

## MARITAL EQUALITY AND SATISFACTION IN STAY-AT-HOME MOTHER AND STAY-AT-HOME FATHER FAMILIES\*

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**ABSTRACT:** Two recent studies have focused on marital equality and satisfaction in couples where one of the spouses stays at home full-time with the children and the other spouse works full-time outside of the home. One study looked at couples with a stay-at-home mother/career father while the other study examined couples with a stay-at-home father/career mother. Similarities as well as differences emerged between the two samples when comparing the experiences of these couples. In general, couples in both arrangements shared positive feelings about their marriages, although the mothers across both samples reported higher levels of stress and exhaustion than fathers.

**KEY WORDS:** stay-at-home mother; stay-at-home father; marital equality.

Very little is known about today's families in which one parent stays home full-time with the children and the other parent works outside the home, perhaps because they make up a small percentage of the population. Traditionally, it has been the mother who stays home with the children, but in recent years some fathers are staying home full-time with the children while the mother is employed outside the home. Families where mothers stay at home full-time now account for about 6–7% of the population (Barnett, 1996). The number of families with stay-at-home fathers is even smaller, accounting for about 1–2% of the population (Rabin, 1996). A few studies have investigated stay-at-home father families, but they were a subset of a larger sample

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(Grbich, 1992, Radin, 1988, 1984; Rosenwasser & Patterson, 1985). Small sample sizes and diverse circumstances of the studies resulted in fairly mixed data telling us very little about these families. Most of the research on stay-at-home mothers was conducted in the 1960s and 1970s with only a few studies available in the early 1980s. Since that time, there have been many advances by women toward equality in public and private sectors and a movement by men to be more involved with their children. With the changes in traditional gender roles and shifts in societal norms, it is likely that marital satisfaction and equality are different for these "modern traditional" families than in past decades (Kimmel & Messmer, 1989; Starrels, 1994).

The existence of traditional, stay-at-home mother arrangements and the non-traditional, stay-at-home father arrangements pose interesting questions about similarities and differences in marital equality and satisfaction depending on which gender assumes primary responsibility for the home. One of the strongest predictors of marital satisfaction is equality within a couple's relationship (Gottman, 1999), and four primary components of marital equality that address issues of gender and power in intimate relationships are (1) division of household labor and child care, (2) balance of power, (3) value placed on responsibilities, and (4) individual well-being (Schwartz, Patterson, & Steen, 1995). This study investigated how these components of marital equality differ among stay-at-home mother and stay-at-home father families.

### **DIVISION OF LABOR AND CHILDCARE**

To our knowledge, there is no research to date on the division of household labor and the sharing of childcare in stay-at-home father/career mother families. Research on families in which the husband works and the wife either stays at home or also works indicates that husbands are not sharing the burden of housework equally with their wives (Almeida, Maggs, & Galambos, 1993; Blair & Johnson, 1992; Gunter & Gunter, 1990; Starrels, 1994; Zimmerman & Addison, 1997). Despite the substantial increase of mothers' participation in the labor market over recent decades, an equal increase in working fathers' participation in household and childcare activities has not occurred. In fact, women who work outside the home spend three times as many hours doing housework as their husbands (Berardo, Shehan, & Leslie, 1987). Hochschild's landmark study (1989) found that cumulatively women work an extra month each year in household labor. In addition to housework, research also indicates that parental tasks are assumed

disproportionately by mothers (MacDermid, Huston, & McHale; 1990). Fathers are more likely to take part in child care if requested by mothers, implying that mothers are responsible for the planning and management of children while fathers “help out” (Barnett & Baruch, 1987; Crouter, Perry-Jenkins, Huston, & McHale, 1987; Leslie, Brownstone, & Anderson, 1991).

The balance in division of labor is challenging to discern when one spouse is at home while the other is employed full-time outside the home. It may be assumed that the stay-at-home spouse will accomplish household tasks during the day in addition to caring for the children; yet during the times that the career spouse is also at home, what are the assumptions about division of household labor and childcare? It may be less a question of who is doing more work overall and more a question of how chores and childcare are divided when both spouses are available, as well as how much each spouse feels valued and appreciated for what he or she does.

### **BALANCE OF POWER**

Research has suggested that the balance of power in American families is largely determined by earning power (Andre, 1981). Some have speculated that earning power is the key to household division of labor with the more powerful (money-earning) spouse doing less domestic work (Starrels, 1994). This theory leads to the hypothesis that if the father is the family’s income provider, he is the more powerful spouse and may be doing little domestic work. Schwartz and colleagues (1995) argue that wives who are less financially stable are the least likely to achieve marital equality and shared power. Research findings also show that the more time wives spend in the labor force in relation to their husbands, the more they view their marriage as equitable (Kollock, Blumstein, & Schwartz, 1994). An important question in terms of marital equality is how stay-at-home mother or father families view their marital equality since one spouse is financially dependent on the other.

### **VALUE PLACED ON RESPONSIBILITIES**

The value placed on responsibilities is directly linked with power. If fathers working out of the home hold more power than stay-at-home mothers financially, it is likely that they may be valued more by society

accordingly. Research consistently shows that the homemaker role is inherently viewed as low in status (Amundsen, 1971; Andre, 1981; Gavron, 1983). Fethke and Hauserman (1979) specifically addressed the invisibility of the "housewife," noting that she is not even acknowledged in the Department of Labor statistics because she has no income. Without an "occupation," the housewife is not eligible for benefits such as disability, unemployment, vacation, or sick leave. Alimony or maintenance has decreased across the country to about two years, often leaving stay-at-home mothers unable to effectively support themselves after a divorce. In addition, spending years as a homemaker can make women vulnerable to age and gender discrimination if they decide to work outside the home later in life (Andre, 1981). If families value the at home spouse equally with the career spouse, therefore not following society's lead, they may be far more effective at balancing power.

### **INDIVIDUAL WELL-BEING**

Although there is little research on the individual well-being of stay-at-home fathers, research indicates that stay-at-home mothers show more signs of stress than women who work outside of the home (Bird, 1993; Barnett, 1996). It has been found that stay-at-home mothers experience higher levels of depression when husbands offer less assistance with household chores, whereas when husbands offer more help with housework, there are no adverse effects on male levels of depression (Blair & Johnson, 1992). In fact, the main factor found to be related to a decrease in employed mothers' role strain is the husbands' willingness to share in household responsibilities (Pleck, 1985; Repetti, Matthews, & Waldron, 1989). Individual well-being is directly affected by the sharing of power and equitable division of labor.

### **METHODS**

Two recent studies, one on stay-at-home mothers and one on stay-at-home fathers, focused specifically on marital equality and satisfaction in families where one of the parents stays at home full-time while the other parent works outside the home (Zimmerman, Seng, Northern, & Grogan, 1998; Zimmerman, Northern, Seng, & Grogan, 1999). These studies were very similar in design and methodology. A comparison of the findings from these previous studies provides insight into

similarities and differences of these family arrangements regarding marital equality when mothers and fathers fill different roles within the family.

### *Participants*

The Zimmerman (1998; 1999) studies used the same qualitative methodology. One study focused on stay-at-home mother/career father families (N = 24) and the other study focused on stay-at-home father/career mother families (N = 26). Participants for each study were randomly selected from national mailing lists of stay-at-home parent magazines (*Welcome Home: A Publication in Support of Mothers Who Choose to Stay at Home* and *Full-Time Dads' Journal*). All participating couples met the criteria of the studies: (1) they were married with at least one preschool age child at home, and (2) one parent was at home full-time with the children while the other parent worked full-time out of the home as the primary income provider.

There were many similarities in the demographics of the families in the two studies. In the stay-at-home mother/career father families (N = 24), the mean age for mothers was 35.75 and the mean age for fathers was 37.16. The years involved in this family arrangement ranged from 4 to 21 years. Four of the families had two children in the home, three families had three children in the home, four families had four children in the home, and one family had six children in the home. Of the 12 mothers in the study, the highest level of education was as follows: one had completed high school, two had Associate in Arts degrees, six had Bachelor's degrees, three had Master's degrees, and one had a PhD (Doctor of Philosophy). The fathers' highest education level included four with Bachelor's degrees, three with Master's degrees, two with a PhD, and three fathers' education levels were unreported. The mean family income was \$71,640. Fathers' occupations included two accountants, construction supervisor, computer programmer, benefits consultant, anesthesiologist, financial analyst, landscape specialist, research analyst, engineer, and executive. All 12 mothers reported their occupation as full-time mother or homemaker.

In the stay-at-home father/career mother families (N = 26), the mean age for mothers was 35 and the mean age for fathers was 37.5. The time involved in this family arrangement ranged from three months to seven years. Eight of the families had one child in the home, two families had two children at home, and two families had three children at home. The mothers' highest education level included four with Bache-

lor's degrees, five with Master's degrees, and four with a PhD. The fathers' highest education level was one with two years of junior college, one with an AA degree, four with Bachelor's degrees, and seven with Master's degrees. Mothers' occupations included two physicians, two attorneys, two in marketing, two managers, a teacher, certified public accountant, fundraiser, and psychotherapist. Ten fathers reported their primary occupation as full-time father or homemaker, two reported as writers, and one reported as a consultant.

In both studies, telephone interviews averaging one hour in length were conducted individually with each spouse. Participants were asked broad, personal questions about their responsibilities and feelings regarding their role within the family (e.g., division of household labor and child care, balance of power, value placed on responsibilities, individual well-being, marital satisfaction, and so on) and were asked to scale their responses. After each taped interview was transcribed, two independent coding teams analyzed and coded the interview data according to common themes reflecting the majority of the material collected (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). From the coded interviews, themes and sub-themes were identified for each study.

### *Data Analysis*

When comparing the themes that emerged from each study, several similarities as well as differences were evident between the two types of family arrangements. The following analysis is a summary of the comparisons.

### *Similarities in Themes*

1. Mothers' experience high levels of exhaustion. Mothers in both family arrangements (stay-at-home and career) expressed having higher levels of exhaustion than their partners. On a scale of 1–10, mothers who stay at home averaged two points higher on the exhaustion scale than their career husbands, and career mothers averaged 1.6 points higher than their stay-at-home husbands.
2. Positive feelings about self and marriage. Almost all participants reported high levels of satisfaction with their marriage in addition to feeling positive about their individual self. Twenty-one of the mothers and 18 of the fathers in both samples

reported feeling very satisfied with their marriage, and eight participants reported feeling satisfied. In the stay-at-home mother couples, nine of the mothers and all of the fathers reported average to high self-esteem. Similarly, in the stay-at-home father couples, 12 of the mothers and 12 of the fathers reported average to high self-esteem. Most participants also expressed satisfaction with their efforts as well as the efforts of their spouse. In the division of household labor, 10 of the stay-at-home mothers reported being satisfied to very satisfied, and 6 of the career fathers reported being satisfied with the other career fathers expressing the desire to help more. In the stay-at-home father couples, 10 of the fathers and 12 of the mothers reported being satisfied to very satisfied with the division of household labor. Across both kinds of family arrangements, participants spoke about the cooperative spirit of their relationship, and most believed they had strong communication skills.

3. Shared value on at-home parental care. All couples reported a commitment and value placed on one parent staying at home with the children. Even though their family income would be higher if both parents were working, most couples believed that the financial and other sacrifices were worthwhile to allow their child(ren) to benefit from at-home care.
4. Feelings that society does not appreciate or value the stay-at-home parent. Career spouses of both genders shared the view that society does not respect the work of the stay-at-home parent. Stay-at-home parents expressed feeling society's disapproval for not doing more challenging or interesting work. In the case of stay-at-home fathers, couples reported an additional response of confusion or fascination because of the uniqueness of their arrangement.
5. Stay-at-home parent experiences loneliness. In both family arrangements, the stay-at-home parent (mother or father) averaged twice as high a level of loneliness than his or her career partner. The stay-at-home mothers averaged 3.4 on a scale of 1–10, and their career husbands averaged 1.7. The stay-at-home fathers averaged 4.6 on the loneliness scale, and their career wives averaged 2.4. This finding is also indicative of a higher loneliness for stay-at-home fathers which will be discussed later.
6. Feelings of stress from high expectations. All couples reported

stress from expectations that were too high. Mothers and fathers in both arrangements believed that the frustrations they felt were primarily from self-imposed expectations.

### *Differences in Themes*

1. Decision as to which parent would stay at home with children while the other worked outside the home. In the stay-at-home father/career mother families, all couples reported choosing this arrangement based on the practicality of the mothers' salary and benefits. Most of these couples did not discuss this arrangement prior to marriage, whereas in the stay-at-home mother/career father families, 11 of the 12 couples reported agreeing on their arrangement prior to marriage. Additionally, the personality of both parents was a consideration for which parent would stay home with children in the stay-at-home father/career mother families but was not mentioned in the stay-at-home mother/career mother families. Fathers who stayed home with the children were more often described as loners, and their career mother spouses were described as more social.
2. Long-term commitment to this arrangement. Most of the stay-at-home mother couples planned to continue their arrangement long term, in contrast to the stay-at-home father couples who were less clear about a long-term commitment to their arrangement. This finding may reflect differences in how the couples came to their decision initially, as well as feelings that the stay-at-home fathers may be a temporary situation. When asked the number of years they had maintained their arrangement, the stay-at-home father couples reported between three months and seven years, whereas the stay-at-home mother couples reported between four and twenty-one years for their arrangement. On average, the stay-at-home mothers had six more years in their role than did the stay-at-home fathers, and the career fathers had 5.4 more years in their role than the career mothers.
3. Primary influence for their decision. Most of the stay-at-home mother/career father families reported that religion and their family were the primary influences for choosing their arrangement. None of the stay-at-home father/career mother families cited religion as the primary influence, instead reporting personal choice as the main factor.

4. Stress level of career parent. Most of the career mothers reported higher levels of exhaustion than did the career fathers, averaging 2.9 points higher on the exhaustion scale. A factor that could contribute to this is that career mothers averaged 12.7 more hours per week as the primary care provider for the children than did the career fathers. The majority of career mothers said they believed that their job added stress to their family, whereas only one career father reported he felt that way. Additionally, more career mothers than career fathers reported feelings of stress and ambivalence about not being at home full time. Career mothers reported feeling a personal struggle between the financial responsibilities of working out of the home and desire to be at home.
5. Social and community relationships of stay-at-home parent. When asked if they socialize with other stay-at-home parents, 11 of the 12 stay-at-home mothers reported that they did, whereas only 8 of the 13 stay-at-home fathers said that they did even if not very often. All of the stay-at-home mothers reported being involved with out of the home activities including volunteering in the community. In contrast, only 9 of the 13 stay-at-home fathers reported being involved in other activities. This higher level of isolation could help explain why stay-at-home fathers reported greater feelings of loneliness and boredom than stay-at-home mothers.
6. Reaction from family, friends, and society. Stay-at-home father/career mother families reported receiving less initial approval for their arrangement and said they felt like they had to prove themselves to others. Stay-at-home fathers reported having to resist more gender stereotyped pressure to “be a man” and “have a real job.” Friends and co-workers told stay-at-home fathers that they believed their situation was a temporary arrangement. The stay-at-home father/career mother families reported feeling that they had a natural arrangement but that their family and peers believed it was unnatural. Similar disapproving or cautionary reactions were not reported by stay-at-home mother/career father families. Another interesting difference is that all of the stay-at-home mothers listed “stay-at-home mother” as their occupation, whereas four of the stay-at-home fathers listed something other than “stay-at-home father,” perhaps suggesting that they were less comfortable declaring their stay-at-home job.

It is worth noting that in the two samples, the stay-at-home mother families had more children in the home than did the stay-at-home father families. Eight of the stay-at-home fathers had just one child in the home, whereas none of the stay-at-home mothers had just one child, ranging instead from two to six children in their care.

## DISCUSSION

The similarities and differences in these stay-at-home mother/career father and stay-at-home father/career mother couples offer interesting insights concerning marital equality and satisfaction. Although the sample sizes are relatively small, confidence in the findings is strengthened through the richness of the qualitative data and the consistent recurrence of common themes across families. Several themes are evident when making comparisons between these two types of family arrangements.

A salient theme that emerges throughout the two studies is that mothers in both family arrangements consistently report higher levels of stress and exhaustion than their spouses. For instance, the stay-at-home mothers were more exhausted than the stay-at-home fathers. Interestingly, career fathers reported the lowest level of exhaustion for any group possibly indicating that they did not feel over-burdened by the demands of their spouse or society to do more.

Another contributing factor to the mothers' higher level of exhaustion could be the way women are socialized in our society to put the needs of others ahead of their own. Mothers may spend the majority of their time tending to the needs of their children and husbands at the expense of their own needs, resulting in higher levels of exhaustion. Men, on the other hand, may feel less guilt about taking care of themselves and therefore be better able to justify time for relaxation and self-renewal. In summary, this study supports the research that mothers tend to assume disproportionate responsibility for child care and housework (MacDermid et al., 1990; Pleck, 1985; Robinson, 1988; Zimmerman & Addison, 1997) regardless of mothers working out of the home or not.

The career mothers in this study averaged 12.7 more hours of childcare each week than the career fathers, which may also contribute to the higher levels of exhaustion reported by career mothers. This increased time (12.7 hours) could be her feeling obligated to get home and participate in housework and childcare or simply a desire to be

home more with the children. Additionally, when both parents were at home, mothers assumed the role of primary caregiver in both families.

Stay-at-home mothers reported societal messages that they were “wasting their education” by being home with children. Career mothers reported feeling judged for not being home full-time. These “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” societal messages ring true in the welfare reform talks which give a strong message that “welfare moms” must work and get off welfare. Yet, many religious organizations subscribe to a stay-at-home mother only arrangement in order to be a good and loving mother. These mixed, and for many unattainable, messages contribute to women’s feelings of ambivalence, guilt, and fatigue.

A second major theme noted is that regardless of which gender is primarily at home with the children, couples report high levels of satisfaction with their marriages. Several factors seem to contribute to this finding. The couples have shared values about how to raise their children, they are content and able to live on one income, they value and respect the work and contributions of their spouse, they are mostly satisfied with the division of household labor and child care, and they have good communication skills. Additionally, the balance of power in these couples is perceived to be largely equitable.

Because these couples agree that one parent should be at home with the children, there appears to be strength in the relationship through shared commitment to values. Although there were differences in how the couples came to this agreement, all couples reported being very satisfied with their arrangement. Most of the stay-at-home mother/career father couples entered their marriages knowing that the mother would stay home with the children. In many cases, their own family backgrounds had this arrangement, and the women were looking forward to doing the same in their own lives. Religious beliefs were a primary influence that guided the stay-at-home mother/career fathers’ decisions prior to marriage.

On the other hand, the stay-at-home father/career mother couples came to their decision in a different way. They, too, placed a high value on a parent being at home with the children, but the father became the most likely parent to do this because of his personality as well as the mother’s ability to secure a desirable income for the family. Most couples acknowledged that despite the educational level and earning potential of each spouse, as a family they were able and willing to live on less income to allow for one parent to be home with the children. It is imperative to note that all couples in this study have middle to upper incomes. Couples with lower to middle incomes with similar

values cannot make these same choices because two incomes are necessary for their family.

Despite the low value society places on the work of the homemaker (Andre, 1981; Gavron, 1983), these couples report mutual respect and appreciation for the at home work of their partner. Both the mother and father homemakers felt valued by their career spouses and reported average to high levels of self-esteem. This feeling of respect and value may be the result of good communication skills among the couples. These couples may represent a group highly satisfied with their arrangements given that they subscribe to magazines that support their choice. This high satisfaction with arrangement may influence their positive feelings.

Credit must be given to the feminist movement as we observe today's families striving for a more equal division of parental responsibilities and housework. The couples in these two studies are examples of how a new "cultural ideal of role sharing" (LaRossa, Gordon, Wilson, Bairan, & Jaret, 1991; Starrels, 1994) is contributing to marital satisfaction even in traditional arrangements. Although these couples admit they still have work to do regarding equity in the division of labor, they are largely satisfied with the balance they have worked out so far.

A third theme emerging from this study is that stay-at-home fathers are less likely to network within their community. Compared with the stay-at-home mothers, stay-at-home fathers were less involved with activities outside of the home. Fewer fathers volunteered in the community or socialized with other stay-at-home parents. These findings could be attributed in part to the way men are socialized to be independent and able to handle things on their own. As reported by the stay-at-home father couples, many of the fathers were described as loners. The fathers' isolation could also indicate less comfort with their role in the family resulting in a reluctance to reach out to others and risk disapproval or rejection. Stay-at-home fathers are also less likely to find other men who stay at home to share experiences with and may prefer isolation to socializing with other stay-at-home moms. Because the stay-at-home father family is a newer arrangement in our society and very few in numbers, there are few role models for these fathers and less opportunities to network with people with whom they can identify.

A fourth theme evident in this study highlights that societal messages seem to reflect minimal respect or support to stay-at-home parent

families. Despite the rhetoric of politicians, policy makers, and community leaders, American society continues to demonstrate low regard for children and child care providers. This attitude is seen in the grossly inadequate wages offered to child care providers and lack of quality of subsidized childcare. Stay-at-home parents have to work harder to feel good about their choice because they receive little validation from society for the work they are doing. As evidenced in these two studies, both mothers and fathers felt disapproval from society. However, they did feel support and appreciation from their spouses (which likely contributed to greater satisfaction with their marriage). As mentioned previously, society gives mixed and largely negative messages to all of women's choices (staying at home and working out of the home) concerning work and home.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR THERAPY**

There are obvious implications for therapists working with couples addressing childcare, employment, division of household labor, and balance of power across a variety of arrangements. Therapists must be aware of their own assumptions and biases regarding different kinds of work/family arrangements. Therapists must examine their own preconceived judgments and assumptions based on family/work arrangements and be aware of societal assumptions influencing clients. Society (e.g., the media) presents an abundance of negative assumptions about the ways families structure their work/family balance (Holcomb, 1998). Therapists can counter these negative messages by being informed and not integrating negative stereotypes. Acknowledgment and support for a variety of family arrangements and encouraging couples to achieve equality and marital satisfaction across arrangements is imperative. Couples seeking marital therapy can benefit from therapeutic approaches that directly confront the larger context of negative societal assumptions about how parents are supposed to handle the challenges of balancing family life with career. When couples describe their feelings of stress, inadequacy, and exhaustion from trying to fulfill endless expectations, therapists can make overt the cultural framework that has contributed to those pressures and expectations. For instance, therapists can point out the societal stereotypes that affect dual-earner couples such as stereotypes that they lack commitment to their children, are more concerned about large cars and big homes than being

home with their children, that they work 50 to 60 hours a week while their children are in endless daycare, and that these families experience high levels of marital conflict due to their hectic lives. These stereotypes do not reflect the reality for most dual-earners and contribute to negative feelings and guilt in these families. These feelings can have a negative influence on equality and marital satisfaction.

It is important for therapists to be well read and aware of current and sophisticated research concerning dual-earner couples. For instance, the work of Barnett (1996) and Schwartz (1994) reveal that many dual-earner couples are sharing both the public and private spheres of their lives, are highly committed to their children, work reasonable hours, and their children benefit greatly from quality day care (Holcomb, 1998). They are involved in the home, chores, and the loving and meaningful work of raising their children as well as being involved in their community. They are giving to their community through their occupations, and earning an income for their family. Despite some rhetoric that dual-earner couples have the possibility of one person staying at home full-time if they really wanted to, it is important for therapists to be aware that sixty percent of women in dual-earner couples have husbands that earn less than \$15,000 a year (Women's Bureau, U.S. Department of Labor, 1995). These women are giving to their families financially as part of being a good and loving mother.

Therapists working with stay-at-home father couples should also challenge stereotypic assumptions they may have. For instance, therapists might make the assumption that the mother is very career-driven, that she is more interested in her career than her children, or that the father is unable or incapable of holding a job. The limited research on stay-at-home father families indicates that the reality of most of these couples is far from these stereotypes. These working mothers are loving mothers who are working to earn money as part of their mothering, and these fathers have made the practical decision to stay home with the children. Again, it is important for therapists to not conduct these therapy sessions with assumptions and stereotypes, but to ask meaningful questions about the couples' lives and choices. Therapists should also take care to not make assumptions about stay-at-home mother couples. Contrary to societal images of "Leave it to Beaver," many of these mothers are not doing all the housework and they frequently do not live traditional lives in terms of power equity and "head of household" values. Women who choose to stay home full-time are making these decisions for many reasons, some short-term, some long-term.

Many of the fathers in these families are highly involved with their kids and the mothers are respected for their contributions at home.

It is also important for therapists to challenge assumptions about how families came to decide their arrangement. For instance, lower to middle income families, families of color, and single-parent families have traditionally not been able to have one parent stay at home. These families need two incomes, or in cases of “single-parent families” there is not an option of staying at home. It is very frustrating for many families who do not have the possibility of someone staying at home, to feel consistently judged by society as being less caring about their children, less involved in parenting, or somehow not as good of a mother or father. These assumptions are particularly damaging when they are religion-based. When society gives a message that the more spiritual path is a stay-at-home mother arrangement, this discounts the spiritual commitment of poor families and families making other choices.

It is also critical to not stereotype dual-earner families making middle to high incomes. Stereotypes exist that if two earners have a high combined income and truly cared about their children, one of them would quit and stay home with the children. Many men and women work for income, but also because they want to work and give to their communities in a variety of ways. They are our children’s physicians, nurses, teachers, and our accountants, repair persons, and veterinarians. They are men and women who want to work and who have something meaningful to contribute to all of our lives. Furthermore, research has repeatedly dispelled myths of daycare being negative for children (Holcomb, 1998). The benefits of daycare, if it is high quality and if there is positive parent involvement when the child is outside of daycare, are tremendous. Because of the many daycare benefits for children, it is important for therapists to not make negative assumptions about any decisions families make based on family arrangements that involve daycare.

Therapists have to challenge themselves to look beyond the societal stereotypes about arrangements that so quickly come into our minds when families describe their arrangement in terms of family and career. Only when we can get past these stereotypes and assumptions can we effectively work with families and their unique ways of addressing arrangements, equality, division of labor, parenting, and earning.

Generally, when couples and families present for therapy, the solution to issues is not as simple as altering a family arrangement. For instance, in Gottman’s (1999) 25 years of research described in his book, *Seven Principles for Successful Marriages*, none of the principles

have to do with family arrangements. They involve sharing of power, accepting influence, communication, respecting each other, deep friendship, and knowing each other and the details of each other's lives. These principles and many other research findings about what leads to marital satisfaction and equality are absent of mentioning arrangement. When therapists suggest a change in arrangement inappropriately (e.g., "the kids would be better off if you stayed at home," "maybe being at home has created enmeshment with you and your son"), they perpetuate mother blaming. In a recent *Redbook* magazine article (Gifford, April 2000), the front cover reads "Who's the better mom? Stay-at-home and working moms let the fury fly." This kind of media rhetoric is unhelpful to all families. All work/family arrangements have benefits and costs. For example, in stay-at-home mother or father families the at home spouse may be at risk financially if a divorce should occur. Additionally, the provider in these families may feel over-burdened or unable to change careers or return to school without a back-up income. However, stay-at-home families have flexibility in terms of an available person all day to run errands and organize for the family. Therapists help couples evaluate the costs and benefits of all arrangements to help families find the best arrangement for them and their life goals absent from stereotypic assumptions and myths. Helping families achieve "valuing their families" is important rather than buying into judging who has the best "family values."

## CONCLUSION

The two studies used for this comparison (Zimmerman et al., 1998; Zimmerman et al., 1999) pose some limitations including the relatively small sample size and the use of self-report for measuring marital equality and satisfaction. More studies are needed to broaden our understanding of the experience of stay-at-home mother/career father couples and stay-at-home father/career mother couples. However, despite the limitations of sample size and self-reporting, definite recurring patterns and themes emerged from the data confirming findings from previous studies as well as offering new ideas with therapeutic implications. When couples work together to build a satisfying partnership that values equity and balance of power, both traditional and non-traditional gender responsibilities within family structures can promote individual and marital well-being.

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