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Work Experience and Family Life

Abstract

The time-honored assumption that a link exists between the family system and the economic order is hardly a controversial one, and few authorities would question the more specific proposition that family stability in contemporary American society bears a relationship to the occupational prospects of the household head.¹ In times past, the family was generally an economic unity, and its members were integrated by virtue of the fact that they shared a number of work activities. Although the postindustrial family is no longer a work unit, it is still very much an economic entity. For example, the occupational status of the household head determines the social status of his or her family. Moreover, the family is still organized around an economic activity—consumption. The consumption of resources provides a kind of integration of the family and an arena for exchanging economic benefits for psychological rewards.²

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14 Work Experience and Family Life

Frank F. Furstenberg, Jr.

The time-honored assumption that a link exists between the family system and the economic order is hardly a controversial one, and few authorities would question the more specific proposition that family stability in contemporary American society bears a relationship to the occupational prospects of the household head.¹ In times past, the family was generally an economic unit, and its members were integrated by virtue of the fact that they shared a number of work activities. Although the postindustrial family is no longer a work unit, it is still very much an economic entity. For example, the occupational status of the household head determines the social status of his or her family. Moreover, the family is still organized around an economic activity—consumption. The consumption of resources provides a kind of integration of the family and an arena for exchanging economic benefits for psychological rewards.²

For a long period, students of the family were content merely to affirm the importance of the association between economic status and family life, but few empirical studies were undertaken that might specify the relationship more precisely. Recently, when researchers finally began to consider this question, a lack of consensus was immediately apparent. Particularly, considerable uncertainty has arisen about which economic actions, if any, might be taken to promote more durable family relations.

Indicative of the state of affairs is the festering debate over the Moynihan

report.³ It has now been nearly ten years since its publication, and the controversy over its conclusions has not subsided. Indeed, the past decade has witnessed far more energy expended in ideological debate than in the fact gathering that might better resolve some of the questions at issue. Surely the time has come to call a cease-fire, to reassess the current state of knowledge about work status and family stability, to identify the issues that have yet to be explored, and to draw what implications we can from the evidence at hand.

Some Methodological Issues

Before setting out, it is worthwhile to recall what William Goode pointed out a decade ago—that one's ideological position inevitably shapes one's definition of family instability.⁴ Moreover, Goode reminded us that the harmful effects of family instability are not always self-evident or to be taken for granted. This point has been reiterated in a recent review of the literature on fatherless families which concludes that the absence of a male is not ipso facto a reason for concern.⁵ The accumulated evidence suggests that the negative effects of broken homes may be somewhat overrated in sociological and psychological literature. Similarly, the deleterious effects of other types of family instability, such as out-of-wedlock parenthood, may be overstated. While recognizing the strong possibility that a wider variety of family forms will become normative in the future, it is nonetheless instructive to examine the sources of family instability in contemporary society. The question I take up in this paper is "What are the prospects of strengthening the family through improved economic opportunity in our society?"

In my discussion I shall consider specifically the effect of certain public policies on the quality of family life.

To answer this question, we must be far more specific about what is meant by both family stability and economic opportunity. As Ray Abrams wrote twenty years ago, it is possible to reach very different conclusions in empirical investigations depending on one's definition of family stability.⁶ Abrams's point is no less valid today. There is an uncomfortable lack of clarity in many of the studies that seek to associate family stability with economic factors. Referring to this problem, Reynolds Farley and Albert Hermalin have recently written that ". . . there is no consensus as to how . . . [family stability] is to be measured or how trends over time can be assessed."⁷ If their point is accepted, then we might expect conflicting and

contradictory evidence on the relationship between employment status and family stability.

This methodological problem cannot be solved by edict. Rather than arbitrarily restricting the concept, it seems more prudent to include most of the major indicators of family instability that have been employed in sociological studies. To avoid excessive confusion, it is also useful to make certain distinctions regarding the use of the term. Some writers have used "family instability" to refer to *structural* defects in family composition: the family may be incomplete—childbearing occurs outside marriage. It may be formed precipitately—the timing of marriage is forced by external events such as premarital pregnancy. Or it may be disrupted—either voluntarily through divorce, separation, or desertion, or involuntarily through death or serious illness. Another dimension of family instability, less easily measured, has to do with the *internal role relations* within the family. Many writers characterize the unstable family by referring to strains in the marriage or between parents and children. In this review, I shall include studies that identify both *structural and relational sources of instability*.

The use of the term is further complicated when one tries to determine the boundary of the family unit. Most researchers have elected not to extend their investigations beyond the nuclear family. This decision to ignore the extended family no doubt reflects an implicit cultural bias on the part of contemporary researchers that the nuclear family is the only viable kinship form in American society.⁸ A regrettable consequence of this provincialism has been the tendency to treat multigenerational households as examples of structural weakness rather than as examples of adaptation to meet certain kinds of economic situations.⁹

If there is a lack of clarity in the term "family instability," employment or occupational status presents even greater problems. The vast majority of sociological studies have used greatly simplified measures of the work status of individuals. Either they have merely dichotomized the population into working and nonworking portions, as is typically done in studies of female employment, or they have used some hierarchical categorization of occupational prestige—such as blue-collar versus white-collar. In so doing, these studies have restricted the theoretical analysis of the relationship between work and family life. Since they capture so little of the quality of the work experience, they have relatively little to say about the way that experience impinges on family life (or they are forced to provide improvised and

ad hoc explanations, which, though often plausible, are rarely conclusively demonstrated).

Relatively few studies have measured such important features of the work experience as duration of employment, time spent at work, compensation, security, occupational duties, and opportunities for promotion. Presumably all of these factors could have a direct bearing on family relations.¹⁰ Even less studied is the way the job experience is perceived either by the job holder or by other members of the family.¹¹ Finally, little is known about the families in which more than one member is a job holder. Most studies have examined the effects on family relations of the occupation of the male, disregarding the fact that approximately half of all females are currently employed. While there has been some investigation of the impact that working wives have on family relations,¹² few studies have explored the changes brought about when two or more members are employed.

Contributing to the limited explanatory power of most of the existing studies of employment experience and family stability is the uncertainty over the causal nexus between the two variables. Nearly all the studies that have been conducted to date are cross-sectional—that is, they consider the relationship between employment and family stability only at one time. Typically, they assume that employment conditions are the independent or causal agent that shapes family relations. Daniel Moynihan's insistence that family experience, both past and present, can influence the prospects of stable employment, suggests the possibility of a more complicated interaction between the two factors.¹³ There is some evidence, albeit limited, to suggest that family experience, at least early in life, may constrain employment opportunities.¹⁴ Careful consideration of this problem awaits longitudinal studies which would trace individuals' life histories over a period of years, following them through the family life cycle.¹⁵

Even a cursory examination of the existing literature reveals a preponderance of studies about low-income families, concentrating on poor blacks.¹⁶ While there may be some justification for this special focus, we lack information on employment experience and family life among the middle class. The nearly exclusive focus on lower- and working-class families raises an additional methodological problem. Even if we assume that an individual's employment situation is an important determinant of family disharmony, there are obviously a host of other factors that are sources of instability within the family, such as low levels of education, economic

deprivation, poor interpersonal skills, lack of support from extended kin, and pressure from unwanted pregnancies.¹⁷ Since all of these factors are common among the poor, how can we determine whether employment experience, exclusive of these concomitant conditions, exerts an effect on their family life? It would be helpful, of course, to study the impact of employment in a variety of family types, holding constant other factors that might have an impact on family relations, but few studies have introduced this type of control procedure.

In spite of the need for more sophisticated studies, it is useful to take stock of what we now know about the relationship between work experience and family life. While the research may be deficient in the respects I have outlined, it does reveal certain consistent trends. These trends at the very least provide a tentative basis for programmatic recommendations. Further researchers may refine these conclusions, but they are not likely to repudiate them.

Occupational Status and Family Structure

Family Formation

No more than a half dozen studies examine the effect of occupational position on the decision to marry. Several studies of premarital pregnancy refer to the fact that the timing of marriage may be influenced by the economic position of the male when the pregnancy occurs.¹⁸ Extrapolating from this hypothesis, I have suggested in a previous article that the high rate of illegitimacy among lower-income families in general, and poor blacks in particular, may be attributable to the uncertain occupational position of the males.¹⁹ Although compelling demographic evidence has yet to be assembled, several small-scale studies lend support to this interpretation. Case material from studies of black, unwed mothers reveals that expectant mothers often reject the possibility of marriage if their sexual partner is currently unemployed and has limited occupational prospects in the future.²⁰ In a study that I conducted in Baltimore, young women reported that they would be foolish to marry when their boyfriends were "unsettled" in their jobs.²¹ Typically, those who did marry perceived that their husbands would be capable of supporting their families.

The part the occupational situation of the male plays in his willingness to marry when a pregnancy occurs has not been established. It is known that

economic status can influence sexual patterns and contraceptive practice among males.²² It may be hypothesized that men who have a high investment in their careers are more careful in their selection of sexual partners and more scrupulous about using contraception when they engage in premarital sexual relations.²³ Whether or not these men are prepared to marry if a pregnancy occurs may well depend on whether they perceive that their career would be jeopardized by a precipitate marriage.

In one of the few studies on the effect of work on the timing of marriage, Robert Rapoport reasons that men attempt to coordinate their marriages to fit the demands of their occupations: “. . . A higher average age at marriage occurs in occupations that require lengthy specialized training, in occupations that require extraordinary commitment and/or detachment from human involvements, in occupations that defer entry into full status because of inheritance patterns, and in occupations that fail to provide sufficient economic return or stability of employment to support a wife.”²⁴

In an extensive analysis of the 1960 census data, Hugh Carter and Paul Glick reach the same conclusion.²⁵ Moreover, they suggest that from the point of view of career earnings, there may be an optimal age to begin family building. Although the data they marshal are extremely sketchy, their findings suggest that lower-class men may be disadvantaged by being constrained to marry either too early or too late. The authors do not explain why men in lower-status occupations are less likely to marry in their early twenties, the age when most middle-class males wed. The discussion points to one obvious determinant, however: these men do not represent an attractive long-range prospect for marriage; to women, their occupational histories appear unstable and their futures uncertain. Thus they marry either quite young when marriage is forced by a premarital pregnancy or much older when women begin to feel that they cannot do appreciably better by deferring marriage any longer. In brief, men whose occupational careers are unpredictable tend to be less predictable in establishing marital relations.

Whatever the reason for these irregular marriage patterns, the effect on family life has been well documented. A large number of studies have shown that early marriages are highly conducive to family instability,²⁶ and there is some evidence that late marriages also have low prospects for success.²⁷ Many reasons have been offered to explain the frequent failure of early marriages—such as absence of parental support, immaturity, poor inter-

personal skills, and frequent childbearing. The explanation most relevant to this discussion is that the male faces limited career opportunities. The responsibilities of providing for the immediate needs of his family generally limit his chances of getting further training for occupational advancement. Unlike the unmarried male, he cannot afford to take chances by returning to school or searching for a better job. As Burchinal summarizes the situation, ". . . with employment largely limited to unskilled and semi-skilled jobs, young marriages generally are established and maintained on a meager economic basis."²⁸ Thus the situation of the lower-status male who marries early can be likened to a man caught in a revolving door—he steps in because he has no place to go and he frequently leaves because he is going no place.

The metaphor of the revolving door points out the artificiality of trying to establish that career prospects cause marital stability. It is not hard to see why men with limited hopes of the future might be willing to marry early. After all, there is little reason for them to wait. But by marrying early they contribute to their own occupational stagnancy—as their family responsibilities mount their career flexibility diminishes.

Family Permanence

In contrast to the sketchy information on the relation of occupational status to family formation, there is an abundance of data on its relation to marital stability. As noted earlier, more attention has been given to the existence of a link between the two variables than to the reasons why such a link exists. Some of the earliest information comes from studies of the depression.²⁹ Almost all of the data collected in the thirties were based on case histories and pertained to the effect of unemployment on internal family organization. The single exception was a study that suggested that high unemployment decreases both family formation and family dissolution.³⁰ It is not difficult to understand why poor economic conditions would reduce marriages rates, but it is less obvious why they would curtail the incidence of family dissolution. One explanation is that divorce data in times of economic crisis may be misleading. Those who might otherwise resort to legal means of marital termination are forced by economic circumstances to resort to unofficial means such as desertion.

This explanation may also account for the fact that the earliest studies of marital instability within different occupational groups revealed higher rates of divorce among professionals and white-collar workers than among the

semiskilled and unskilled. In all likelihood, the cost and difficulty of getting a divorce limited the opportunities of lower-status individuals to use this method of dissolving their marriages. Recently divorce has become more accessible to the poor, although restrictions may still not have completely disappeared. In any event, consistent evidence from a large number of studies has established the fact that divorce is most common in lower-status occupations.³¹ And within each class, proneness to divorce varies by occupation.

If we add the number of marriages that break up because of separation and desertion to the number that break up because of divorce, the evidence of a correlation between occupational status and marital disruption is far more powerful. In a study of the 1960 census data, J. Richard Udry reports a strong relationship between the occupational status of males and rates of marital disruption (resulting from divorce, separation, and remarriage). "The relationship between occupational status and marital stability for men," Udry writes, "is direct and unequivocal."³² Interestingly, he finds that within each occupational group blacks are twice as likely to experience marital failure as whites. A study by Jessie Bernard and one by Hugh Carter and Paul Glick also present evidence of the effect that occupational standing has on marital stability.³³ In general, rates of marital instability are roughly twice as high among service workers and laborers as among professionals, with other occupational groups falling in between. Reiterating Udry's results, these studies report that blacks have much higher rates of marital disruption, even holding occupational status constant.

Jessie Bernard examines the effect on family stability of income, education, and occupation simultaneously. Of the three, income is by far the most powerful determinant of marital instability, although occupation continues to have some effect on marital dissolution even when income is held constant. Bernard's controls are relatively crude, however, and a more precise analysis might reveal that a major reason for the relationship of occupational status to marital instability is income differentials between various job categories.

Income, both in the form of present wages and the prospect of future earnings, may be especially decisive in the erosion of marital relations within the working and lower classes. Goode alludes to this possibility when he cites as one reason for the greater propensity of lower-class marriages to break up the fact that the "costs" of divorce are low for these people—that

is, neither partner has a high economic stake in the marriage. The importance of occupational standing, then, in large measure derives from the indication it provides to both husband and wife of their economic future. Perhaps this is one reason why blacks continue to have lower rates of stable marriages even when they possess comparable educational and occupational qualifications. Since blacks are likely to earn less regardless of their qualifications, occupation may serve less well as a prognosticator of future economic position. The importance of occupation as a predictor of future earning power becomes even more apparent later when we consider studies of the impact of occupation on relations within the family.

Occupational Status and Family Relations

Family Disorganization

In studies on the impact of the depression, considerable attention was given to the question of whether loss of employment and downward occupational mobility adversely affected family relations. It should be pointed out that the term "family relations" is a particularly value-laden one, and some of the studies assumed a priori that there was a deterioration in the marriage if the male was forced to share some of his decision-making authority with either his wife or his children. Despite the difficulty of defining such terms as "family integration" and "marital harmony," there is a remarkable degree of uniformity in the findings of these early studies.³⁴ Typically, the initial reaction to unemployment was disorganization: "... when the husband could not find any work, his role suffered in the eyes of other members of the family. Wives sometimes lost their respect or accused their husbands of not trying to find work. Unless the husband could work out some role in the household (difficult to do), he really had no role to play."³⁵

Just how seriously the husband's position was undermined depended in part on the type of role he played prior to the time he lost his job. If the husband had had a primarily utilitarian role (that is, if he had earned the respect of his family through the economic support he provided), obviously the impact of unemployment on his position in the family was more severe than if his authority derived from his position as patriarch. In the latter case, he continued to maintain political authority even when his economic position was undercut.

The extent to which we can extrapolate information about the current situ-

ation from these early studies of unemployment is questionable. Both the social context and the organization of the family are considerably different today.³⁶ Several important findings stand out, however, when these early studies are reviewed. First, there is a tremendous variability in the way that families mediate the crisis of unemployment. To a considerable degree, the prior organization of the family either promotes or prevents deterioration. Moreover, it matters greatly whom the family members blame for the loss of employment. If "the system" is blamed, family members rally around the former breadwinner, but if he is deemed responsible, their support is withdrawn. His position within the family is unaffected if unemployment is perceived as temporary. But when joblessness persists, naturally the position of the formerly employed is diminished, particularly when other family members find employment.

These three elements—inflexibility within the family organization, the tendency to blame the jobless breadwinner for his inability to find work, and the perception of low opportunities for future employment—which were characteristic of low stability among depression families, are found in lower-class families today, particularly poor black families. In the ghetto, many marriages begin early, often as the result of premarital pregnancy. Because of low levels of education, the couple often have limited communication skills and are not likely to have common interests and activities.³⁷ They are placed under considerable economic pressure because of frequent childbearing.³⁸ When unemployment occurs, the family is ill equipped to handle the strain, for rarely has it had time to accumulate savings, and extended kin can provide only limited assistance.

This high risk family situation is further complicated by the fact that the unemployed husband frequently blames himself and/or is blamed by his wife for his situation. As Lee Rainwater, in a recent study of lower-class family life, has written:

The economic marginality of husbands seemed generally to be converted into a moral issue; the wives maintain not that their husbands cannot but that they will not support them. This may seem an insignificant distinction because the effect is the same: lack of sufficient income to support a family. Within the family, however, it is not a minor issue at all because the moral opprobrium encourages the wife, the children, and the husband himself to locate the nature of the problem in the husband's character rather than in his socioeconomic situation.³⁹

Reinforcing the view that the unemployed male is responsible for his

situation is the fact that he is likely to be eligible only for jobs that offer episodic employment or that pay so little that even full-time employment does not offer enough compensation to support his family. Elliot Liebow observes from his study of street-corner men that "a man's chances for working regularly are good only if he is willing to work for less than he can live on, and sometimes not even then."⁴⁰ He is unlikely to be committed to those jobs that he can get, and as Liebow puts it, "He cannot draw from a job those social values which other people do not put into it."

The lower-class male's position is further undermined by his wife's ability to obtain menial employment and her willingness to work at jobs that he, and the larger society, defines as unacceptable. Thus, at the same time that her view of him is confirmed, the lower-class male is likely to be put at a competitive disadvantage vis-à-vis his wife. It is little wonder, then, that several studies have shown that lower-class males, especially blacks, are opposed to their wives working.⁴¹ Joan Aldous, in a study of working-class wives, discovered that black men are less likely to assume family responsibility if their wives work. She concluded: ". . . those Negro males who perceive themselves as relative failures, i.e., lower achievers, with little hope of success, are also more prone to feel that they are failing in their family role performance. . . . intervention attempts to improve the lot of the Negro family should focus on men and their work. For the Negro man to be an active husband-father appears to presuppose the Negro man as family breadwinner."⁴² Thus, resentment toward the wife as a secondary wage earner is likely to decrease only when the lower-class male feels confident of his own earning capacity.

Marital Satisfaction

The erosion of family relations resulting from chronic unemployment or persistent underemployment does not necessarily imply that a low-status job, if held on a steady basis, will have an adverse effect on family relationships. But, while the evidence is less than unequivocal, there is reason to believe that marital satisfaction increases with occupational status. Several recent studies have reported a disproportionate number of unhappy marriages among blue-collar and unskilled workers.⁴³ What is left unanswered by these studies is whether occupational status has any effect on marital relations that is independent of effects of income and education. Norman Bradburn and David Caplovitz do find a tendency for men who are dissatisfied with their jobs to be dissatisfied in their marriage also. Yet they report that there is "still considerable independence between adjustment in the marital role and

adjustment in the work role."⁴⁴ Karen Renne's findings point to the importance of income, particularly among blacks: "Income is more closely related to marital dissatisfaction than is either education or occupation, probably because it has an independent and very concrete impact on a couple's daily life . . . the domestic problems of black couples can be attributed primarily to economic deprivation."⁴⁵ She also discovers that job satisfaction for males is related to marital happiness. Income is a central component of job satisfaction—especially among blacks—and may, again, be the main link between occupational status and marital happiness.⁴⁶ As Levinger concludes in a study of the sources of marital dissatisfaction among applicants for divorce, many individuals are "so heavily engaged with coping to satisfy needs at the first and second level (desire for substance and safety) that they are unable . . . to worry about the achievements of mature love and interpersonal respect. . . ."⁴⁷ It seems impossible to doubt that economic security is a virtual prerequisite for marital harmony.

In his extensive study of marital relations in working- and middle-class families, John Scanzoni goes further than anyone to date in detailing the process by which low economic status erodes marital cohesion.⁴⁸ He is able to demonstrate that men who derive material and symbolic rewards from their work are more likely to gain esteem within the family, as they are able to exchange external rewards for emotional allegiance and deference from other family members. Conversely, Scanzoni has discovered that men who are at the bottom of the status ladder suffer limited bargaining power vis-à-vis their wives and children. Commanding less respect from their families by virtue of their external position, low-status men are forced to draw on traditional sources of power, claiming a historical right to greater authority within the family. Working-class women, in turn, feel resentful and respond by further withdrawing emotional support. Each partner protects his tenuous position by giving as little as possible to the other.⁴⁹

Parent-Child Relations

It is clear that much of what has been said about the corrosive effects of unemployment, underemployment, and menial employment on marital relations applies to parent-child relations also. Elliot Liebow's study of the black men on Tally's Corner bears this out. He discovered that men were propelled away from the home—in part because they could not face the daily reminder of their inability to provide for their children. Consequently, relations were actually better among men who did not live with their offspring: "The man

who lives with his wife and children is under legal and social constraints to provide for them. . . . The chances are, however, that he is failing to provide for them, and failure in this primary function contaminates his performance as father in other respects as well."⁵⁰

What Liebow found to be characteristic of the relationship of the lower-class black father to his children may exist in a less dramatic fashion in families of working-class males.⁵¹ A number of studies have pointed out that blue-collar fathers are less inclined than white-collar and professional fathers to become emotionally involved with their children; their parental style tends to be more distant and removed. Whether this pattern of childrearing has conspicuously negative effects has not been established. There is some evidence that children of blue-collar families feel less close to their fathers as they enter adolescence and adulthood than their middle-class counterparts do.⁵²

Most of these studies point to the unmistakable conclusion that "the father's occupational achievement has become the cornerstone for his success both as a father and as a man."⁵³ Again, it is useful to recall the findings of the depression studies on family life: while occupational failure did not guarantee loss of the father's esteem within the family, unless efforts were made to explain, discount, or neutralize the misfortune of the breadwinner, children were likely to resent his economic failure.

Apart from the way occupational prestige influences the character of parent-child relations, a man's work also shapes the values and expectations imparted to his children. Melvin Kohn has conducted the most extensive research on the way that occupational position patterns parental values and childrearing behavior.⁵⁴ He finds consistent evidence that certain occupational experiences, particularly those common to unskilled and semiskilled jobs, encourage parents to instill a high degree of behavioral restraint in their children. While these authoritarian patterns need not foster dissent between parents and children, they tend to restrict the children's occupational mobility and reduce their adaptability to changes in their environment. The implication of Kohn's findings is that parents' work experience may have subtle but profound consequences for the social adjustment of their children.

Implications for Policy

Despite the many issues left unsettled, and the occasional points where findings are contradictory, there is a high degree of consistency in the evi-

dependence linking occupational experience to family stability. Piecing together conclusions from a variety of studies, there can be little doubt that economic uncertainty brought on by unemployment and marginal employment is a principal reason why family relations deteriorate. Those who hold low-status jobs command less loyalty from spouses primarily because they offer less financial security than other workers. Not only is their current economic contribution unacceptably low, but prospects for betterment in the future are usually nonexistent. Indeed, the lower-class worker cannot even be sure of maintaining the job he currently holds, much less of improving his position over time. In short, in the eyes of his family and himself, he represents a poor investment.

By contrast, white-collar and many working-class occupations afford much greater economic protection. The conscientious worker can usually look forward to a reasonable degree of security, and he generally anticipates a more rewarding, and frequently more interesting position after some years on the job. The fact that these expectations are not always realized is of less importance than the widely held belief that they might come true.

Most jobs are arranged in some kind of progressive sequence, or what might be loosely termed a "career." Particularly in bureaucratic organizations, the worker can expect to "move from less to more desirable positions, and the flow is usually, but not necessarily, related to age."⁵⁵ One of the most salient features of lower-class jobs is the absence of a career route, that is, a predictable and prearranged pattern of mobility for the job holder. Indeed, the only predictable feature of the job is that the worker can anticipate low mobility and probably little security. Thus, not only is the lower-class worker relegated to employment that is boring, unappreciated, and poorly paid, but he is also led to expect, unlike most workers, that his situation will not improve. I contend that it is the absence of a work career that has the most unsettling effects on family life.

There is some evidence that when jobs are arranged in an orderly and predictable fashion, the worker's social relations tend to be more stable and more regular. For example, Harold Wilensky has shown that community involvement is greater among people whose occupational career was arranged in an orderly sequence.⁵⁶ Similarly, we might expect more enduring relations within the families of such workers. And the worker who is assured of some degree of security and advancement in his job is more likely to have a greater stake in his work. As Marc Fried has written, "Good productive

work and self-fulfillment seldom co-exist with fear and lack of hope."⁵⁷ As the breadwinner invests more in his job, he can be expected to invest more in his family, and they, in him.

Work careers and family careers are, then, inextricably bound together. Family members orient their current relations, at least in part, to their expectations of each other's role performance in the future. Concretely, this means that if they cannot foresee the potential of a successful occupational career, there is a reluctance to initiate or maintain a family career. Thus, if patterns of work experience do indeed foreshadow instability in family relations, then it may be necessary to restructure certain types of jobs in order to decrease family instability.

Is it feasible to imagine that menial jobs can be restructured to promote greater investment by the employee in his work? Herbert Gans and others have pointed out that "dirty work," by definition, is work that nobody wants.⁵⁸ However, it is unclear whether it is the intrinsic requirements of the work that make them so undesirable or the way the work is organized. As Gans notes, the main reason why these jobs are so despised is that they are low-paying and unstable and lead nowhere. It is entirely possible, therefore, that the difference between "good jobs" and "dirty work" has as much to do with the way that the work is arranged and rewarded as it does with the demands made on the worker. If this is so, many menial jobs might be made far more acceptable if they could be organized into long-term careers. Occupations that are currently regarded as "dirty work" could be upgraded by providing the possibility of advancement and offering other benefits to the employee and his family. All workers who demonstrated reasonable competence and willingness could be guaranteed job security and at least a limited degree of mobility in their "careers."

Let us take a specific case. A young person might become a nursing home attendant without specific skills or a high school diploma. After receiving initial training on the job, he would advance beyond the apprenticeship stage and enter the occupation. Thereafter, the jobholder would be encouraged to take courses to increase his skills and would receive credits toward promotion as he demonstrated higher levels of competence. He would have some latitude in redefining his duties as he acquired further training, experience, and demonstrated special skills. For instance, the experienced attendant would be encouraged to assist in the planning of his work, arrange his own schedule, and aid in the supervision and training of apprentices. During

the early part of his career, salary increments would rise steadily; later on, the worker might benefit more from special kinds of compensation such as increased vacation time, educational scholarships for his children, housing allowances, and so on. In short, both the quality of the job and the rewards accorded would induce the worker to remain on the job and invest in his work.

It is not unreasonable, given the evidence presented earlier, to expect that the ready availability of such "careers" might do much to reduce family instability. Couples could marry with the assurance of job security in the present and reasonable economic advancement in the future. More importantly, the position of the lower-class male within the family would not be undermined over time. He and his family could be sure that he would always be in a position to support them.

Some authorities would argue that lower-class males, particularly in their teens, would reject the possibility of such careers even if they were offered them. This would undoubtedly occur in some instances, but there is every reason to believe that the majority would welcome the opportunity to work if decent employment opportunities were available.⁵⁹ It is interesting to note how estimates of the number of so-called hard-core unemployed vary considerably depending on the national economic picture. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that work patterns have less to do with individual values and personalities than with the type of jobs available.

The idea proposed here is not really so far-fetched. After all, many menial jobs, especially those that have become unionized, have already been organized in this fashion. Other jobs that have been considered low-status, such as migrant workers and hospital orderlies, are being restructured along the lines suggested in this paper. The major obstacle to further upgrading is cost. Obviously, it is more expensive to arrange menial labor in the fashion that I have outlined than it is to keep it low-paying and unstable. The indirect costs of menial jobs are rarely considered in such calculations, however. Little effort has been devoted to the difficult task of assigning costs to the consequences of unemployment and underemployment, whether they be the expenses of the criminal justice system, public assistance, mental health clinics, or medical services for the indigent. Considering merely the indirect cost discussed in this paper—the effects of limited employment opportunities on family life—it is clear that the upgrading of "dirty work" jobs might yield a tremendous saving in welfare payments alone by promoting greater

family stability within low-income families.

The literature on work experience and family life suggests that manpower policies that attempt to strengthen the family by providing employment to the jobless are not likely to succeed if the jobs offered are low-paying and unstable and offer little chance for advancement. Indeed, relegating people to "dirty work" jobs is more likely to erode family relations than to ameliorate them. It should be the responsibility of the federal government to help create not only jobs but also occupational careers. One of many benefits that might follow from this effort would be a more stable and gratifying family life for many Americans.

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Work and the Quality of Life
Resource Papers for *Work in America*

Edited by James O'Toole

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