Dilemmas in Researching Family Work Roles

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This paper reflects critically and retrospectively on problems associated with an ongoing longitudinal study of the changing character of family and work roles of both men and women. The study has provided a vivid lesson in the interdependence of theory, concept and method; and it has also served as a reminder once again that there is a need for a better balanced approach in sociological research to avoid the all-too-common over-emphasis on either theory or methodology to the near neglect of the other. Thus, from its very inception in 1974, the research reported here generated a number of conceptual, analytical, and methodological dilemmas that are germane to broader theoretical issues and, therefore, worthy of systematic reassessment.

This research highlights the complexity involved in studying family work roles, illustrates some of the inherent dilemmas, and suggests improvements in conceptualization, theory construction, methodology, and collaborative research endeavours. Furthermore, the case study examined here serves as a point of departure for a more general and critical assessment of current family theory and research.

Other considerations besides the dissatisfaction with the state of systematic understanding of certain aspects of Canadian social life prompted the decision to formulate a reasonably comprehensive research question and launch a research effort commensurate with its dimensions. The approach was to involve a number of principal investigators with different theoretical backgrounds and substantive interests. There were several sociologists at one university with the common experience of trying to answer research questions in his or her respective specialty areas of interest, with the consequent diverse and inherent limitations associated with any and all sociological specialties. Many Canadian researchers have sought answers purely within a given social system and have suggested how incomplete and unsatisfactory these have been. Thus, frustrated by the inadequacy of any one specialty perspec-

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A Theoretical Dilemma: The Unitary Character of Family and Work

The researchers concluded that past conceptual approaches to the study of family and work roles have been unduly influenced by structural functional theory. For example, it was argued by Parsons (1965) that the major mechanism preventing disruptive competition between husband and wife is sex-role segregation, where the dominant male role is the occupational role and the dominant female role that of housewife and mother. According to this formulation, as the major source of social status in modern society is occupation, a married woman doing paid work raises the possibility of disruptive competition between the spouses. This assertion requires a thorough examination in the light of the rapidly increasing labour force involvement of married women, especially young mothers, not only in Canada (Lupri and Mills, 1983) but around the world (Lupri, 1983). Everywhere wives increasingly share in making substantial economic contributions to the family household. Preliminary findings from this research suggest, by way of illustration, that the postulated inevitability of marital conflict resulting from women's participation in the labour force is unwarranted and in need of redress. Although there is considerable cross-cultural evidence that supports the textbook generalization that in the large majority of societies men and women adhere to a division of labour and roles in which husbands cope mainly with the external environment and wives maintain the home, together with some other researches these 1975 and 1980 data suggest that there is no reason to assume that both roles cannot be performed by either partner. Moreover, the data tend to show that not only does the working wife exhibit great involvement in her paid task performance but that the husband exhibits considerable amount of social-emotional activity as well.

One theoretical position about role differentiation that may be advanced is this: the simple dichotomous gender distinction between task and social-emotional specialization in couple interaction receives no support from the Calgary data. When the data are broken down by family life cycle stage, further limitations of the Parsonian formulation become apparent. Moreover, credence is lent to the Rapoports' (1975) findings that there is variation in the relative salience of family and work roles in the lives of those who assume roles; that there are points in the life-cycle when relations between family and work life are influenced crucially; and that there are "modes of interaction in work and family which tend to be isomorphic (i.e., they tend to be similar in their patterns)" (Rodgers, 1973:164). Thus "while inter-system influence is probably maximal when individuals are undergoing transitions in both [fami-