TEN ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES FOR FAMILY AND WORK BALANCE: ADVICE FROM SUCCESSFUL FAMILIES

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Despite negative media images and social dynamics insensitive to the lives of many dual-career couples, research shows that these families are largely healthy and thriving. In this study, we investigated the adaptive strategies of middle-class, dual-earner couples (N = 47) with children that are successfully managing family and work. Guided by grounded-theory methodology, analysis of interview data revealed that these successful couples structured their lives around 10 major strategies: Valuing family, striving for partnership, deriving meaning from work, maintaining work boundaries, focusing and producing at work, taking pride in dual earning, prioritizing family fun, living simply, making decisions proactively, and valuing time. Each adaptive strategy is defined and illustrated through the participants' own words. Clinical applications for therapists working with dual-earner couples are offered.

Evidence exists that most employed women and men believe that there are strong benefits to combining family and work, and that the benefits outweigh the costs (Barnett & Rivers, 1996). In addition, Galinsky (1999) found that most parents with children under the age of 18 reported being at least somewhat successful in managing work and family life. A significant number of people in the United States also report that attending to the myriad responsibilities in their lives can be difficult. For instance, in a large random sample of United States workers, Galinsky, Bond, and Friedman (1996) found that 42% of nonparents and 58% of parents reported at least some conflict in managing family and work.

Therapists are increasingly being called on to assist families in managing the many responsibilities in their lives. In fact, a random sample of clinical members in the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) reported that approximately one-third of their couple cases involved difficulties associated with work–family balance (Haddock & Bowling, in press). Unfortunately, nearly one-half of this sample reported that their training did not adequately prepare them to assist families with these difficulties.

Many scholars (e.g., Barnett & Rivers, 1996; Galinsky, 1999) agree that the response of researchers, policy makers, and other professionals to people’s challenges in managing family and work responsibilities has been stalled by polarized debates about maternal employment. For instance, over the last several decades, much of the empirical literature has centered on the question of whether or not mothers should work. Primarily quantitative, many of these studies were designed to discover the impact of maternal employment on families (Galinsky, 1999), and were often based on an assumption that this employment would have a negative influence (Barnett & Rivers, 1996). These studies have led to important conclusions; in general, they have found that maternal employment in and of itself has very little impact on children, and that the impact, which is generally positive, depends on many other factors (Galinsky, 1999). However, these...
studies have produced few suggestions or solutions designed to assist dual-earner couples in managing family and work responsibilities.

This qualitative study is designed to provide therapists and dual-earner couples with research-based, practical guidance for the successful balance of family and work. More specifically, the purpose of this study is to identify key adaptive strategies for work-family balance of middle-class, dual-earner couples with children that successfully manage these major areas of life. In examining the strategies utilized by successful couples, we employed a research methodology (e.g., Gottman, 1999; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1995) based on an assumption that solving a “problem” (i.e., difficulties in managing family and work) is often best accomplished not by further exploring the problem itself, but by learning about those circumstances in which the problem is less present. Qualitative methods were chosen to highlight the voices of successful couples; the words of these couples can illustrate adaptive strategies for couples that are struggling with work-family balance.

To work effectively with dual-earner couples in amplifying the benefits and reducing the difficulties in balancing family and work, therapists need at least three general kinds of information. First, to fully appreciate the opportunities and constraints of today’s dual-earner couples, therapists need to understand the influences of the societal context in which these couples live. Second, therapists need to be familiar with the empirical literature about maternal employment. Third, they need to be aware of factors that are associated with reduced difficulties in balancing family and work and the strategies that are central to successful balance. Although the first two kinds of information will be reviewed briefly in the literature review, the primary purpose of this article is to highlight the adaptive strategies of 47 middle-class, dual-earner couples who perceive themselves as successful in balancing family and work. The clinical implications of these strategies will be discussed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Societal Context of Dual-Earning Couples

The increase in the number of dual-earner couples has been one of the most significant social transformations in the United States over the last four decades. Because the increased employment rates of women have challenged long-held cultural norms about family configuration, gender, and division of labor (Williams, 2000), these changes have resulted in anxiety and dissension in United States society (Barnett & Rivers, 1996). Dual-earner families—particularly working mothers—have become the subject of heated public and private discourse, which has been marked by extreme positions on the benefits and drawbacks of this work/family arrangement.

This cultural anxiety and dissension can be evidenced in depictions of dual-earner couples in the popular media. Dual-earner couples are often depicted as time crazed, and their children are portrayed as desperate for parental love while being “raised” by child-care providers (Barnett & Rivers, 1996; Galinsky, 1999; Holcomb, 1998). For instance, in 1997, to illustrate the lead story, the cover of Newsweek showed distorted images of a distressed dual-earner couple; the woman and man are each standing in for hands of a clock while their child looks from afar, longing for attention and affection. These couples, in particular the working women, also are often depicted as selfish, ambitious, uncaring, and materialistic—more interested in their careers than in spending time with their children or one another (Holcomb, 1998). For instance, a recent cellular telephone advertisement featured a working mother spending a day with her daughter at the beach. While the mother is busy receiving business calls on her cellular telephone, the daughter pleads to be her mother’s only client for the day.

Scholars (e.g., Barnett & Rivers, 1996; Holcomb, 1998) argue that these portrayals are far from harmless images transmitted by the media, but rather, they are depictions that have become embedded in contemporary culture and shaped the collective psyches of people in the United States. The influence of some of these beliefs can be evidenced in national policies related to child care and family leave and in the practices of professionals. For instance, Haddock and Bowling (in press) found that many therapists had accepted inaccurate messages contained in the media.

When examining the cultural ideologies surrounding work and family, it is important to recognize that
gender is not the only relevant variable—class is as well. Lower income women have long been in the paid workforce; societal anxiety emerged only when a large number of middle-class women began entering the workforce. In addition, as Etizen and Zinn (2000) argued, it is often the same political groups in American society that argue that women (i.e., middle- and upper-class women) should stay home that also argue that mothers on welfare should find gainful employment.

Not only have cultural ideologies been slow to respond to the rise in dual-earner families, so too has the structure and norms of the United States economy and social systems (Barnett & Rivers, 1996). In many workplaces, norms continue to be structured around an assumption that paid employees have a full-time adult at home that takes care of all unpaid labor. People in the United States work an average of 47 hr per week—3 hr longer than 20 years ago, and more than people in any other country in the world (Coontz, 2000). Despite evidence that they improve productivity and morale, many workplaces continue to resist the implementation of family-friendly options, such as flextime (Galinsky et al., 1996).

The lag in changes to social ideologies and structural dynamics produce barriers for dual-earner couples in balancing family and work. As incisively stated by Coontz (2000), “The privileges and disadvantages of any family form are socially constructed.” Many scholars (e.g., Barnett & Rivers, 1996; Galinsky, 1999) argue that until institutions and cultural ideologies change to fit new realities, dual-earner couples will continue to face unnecessary obstacles. As a result of lagging social and structural dynamics, many—but not all—dual-earner couples appear to experience at least three normative challenges.

First, dual-earner couples—particularly working mothers—experience concern and guilt about their family arrangement (Barnett & Rivers, 1996). This guilt is not a personal problem, indicating some kind of personal pathology or intrinsic family deficit, but rather it is a natural response to “each day, in large ways and small, [finding one’s] choices scrutinized, [one’s] motivation under attack, the well being of [one’s] children constantly called into question” (Holcomb, 1998, p. 22). Evidence exists that this guilt is often unwarranted, and that it—in and of itself—contributes to negative outcomes for dual-earners and their children (Barnett & Rivers, 1996).

Second, a challenge shared by many family types, including dual earners, is that of renegotiating gender expectations in couple relationships. Although a move toward less traditional gender norms appears to benefit many men and women in significant ways (Gottman, 1999), it also can be challenging (Deutsch, 1999). Several researchers have found that, although men as a group contribute more to household and childcare responsibilities than they did in the past (e.g., Barnett & Rivers, 1996), their contributions generally still fall short of those of their wives’ (Williams, 2000).

Third, many dual-earner couples report conflict in balancing family and work. For instance, Barnett and Rivers (1996) found that 75% of dual-earner parents reported strain in combining work and parenting. These strains are not exclusive to dual-earner families (Galinsky et al., 1996), nor are they inevitable or a result of qualities intrinsic to the dual-earner family form.

Empirical Literature Relevant to Maternal Employment

Despite the normative challenges experienced by some dual earners, a significant body of literature reports that, in general, in dual-earner families, “The men and women are doing well, emotionally and physically, and the children are thriving” (Barnett & Rivers, 1996, p. 1). Many parents report that the benefits of dual earning outweigh the costs (Barnett & Rivers, 1996). Many women find employment to be a source of independent identity, increased self-esteem, and enhanced social contacts (Barnett & Baruch, 1985). Many men report decreased bread-winning pressure and increased opportunities for family involvement (Barnett & Rivers, 1996).

Research has consistently reported that mothers’ employment in and of itself does not affect the mother–child bond (National Institute of Child Health and Development [NICHD] Early Child Care Research Network, 1997), does not diminish the influence of parents on children (Fuligni, Galinsky, & Pons, 1995), and does not influence children’s assessment of the quality of their mothers’ parenting (Galinsky, 1999). Many researchers have found benefits of maternal employment for children, a few of which are greater independence and more flexible attitudes about gender (Hoffman, 1989). The effect of maternal employment depends on a number of factors, such as parental attitudes about maternal
employment; the income that working brings to the family; the mother’s warmth and sensitivity to her children; the quality of parents’ jobs; and the quality of child care (Fuligni et al., 1995; Galinsky, 1999).

As researchers have begun to understand that “The problem isn’t that mothers (and fathers) work: It is how they work” (Galinsky, 1999, p. xiv; italics in original), a new body of research has emerged (e.g., Edgell Becker & Moen, 1999; Moen & Wethington, 1992). This research is focused neither on the problems or benefits of dual earning, but on understanding how couples describe their adaptive strategies (Edgell Becker & Moen, 1999).

This study extends this body of literature. To date, the factors that successful couples themselves believe are central to the successful balance of family and work are not known. This study uses a discovery-oriented methodology to highlight the voices of successful couples in answering the research question: What are the adaptive strategies of middle-class couples that are successful in balancing family and work?

METHOD

Participants

All participant couples were residents of three major urban population centers in Colorado. A variety of recruitment efforts were utilized with the intention of “saturating” these areas to recruit participation of a diverse population (e.g., diversity in race, income, and career type). Recruitment efforts included distribution of fliers to parents of children in early childhood centers and public elementary and middle schools; articles appearing in two major daily newspapers; stories broadcast by two television news programs; posters displayed in a variety of retail shops, family activity centers, and large businesses and universities; e-mails distributed to employees of large businesses and universities; and distribution of postcards to alumni from a major university and members of the Women’s Chamber of Commerce in Colorado. Despite these efforts, the couples that contacted us were predominately middle-class (see Figure 1).

On expressing interest in the study, potential participants were screened during a 20-min phone conversation to determine eligibility. Couples were considered eligible if they were married; each spouse completed at least 35 hr per week of paid employment; the couple had at least one child 12 years of age or younger who resided with them at least half of the time; and both partners wanted to participate in the study. In addition, couples were asked to consider if all the following statements were descriptive of them: My spouse and I experience more positives than negatives from the opportunity to fill both work and family responsibilities; My spouse and I believe that we are skilled in balancing the many responsibilities in our lives (e.g., spouse, parent, employee); My spouse and I have found and continue to find creative ways for balancing work and family; my spouse and I would be described as skilled in balancing work and family;

![Figure 1](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

**Figure 1**

Frequency Distribution of Couples’ Combined Incomes
my spouse and I believe we have quality and quantity time with each other and our children, and are mostly satisfied with our performance at work and home.

One hundred and thirteen couples originally expressed interest in the study, of which 50 were excluded, primarily because of demographic considerations (e.g., not married, children older than 12), 11 withdrew before screening, and 5 couples withdrew from the study following successful screening. A total of 47 couples participated in the study. The average age was 38 for women and 40 for men. On average, the couples had two children, ranging in age from 6 months to 23 years of age. The average age of the youngest child was 5 years, and the average age of the oldest was 9 years. For 38 women and 40 men, this was their first marriage, and the average length of marriage for the couples was 12.75 years.

Figure 1 shows the frequency distribution of the participants' joint incomes. Combined incomes ranged from $34,000 to $220,000 with a median income of $105,000 ($105,022; excluding two atypically high incomes). On average, wives earned less than husbands did; women earned a median income of $45,000 ($54,400) compared to men's median income of $54,000 ($63,320), with a range of $10,000 to $105,000 for women, and $20,000 to $190,000 for men.

The occupations of the participants were diverse; they included baker, billing clerk, construction, engineer, firefighter, grocery clerk, housekeeper, lawyer, machine operator, minister, musician, nurse, teacher, truck driver, and professor. The wives in the study worked an average of 40 hr a week; husbands worked an average of 45.

Of the individual participants, 77 identified as White, eight as Hispanic American, four as African American, one as Asian American, one as White Native American, and one as “Other.” Participants attained relatively high levels of education, with the average participant completing some graduate study. In terms of highest level of education completed, five individual participants graduated high school, 13 attended some college, 27 graduated college, seven attended some graduate study, and 40 attained graduate degrees.

Procedure

Participant couples were asked to complete a written questionnaire and a conjoint interview. The questionnaire included a battery of instruments, including basic demographic information and assessments of work, family, marital, and personal variables. The results presented here were drawn exclusively from the interview data. The interview followed a semistructured format, including a broad spectrum of open-ended questions regarding strategies that have contributed to the couple’s overall success. For example, the following questions were asked: What are the primary factors that contribute to your successful balance of family and work? Do you have philosophies that are central to the way in which you manage family and work responsibilities and, if so, what are they? What are some of the strategies that you use at home and at work to successful balance family and work? The majority of interviews—which lasted approximately 90 min—were conducted in participants’ homes. Couples received $30 as compensation for their participation.

Data Analysis

A grounded-theory approach was adopted for analysis of the qualitative interview data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Consistent with grounded-theory method, an inductive, cross-case strategy was utilized. No one truth, theory, or set of conclusions was sought after; themes were generated largely from participants’ experiences, rather than attempting to impose interpretations on the data or procure support for a particular worldview. The intent and goal was to let the data speak for themselves.

All members of the research team carefully read each interview transcript to identify themes and patterns. Using a qualitative data analysis program, ATLAS.ti (Muhr, 1997), one researcher coded each information fragment in these interviews, using a process commonly referred to as first-level coding. Two researchers then organized these first-level codes around common ideas or concepts. During this process, emergent themes were identified (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Ten adaptive strategies were identified. Next, a researcher—not on the original research team—reread the transcripts to perform a count on these strategies.

Consistent with grounded-theory methodology, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously. This approach allowed newly collected data to be compared to previously generated hypotheses. Data categories were collapsed and clarified after reaching theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), achieved through constant comparison between new data and previously created categories, when a
common lexicon of terms was created, category modification was diminished, and relationships between concepts crystallized from analysis of the data. Recruitment efforts were terminated on reaching saturation in interview data.

Ensuring Validity

Several strategies have been established to enhance validity and trustworthiness of qualitative research findings (Creswell, 1998). To ensure the integrity of qualitative research, Creswell (1998) advised investigators to utilize at least two of these commonly accepted strategies. We used five primary strategies to enhance the trustworthiness of our findings.

Before interviewing couples, we clarified biases, perspectives, and orientations that we likely brought to our research. This process, commonly used by qualitative researchers, allows the researcher and consumer of research to be aware of the potential influence of their belief systems on the interpretation of findings. As family therapists, we have approached this study from a perspective shaped by feminist social philosophy and family systems theory.

To ensure the validity of the emerging code structure, we adopted a team approach to data analysis. Each interview was conducted by one member of the research team, reviewed by another, and systematically analyzed by two others. This process allowed each member of the research team to achieve high levels of familiarity with the data. The team met regularly to discuss the emergent themes.

The use of ATLAS.ti allowed us to create an online audit trail of our findings so that we could trace codes back to discrete units of text in the interview transcripts. This process allowed us to reexamine units of coded data to ensure that generated data categories have remained true to the voices of the participants. In addition, performing counts served as an additional validity check and allowed us to determine the prevalence of these strategies across couples.

Finally, in reporting our results, we have made an effort to offer a rich, detailed description of the findings. Although space limitations allow us to provide only a limited number of quotations, these quotes provide a clearer understanding of the findings. Although specific respondents are not identified, these quotes represent a cross-section of interviews.

RESULTS

Although there was considerable diversity among couples in terms of their professions and work schedules there was significant overlap in their report of ten foundational strategies. These strategies guided couples in meeting their various responsibilities. The couples did not claim to implement consistently these strategies all of the time; instead, these strategies guided their behaviors and decisions.

The 10 adaptive strategies along with subthemes and illustrative quotes will be described below. The sub-themes are often more practical in nature; they represent the more specific ways that couples operationalized the larger strategy. The subthemes provide a fuller understanding of the meaning of the strategies. The illustrative quotes, from a variety of the men and women interviewed, have been edited slightly to enhance clarity and preserve anonymity; pseudonyms have been used.

Valuing Family

Forty-six couples stressed the importance of maintaining a commitment to family as the highest priority. Through word and deed, both members of the couple worked hard to maintain family as their highest priority in making decisions about their behavior in daily life. To do this, couples proactively created opportunities for family time, which often involved family rituals, routines, and special family time, such as “pizza night” every Friday, attending soccer games, and bedtime stories.

M (Male participant): Every night, one or both of us reads with our son for about 20 min. Now, we’re getting to the point where he’s reading to himself, and we talk before he goes to bed. When I was traveling a lot [on business], I missed that so much.
Second, in terms of relative importance, these couples emphasized family happiness over professional responsibilities and advancement. In fact, they often discussed employment as a means for ensuring family well being. It was not uncommon for participants to limit work hours, sacrifice career advancement, make career changes, or accept less-prestigious positions to keep family as the number one priority in life.

M: I felt I was spending no time at home with the kids, and I didn’t like it at all. So, I changed jobs. It’s just not worth it. I was doing well in this job, and could have gone a lot further, but again I go back to [the fact that] these guys will never be two and three again.

F (Female Participant): David was going to go to med[ical] school. We sat down and said, “If you’re in med school, that’s 8-plus years of absentee;” We said no to that . . . we needed to pursue something else.

Striving for Partnership

Forty-five couples stressed that striving for equality and partnership in their marital relationship was critical to their success. Although differences emerged in the degree of equality among couples in this sample, as a group they possessed a relatively high degree of equality. They discussed the importance of three principle components of marital equality, the first revolving around division of labor.

M: My job is both earning and caring, and so is hers. It’s not a matter of I pay the bills and she takes care of the kids; it’s a both/and thing. This provides me an outlet for the affections I feel for my kids and an opportunity to engage in that daily.

F: We view it much more like this is our responsibility. It’s not my responsibility, and you’re helping me with it.

M: It doesn’t seem fair . . . for each one of us to be doing 40 hr and then expect Lisa to come home and do everything else. There’s just, I mean, there’s no way.

F: I just feel like a lot of why we’re successful is because he is so open to everything that he possibly could do. And he is not constrained by, “No, you have to do dinner because you’re the woman.” That has never come out of his mouth.

Second, the couples stated the importance of making decisions together as partners who have equal input into the process and outcome of decisions.

M: If one person believes really strongly in something—whether it’s something about the way our kids are raised or whatever—I respect her and say, “Yeah. There’s a reason why.” And, [she does the same] if I feel real strongly. We don’t necessarily blindly agree, but we talk about it.

Third, the couples said that they were partners on an interpersonal level as well. They told stories about how they respect, appreciate, and support one another.

M: If I win and she loses, then we both lose. If she wins and I lose, we both lose. [This belief] has probably made all the difference . . . because you just can’t live your life trying to win in a relationship. You will just come out a loser, period.

F: I think both of us are appreciative, . . . like if I come home . . . and see that he’s done something around the house, . . . we’re really good at acknowledging what we’ve done.

F: We continue to talk about, OK, career-wise, where do we want to be? What do we want to do? And what do we need to do to make that happen? If Darrell wanted to make a career change [which] might mean that I have to . . . do administration so I can make more money, then we’ll talk about it. If that’s important to him right now, then that’s what I need to do, because he’s done that for me.
Deriving Meaning from Work

Forty-two couples stated that being able to derive meaning from work was an important aspect of their success. They described experiencing enjoyment and purpose from their professional pursuits, which brought energy and enthusiasm to their lives and limited work-related fatigue and burnout.

F: We both really like our jobs. Not that they’re not stressful at times, but we really like what we’re doing and we feel good about what we are doing. We want to go to work. It wouldn’t feel as good if we were doing something we had to do, or just another job.
M: I get a great deal of satisfaction from my job . . . I did a couple of jobs after [getting] my bachelor’s that I enjoyed and appreciated, but once I got on track with this, I realized it was something that I was meant to do . . . I get a great sense of accomplishment—not just from coaching . . . but also from school work in general.

Maintaining Work Boundaries

Forty-one couples mentioned that maintaining boundaries around work was important. Couples’ sense of family as the highest priority in their lives was critical in decisions about the level of effort to expend at work and what job would best support this priority. Couples made a commitment to maintain control over work, not allowing their careers to dictate the pace of their lives. They made conscious and concerted efforts to set limits on work, marking clear boundaries for their professional commitments. This commitment often entailed communicating to or negotiating with their employers.

M: We’ve always said, “No,” to jobs that required long hours . . . long hours, weekends, lots of overtime, we just refuse to do those types of jobs.
M: We both like our jobs, but, when it’s quitting time, we’re out of there. I mean [with both of our jobs] you could work 24 hours a day; it’s a never-ending workload.
M: With the person I’m working for now, [when she says] “Oh, here’s a project, I’d like you to do it,” . . . [instead of saying,] “Yeah, I’ll just do it,” [I say,] “OK, I can do that but I need 4 weeks.” Because I know I’m not going to work on Saturdays . . . or after 5:00.

They also reported consciously and purposefully separated family and work. Many couples tended to compartmentalize their lives whenever possible, striving for little overlap between their personal and professional lives.

F: I think one of the biggest [strategies] is: When you’re at home, you’re at home; and when you’re at work, you’re at work. There’s not the crossover. You don’t get to think about work unless there’s a huge problem . . . or something big going on at work.

Focusing and Producing at Work

Thirty-six couples talked about the importance of being productive at work. Although they set limits on their careers, they did not believe this adversely affected their productivity. In fact, many said that it enhanced it. Several couples saw this productivity as key to their employers’ support of their efforts to manage family and work and as a way to limit work hours.

M: We’re both pulling our weight at [our] jobs. [No one] has ever felt that we’re slacking off or we’re getting off easy because we’ve got kids. We’re in there and . . . doing more than what they’ve asked us to do. That’s how we keep options . . . open.
F: I think that if you’re good at what you do, they will accept those boundaries. . . . They won’t question you because the quality of your work is good. I see them questioning other people, but I believe that’s because they’re questioning their quality of work. They get a lot of work out of me.
F: I don’t mess around. When I’m there, I’m working. I’m not chatting; I’m working. And I think that’s key. You just try to be really efficient and be on when you’re there.
**Prioritizing Family Fun**

Despite living often busy and demanding lives, 47 couples said that they made a point and a priority to enjoy a lot of play time. Couples used play and family fun as a means of relaxing, enjoying life, staying emotionally connected, and creating balance against the stress of managing many responsibilities.

F: We don’t set aside a day on the weekend to do [chores] or anything like that . . . we tend to look first and see if there’s something more fun to do and then we do that [laughter].
M: I think a lot of our family bonding revolves around these excursions . . . going on lots of hikes or bike trips . . . sometimes fishing, concerts . . . the three of us.
F: Once in a while, we’ll just try and do stuff off the cuff; one night we had a camp night in our living room with the fireplace. We all had a slumber party. We got our sleeping bags and we all slept overnight downstairs.

These couples also said that having a sense of humor, an ability to laugh at life, were important elements in keeping life enjoyable and balanced. The couples’ sense of humor was evident during the interviews; the general atmosphere in the family was one of fun.

M: We’re always together . . . so, it’s not like I’m always at boys’ night and out drinking and playing pool. I don’t think that is good for a relationship. We have friends that do that . . . [they might want all the girls to] go down to Cancun for a week. Why doesn’t everybody go to Cancun? I wouldn’t mind going myself. Can I be included? I won’t talk. I will wear a skirt if I have to, a thong, anything: I just want to go, too.
F: They’re only kids once, they only get to do those messy things at this age . . . We buy silly straws and weird cups and [laughter] we have chocolate milk on Saturday mornings for breakfast.

**Taking Pride in Dual Earning**

Forty-three couples stated that they believed dual earning was positive for all members of their family. They did not appear to accept negative societal messages about their family arrangement. In general, these couples tended not to struggle with the feelings of guilt that Barnett and Rivers (1996) argued is “universal” among dual earners as a result of these societal messages. For instance, they did not feel guilty about not spending every minute engaging in quality time with their children—such as paying the bills while their children played in the backyard—because they believed they had a good balance of playing with their children, work, attending to household chores, and spending time together as a couple. They reported finding many benefits to dual earning.

F: Of course, [children] fulfill you, but they can only fulfill a certain part of you. You have to be able to fulfill the majority of you. I mean, a man can’t fulfill you, your kids can’t fulfill you, you have to fulfill you. And so, I definitely went on a search for purpose . . . Not that my first purpose ever went away, because I still love my kids and enjoy them, and I’m a good mom. But I also knew that it was time for me to move toward something else in addition.
M: Her working makes it so much nicer for me to be relaxed about my position. When she wasn’t working, I felt totally trapped in a job. . . . One of the nicest gifts that Patty has ever given me is to go to work and to bring home a good income.
M: I think a big benefit for Jimmy in having a working mom . . . is the fact that he’s going to grow up understanding that women and men share equally in what’s going on—that women are just as capable of holding down a job and pursuing careers as men . . . He is going to grow up expecting that he’s going to share in what happens in the house.

**Living Simply**

Thirty-eight couples also stated the importance of consciously simplifying their lives in a variety of
ways. First, couples limited activities that restricted family time, especially TV and extracurricular activities. 

F: He doesn’t go out to eat. Just little things like that that add up. We don’t need cable. We don’t need to sit in front of the TV anyway.

F: We won’t allow any more than two regular commitments a week of whatever it is. Friday nights are “family night,” and we don’t budge on that.

F: We very rarely have the TV on in our family. . . . Because everybody now has cable or [satellite] dishes, Robert likes to joke that we have the “fab five” because with only a TV antenna, we just get basic channels. But we feel that [TV] is too much of a deterrent from family time. It’s nice to come home and do things, like go for a bike ride or a walk.

Second, several couples mentioned the importance of controlling their finances to prevent life from becoming encumbered by unnecessary expenditures.

M: We don’t use credit cards. We don’t have cable. We don’t have extravagances that nickel and dime you . . . so that we would have to work more overtime to pay bills.

M: We don’t have fancy cars where the payments just eat you up.

Third, couples discussed the value of adopting high but realistic expectations as a method for simplifying life and managing the responsibilities of a dual-earner household.

M: We’re not fanatics about having everything done. We keep our house clean and presentable . . . but we’re not fanatics about it . . . . We just decided that’s not the most important thing in our life.

Fourth, couples discussed creative time-saving strategies that make life more efficient and less complicated.

F: We plan a lot the night before . . . we’ve got little organizers for the kids—garment bags that their clothes are in five days of the week. There’s five little pockets and . . . on Sundays they pick out their clothes—underwear, socks, and clothes in each one. Then on Monday, they can just go and pick one of the days to wear. They still have a choice, and I don’t have to worry about what’s clean, what’s dirty, whether they’ve got clothes ready.

Making Decisions Proactively

Forty-four couples mentioned that being proactive in decision making was important. Rather than allowing the pace of their lives to dictate the course of their experiences, couples were vigilant in their efforts to maintain control of life and decision making. Couples talked about the importance of remaining proactive and in control of their various responsibilities.

M: We are very in control of our lives . . . my life separately, where these guys [our sons] go, and what they do . . . . If you’re in control of your own life, then you tend to be a lot happier.

F: I view it as my choice. I have control over what I’m going to do, rather than, “Oh God! This schedule is just crazy this week.” We’re the ones that [make choices] and [I] remind myself, “If it’s crazy, then I need to make some other choices.” I need to say, “No.”

Second, these couples stated that they maintain a clear sense of priorities, which serves as a map or template by which couples make decisions concerning their marriage, children, family, and careers.

M: For me, probably the biggest thing is priorities—setting out and deciding pretty early on as far as what . . . we would consider the most important thing, the second most important thing.

F: If you just define success as what you do at work, then that is all you will do. Whereas, if you define success as having a happy family and a happy marriage and [being] happy at work, then you make all those things happen.
Third, couples said that they routinely engaged in conscious and careful decision making in which they were both involved (as mentioned above). This process allowed couples to make choices consistent with their priorities. Quite often this process of deliberation and operationalizing priorities also included frequent and open communication between partners.

M: The choices are made—like my extracurricular things that tend to draw me away from home—with discussion [about] how it’s going to affect the family as a whole.
M: We just started football with my son. . . . So, we had to think the whole thing through; how is this going to fit into our schedule? [W]e sit down [and brainstorm] three or four different pathways that could work. [W]e constantly reevaluate it.
M: We talk a lot during the day . . . [about] anything from getting oil changed in the Volvo to . . . who is bringing plates over to mom’s house. There’s not much I don’t know about.

Fourth, couples said that they try to maintain a sense of the bigger picture, remaining conscious of the consequences for their decisions. Couples maintained a sense of direction for their lives and an ideal image of desired outcomes for their families.

F: I think for us it is a sense of a bigger picture. It’s not about the checkbook or . . . get[ting] caught up on bills. . . . You have to have a bigger sense . . . a bigger purpose than just what we do day to day . . . which helps us put things in perspective.
M: I always try and project from a later point in my life back to this point and think, “OK, how, how am I going to look at this point in my life down the road?” I try to realize that this time with your kids is short . . . When I look back at this time, I’m going to appreciate the kids. I’ll have time to work later.
M: One of our goals is . . . to learn how to play golf, so that we always make sure that we don’t grow apart, which is what we hear and see a lot of older couples do, especially after their children are grown.

Valuing Time
Forty-five couples also stated that they try to remain aware of the value of time, viewing it as a window of opportunity to be used for creating balance and happiness. They attempted to maximize their time.

F: I think you are almost forced to make better use of the time that you have together by nature of the fact that you work.
F: We try to really utilize all of our time. . . we just don’t waste much time.

Second, couples stories revealed that they viewed their time as a valuable commodity and a resource to be spent with great care. They stated being protective of their time, cautiously deciding how it would be best utilized.

F: Keeping your time sacred for the family. Not letting other people dictate what, where you should . . . be, or how you should be spending your time.
F: When they come and say, “Will you play a game with me?” [I may think.] “No, I’ve got to do this.” Well, if the ‘this’ . . . is cleaning the kitchen, just let the kitchen go. Just let things go!

Third, couples shared strategies by which they structured their sacred time. They said that having these plans in mind allowed them to consciously spend meaningful and rewarding time.

M: We try to do a lot of our [house] work though during the week, so that the weekends are free.

While remaining conscious of time, couples commented on their attention to the moment. They described themselves as oriented to the present and highly focused on making the most of each day.
general, they tried to maintain a “be here now” attitude.

F: We plan a lot . . . we try to take care of the future, but I think we probably live more for the present . . . we feel pretty good about just taking stuff as it comes.

M: So a lot like the strategy we have with home, I tend to really work on things being done before I head home. And sometimes if it takes an extra half-hour staying up there it’s, then it’s that half-hour allows me to be that much more present when I get home. So that I can be, I have things complete, both physically and kind of inside my head as well.

DISCUSSION

The implications of this study should be addressed within the context of the study’s limitations. Despite efforts to obtain a more diverse sample, the couples who participated in this study were predominantly highly educated, middle-class couples with at least one child under the age of 12. Thus, the findings cannot be generalized to all dual earners. It is impossible to predict how adaptive strategies would be similar or different among couples with lower incomes. It may be that higher income levels and career positions (that typically offer more autonomy and flexibility, for instance) may contribute positively to work and family balance. It may be that some general strategies would be similar (e.g., family fun) across various groups, but the specific ways that couples operationalize these strategies might differ (e.g., engaging in less costly activities to promote fun). On the other hand, higher income may allow couples to hire out more services, allowing more time for family fun. It is our hope that this study will be replicated with couples in noncareer positions and those from lower-income groups.

It also is important to remember in interpreting findings that, to participate in the study, couples had to describe themselves as successful in balancing family and work. In addition, both partners had to agree to participate; agreement by both wives and husbands could in itself imply a certain level of partnership. Although the results cannot be generalized to all dual earners, the purpose of the project was to offer a model for success that may be appropriate to or adapted by many couples.

Clinical Implications

In therapeutic work with dual-earner families who are struggling with work–family balance issues, several considerations are essential. First, it is important for therapists to be familiar with the relevant empirical literature, particularly given the polarized societal discourse that generates a significant amount of misinformation on this topic. For instance, the common belief that children of dual-earner couples enjoy less time, attention, and commitment from their parents has been disputed by empirical evidence (see Galinsky, 1999). In fact, children enjoy more time with their employed parents than they did 20 years ago; the number of hours a parent works per week is not related to the amount of time they report spending with their children, and children of employed mothers are just as likely to report having enough time with their mother than are those of stay-at-home mothers.

Knowledge of the empirical literature is important for at least three reasons. First, it allows therapists to analyze critically societal messages and their own preconceptions about dual-earner families. An example of these misconceptions occurred twice when the researchers presented these findings to professional audiences of therapists; individual audience members voiced skepticism about these families: Were they unique? Were they outliers? Are they too perfect to be true? It is informative that Gottman’s (1999) principles of successful marriage do not appear to be met with such skepticism; people tend to believe that happy marriages are possible. Yet, given the dominant story about dual earners, many people—including professionals—may not be as quick to believe that there are happy marriages of dual-earner couples who successfully balance family and work.

Second, possessing accurate information also allows therapists an opportunity to educate their dual-earner clients on these findings, particularly those who have internalized negative messages about
dual-earner families from the larger culture. In this way, therapists can play an active and critical role in helping working parents examine these messages and work through unjustified guilt. Third, the empirical literature can guide therapists in making informed suggestions designed to assist the couple in improving their ability to manage their multiple responsibilities. In this way, therapeutic conversations do not get mired in potentially unrealistic conversations about should the client work or not; instead, therapist and client can also consider changes to the way the client works. Many resources are available that provide accurate information about dual-earner families and offer valuable suggestions, such as Galinsky (1999), Holcomb (1998), Barnett and Rivers (1996), Deutsch (1999), and Schwartz (1994).

In working with couples that are struggling with managing family and work responsibilities, therapists can use the adaptive strategies for successful work–family balance presented in this article. Of particular note is the importance of equality and partnership in dual-earner marriages or relationships. Difficulties commonly associated with a dual-earner family arrangement are often a result of inequities or power imbalances in the marital relationship. Current research has established the importance of equality or shared power to the quality of intimate relationships. For instance, Gottman (1999) indicated that sharing power is one of the seven principles essential for a successful marriage. In addition, Schwartz (1994) found that egalitarian relationships enjoy high levels of intimacy and marital satisfaction, surpassing those observed in unequal marriages. Therefore, we recommend that therapists assess the degree of equality the couple has been able to achieve in their relationship (see Haddock, Zimmerman, & MacPhee, 2000), assisting the couple in achieving higher levels, if deemed appropriate (see Gottman, 1999; Rabin, 1996).

Once the couple has established a foundation of equality and partnership in their relationship, they may benefit from learning additional strategies that have worked for successful couples. The therapist can facilitate conversations designed to help the partners articulate the values and priorities in their own lives. The couple can then begin to determine how to operationalize these values and priorities in their daily lives.

Finally, it is important for therapists to recognize that, in working with dual-earner couples who are struggling with work–family balance, solutions may not lie solely in their ability to adopt and implement better strategies, such as better time management or present-centered living. Certainly, dual-earners need to be active agents in creating a successful balance of family and work; at the same time, however, it is important to recognize that their agency may be limited by outdated societal ideologies, workplace practices, and/or contextual factors, such as gender, race, class, and sexual orientation. As mentioned, it is noteworthy that the couples interviewed in this study were predominately White, highly educated, middle-class, and in career positions wherein they often experienced the support of supervisors and work institutions. Although it is clear from our findings that these successful couples have been creative, proactive, and flexible in carving out a dual-earner lifestyle that works, their success also often appeared to be dependent on contextual factors and responsive workplaces. In assisting dual-earner couples in balancing family and work, it is important to conceptualize their personal responsibility within a context of restraints, such as evident in many workplaces—restraints that are often greater for individuals in marginalized groups based on gender, race, class, and sexual orientation.

REFERENCES


