

ANNOUNCING

***Working Couples
Caring for Children
and Aging Parents
Effects on Work and Well-Being***

Margaret B. Neal • Leslie B. Hammer
Portland State University



**A longitudinal study
funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation**

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Executive Summary

Working Couples Caring for Children and Aging Parents: Effects on Work and Well-Being

by Margaret B. Neal and Leslie B. Hammer
Portland State University

Most work-family research has concentrated on individuals who are combining work with their nuclear family responsibilities at home, involving children and a spouse or partner. Less attention has been given to workers responsible for the care of elderly parents. Still fewer studies have observed workers with multiple family responsibilities, caring for both children and aging parents.

To our knowledge, no previous studies have examined multiple work and caregiving responsibilities from the perspective of dual-earner couples, where both members, the husband and the wife, not only work but also care for children and for aging parents, all at the same time.

We refer to these couples with multiple family caregiving and work roles as the “sandwiched generation.” In this book we examine how these couples manage their many family and work responsibilities, and we suggest the workplace as a primary arena for change.



How did the authors reach sandwiched-generation couples?

We telephoned households across the United States using a list of households with at least one person aged 30 to 60. Eligible households were composed of couples in which both members worked, there was a child 18 years of age or younger, and the couple helped out an aging parent for an average of three or more hours per week. Due to the interest of the funder, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, in middle-class families, couples also were required to have a household income of at least \$40,000. We mailed out surveys and received responses from both members of 309 sandwiched couples. We then surveyed these couples again one year later to identify changes that had occurred in their work and well-being.

In addition, we conducted focus groups and telephone interviews to gather information about these couples' situations in their own words.

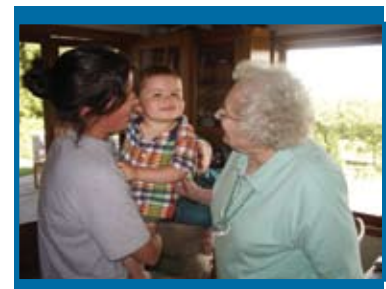
The topic is timely. Given the tendency for many couples to delay becoming parents until their 30s or even 40s, and the increased longevity of the grandparent generation, a small but significant number of dual-earner families face the challenge of providing care to both generations.

- Ann C. Crouter, Center for Work and Family Research
Pennsylvania State University

Who are middle-class, working sandwiched couples?

On the basis of our study, we estimate that working, sandwiched couples represent 9%-13% of American households with a telephone and someone aged 30-60. Our study results indicate the following profile for these couples.

- The typical sandwiched couple consists of a 44-year-old man and a 42-year-old woman, married 18 years.
- The husband works about 49 hours per week, and the wife works about 38 hours per week.
- The couple has two children in the household, and helps two aging parents.
- The help provided to aging parents is related primarily to instrumental activities of daily living, rather than personal care, including help with transportation, shopping, making care-related decisions, housekeeping, and managing money.
- The husband and wife each spend the equivalent of one workday or more each week caring for parents, step-parents, or parents-in-law.
- On average, the wife spends about two hours more per week caring for aging parents (9.8 hours, compared to 7.5 hours for the husband).
- The couple has a median household income of \$62,500.



What are the significant effects of being sandwiched?

- *Depression.* Greater numbers of both wives and husbands in our study experienced depressive symptoms, compared to national studies of the general population.
- *Importance of the parent-care role.* Certain aspects of providing care to aging parents were just as important, and in some cases more important, than characteristics of providing care to children in predicting how sandwiched husbands and wives were doing.
- *Benefits of combining work and family.* Sandwiched couples reported higher levels of positive than negative spillover between work and family, indicating that work-family stress may be offset by certain benefits of combining work and family.
- *Reciprocal support.* Although sandwiched couples were caring for their aging parents, they also received help from their parents in the form of financial assistance, emotional support, help with child care, and household tasks.
- *The importance of role quality.* The quality of roles (spousal, parent-care, child-care, job) was a significant predictor of well-being and work outcomes, even more than the objective characteristics of those roles (e.g., number of hours spent in caregiving and work).
- *Conflict between work and family.* Working sandwiched couples experienced work interfering with family more than family interfering with work.

What coping strategies do working, sandwiched couples use – and which are most effective?

Sandwiched couples used three primary types of coping strategies. Two coping strategies had positive effects, and one had negative effects.

After role quality and personal characteristics were taken into account, coping strategies that focused on *seeking emotional support* and *prioritizing tasks* proved beneficial to both well-being and work outcomes. *Social withdrawal* strategies were associated with negative outcomes.

What are the effects of using workplace supports?

After role quality and personal characteristics were taken into account, use of *dependent-care supports* and use of *alternative work schedules* were related to higher levels of well-being. Use of both of these types of supports, however, was also related to higher levels of work-family conflict. In addition, use of alternative work schedules was related to higher levels of absenteeism. Use of dependent-care supports and alternative work schedules may enable employees to redistribute their activities and take on more work and family demands, which may lead to better well-being, but also to more negative work outcomes.

We found some support for the idea that *work-family culture* is more important in influencing work and family outcomes than the utilization of formal supports. Work-family culture refers to the assumptions, beliefs, and values of supervisors and coworkers with respect to the integration of work and family.

About the Authors

MARGARET B. NEAL is Director of the Institute on Aging and Professor of Community Health in the College of Urban and Public Affairs at Portland State University. For the past several years, Dr. Neal's research has focused on the challenges and opportunities faced by individuals who are balancing employment with providing informal care to children and/or elderly family members or friends, and the ways in which the public and private sectors can assist these caregivers. She has received several grants and written numerous articles, book chapters, and two previous books on these topics - *Balancing Work and Caregiving for Children, Adults, and Elders* (with Nancy Chapman, Berit Ingersoll-Dayton, and Arthur Emlen) and *Work and Caring for the Elderly: International Perspectives* (edited with Viola Lechner).

LESLIE B. HAMMER is Professor of Psychology in the Department of Psychology at Portland State University. She directs the Occupational Health Psychology program and the Center for Work-Family Stress, Safety, and Health, both funded by the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. Dr. Hammer's research has focused on the difficulties of coordinating the demands of work and family. Dr. Hammer has published widely on the ways in which organizations can help reduce work-family stress and improve positive spillover by facilitating both formal and informal workplace supports, and the importance of considering the dyad as the unit of analysis in work and family research. Dr. Hammer serves on the editorial boards of the *Sloan Work and Family Research Network's Online Work and Family Encyclopedia*, and the *Journal of Management* and the *Psychologist-Manager Journal*.

Recommendations

Employers and Managers

To improve employee well-being and minimize negative work outcomes, we suggest employers and managers:

- Minimize long work hours for employees.
- Provide flexibility in the place, hours, and time of work.
- Make available and advertise formal workplace supports, such as family leave (preferably paid), flexible work, dependent-care subsidies, and resource and referral information.
- Improve the organization's work-family culture, such as through increasing managerial sensitivity to, and support for, employees' work-family issues.

Government Policymakers

The United States lags far behind other countries in providing public policies that support family care. At a minimum, national and state policymakers in the United States should direct attention to the following two priorities:

- Implement policies that facilitate access to affordable, quality child care for working parents.
- Draw from family leave models in other countries, notably, universal child care and paid family leave, to develop a public framework to support families in the workplace.

Family-Care Practitioners

Family-care practitioners can assist working, sandwiched couples by helping them to:

- Avoid social withdrawal, especially in relation to one's spouse.
- Increase emotional resources.
- Prioritize tasks.
- Develop practical caregiving skills.
- Enhance the quality of relationships with spouse, children, and aging parents.
- Identify ways that aging parents may help or reciprocate.

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Sandwiched Couples

Our findings suggest that working couples caring for children and aging parents can improve their well-being in a number of ways. Specifically, we suggest that couples:

- Plan time for each other, and also for personal needs.
- Obtain practical support with caregiving, such as using available supports at work, getting help from family members, hiring outside help, and using available technology (e.g., cell phones, voicemail).
- Choose jobs with high levels of flexibility.
- Seek emotional support from family, friends, coworkers, supervisors, and consider joining a formal support group.
- Plan ahead and be prepared for unexpected events or emergencies.
- Decrease demands by choosing to stop certain activities, re-evaluating life and family priorities, reducing work hours, simplifying one's lifestyle, or reducing personal expectations.
- Find ways to ease stress, such as maintaining a sense of humor or relying on religious or spiritual beliefs.
- Avoid the temptation to take on additional responsibilities when making use of dependent care supports and alternative work schedules.

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