, 1979). Actually, dual career couples' ability to negotiate the work and family dichotomy varies greatly from couple to couple, though general types of role structures are evolving (Hall & Hall, 1979).

The process of role negotiation requires compromise and flexibility from both partners and a willingness to experiment and innovate (Maples, 1981). It is crucial that a perceived equity in compromises be experienced by both partners in the negotiation process (Rice, 1979). Moreover the negotiation of roles is evolutionary, with the goal of equity and balance at the forefront (Rice, 1979; Young & Willmott, 1973), but with an appreciation that distinct gender differences may still result (Pleck, 1977) to preserve individual identity and self-esteem (Rapoport & Rapoport, 1976).

The Problem

The literature suggests that dual career families may be a high risk group and that a better understanding of role negotiation in