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Making Family under a Shiftwork Schedule: Air Force Security Guards and Their Wives*

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Through 90 in-depth interviews with 44 rotating shiftworkers and their spouses, this study examines how couples adjust their routines in order to interact as a family unit. We suggest that their views of marital roles are a critical force shaping their practices of daily family life. Wives, even when employed, are responsible for coordinating the individual schedules of family members to match that of the shift-working husband. Wives pay a price for this adjustment work in the form of biological, and emotional symptoms similar to those previously reported only for shiftworkers. Despite their efforts to be providers, husbands pay a price in terms of guilt and anger when work demands limit their ability to fully participate in family life. Further, dual-earner couples rely on husbands ("father care") and informal arrangements to cover child care for economical and social reasons, not simply to provide husbands with an opportunity to interact with children. Yet, despite higher levels of father care, traditional gender roles have not been altered in that working wives still retain primary responsibility for children.

The cohesiveness of a family would seem to depend on members sharing certain routine practices and events, such as meals and at least some leisure activities. For a growing share of the American labor force, however, working shifts outside the normal daylight hours—what we here call "shiftwork"—makes synchronizing the lives of spouses and other family members difficult (see Presser and Cain 1983; Hayghe 1981; Hedges and Sekscenki 1979).

Existing research shows that both male and female shiftworkers report high levels of stress and a sense of conflict between the demands of work and family life. For instance, male shiftworkers are frustrated by their inability to protect the family and provide companionship to their spouses (Mott et al. 1965; Piotrkowski 1979), while female shiftworkers are less satisfied with time spent with their families than are women working regular daytime hours (Tasto et al. 1978). Lack of control over time is seen as a primary cause of stress for both male and female shiftworkers (Staines and Pleck 1983; Voydanoff 1988).

Only a few studies have considered the impact of shiftwork on the attitudes and behaviors of family members other than shiftworkers. Mott et al. (1965) report that wives of shiftworkers were dissatisfied with their inability to maintain a stable home life, in part because they had difficulty performing normal household chores around their husbands' schedules. Three other studies indicate that stresses created by spouse's work schedule may intensify conflicts over demands of work and family life for both spouses (Staines and Pleck 1983; Lein et al. 1974; Voydanoff 1988). Shiftwork therefore not only negatively affects the shiftworkers themselves, but also seems to threaten their spouses' perceived quality of life and happiness.

Insightful though it is, this prior research has limited utility for understanding how fam-

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ily members define their roles under a shiftwork schedule, and the subtle and complex ways that work and family roles shape one another. Most prior studies have relied on workers' reports of the effects of shiftwork on spouses (but see Mott et al. 1965), and survey questions and indices are often limited to vaguely defined issues of happiness and satisfaction. More generally, by concentrating only on the employed spouse, prior studies have obscured what is in fact a three-way relationship. Work in the public sphere of paid employment affects both the worker and the worker's spouse; however, wives and husbands also contribute to their spouses' ability to perform for employers through the work they do at home (Finch 1983). In short, both commonsense and professional distinctions between public (work) and private (home, family) spheres may lead us to overlook activities that bind them together.

In this paper, we report on results from a larger study of the effects of rapidly rotating shiftwork among military personnel and their families (Charlton and Hertz 1989). Here we examine how shiftworkers and their spouses experience and manage their schedules and their lives in order to achieve a sense of a cohesive family unit. In the following section we describe the settings from which we collected our data, particular features of the sample, and the kinds of questions we asked in our interviews. After that we discuss the idea of "a 'normal' family life," the standard in terms of which the couples in our sample judged their own experience. We then describe husbands' and wives' comparisons of their expectations about married life with their experience of it, and how they responded differently to the gaps they saw. How dual-earner couples in our sample tried to mesh work and family is the object of a following section, and the paper concludes with a discussion of a broader social context within which studies of work and family might be located.

Setting, Sample, and Methods

In 1985 we conducted 90 interviews with 44 volunteer married couples (and two married men whose wives were unavailable) in which the husband was a security specialist at two U.S. Air Force bases located in the eastern part of the United States.¹ Security Specialists, the largest career field in the Air Force (Charlton and Hertz 1989), have the job of guarding weapons and aircraft around the clock. They protect against unauthorized trespasses by pilots unfamiliar with the day's code words, by civilians (e.g., hunters or protesters), and by possible terrorists or spies.²

We interviewed at two Air Force bases in an attempt to gauge any base-specific responses. The security police squadrons at each base were roughly the same size and both squadrons operated on the same rotating shift schedule. These security guards rotated between "mid" (11 p.m. to 7 a.m.) and "swing" (3 p.m. to 11 p.m.) shifts. They all worked six days and then had three days off, regardless of shift. The nine-day cycle means that these workers (including day workers) experienced weekends as out-of-sync.

Career security officers at each base provided us with background statistics on their squadrons, including the number of married specialists, of couples with children, of specialists whose wives worked outside the home, and the distribution of security specialists by rank. We used these data to draw matched proportional and theoretical samples (Bailey 1982;

1. Although women have been allowed into the Air Force since 1971, they were not allowed into the career field at the time we did our study. So, our sample of workers consists only of men. Different patterns could emerge when the shiftworkers are primarily women. However, 60 percent of the wives in our sample are employed, and they don't all work day hours.

2. The "Security Police" in the U.S. Air Force is subdivided into two parts: the much larger group called "security specialists" and the much smaller group called "law enforcement." Those in law enforcement are responsible for the traditional police work within the Air Force; those in the security specialty are responsible only for guarding weapons and aircraft. The two receive different training, and staffing shortages have made it impossible for security personnel to move on to other fields of work.

Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss 1987) of spouses and shiftworkers who rotate between mids and swings and those who work fixed day shifts. This allowed us then to compare people who performed the same jobs and who lived in the same physical and social milieu but who did this according to very different timetables. We interviewed shiftworkers and their spouses at length, simultaneously but separately, about their individual and combined responses to their situation, making it possible to analyze how both responded to shiftwork in the context of their perceptions of and aspirations for a conventional family life.

The security specialists squadrons at both bases (and in the U.S. Air Force overall) are staffed overwhelmingly by "first terms" or enlisted men in the first three or four years of service (81 percent at one base, 76 percent at the other). We chose to over-sample career specialists from the remaining, more senior group, knowing that those families could provide us with a perspective on the first as well as on subsequent terms. With the exception of a few airmen and their wives, all couples had the experience of both day and night shifts.³ This allowed us to use their cumulative knowledge about the difference between the day shift and night shift as the basis for contrasts.

The interviews focused on dimensions of shiftwork identified by previous researchers as leading to conflict between the demands of work and family life: work role characteristics, perceived control over work schedule and job content, family characteristics (e.g., numbers and ages of children), household division of labor, and spouse's work situation. We also asked questions about the reference groups or settings husbands and wives used to assess their current feelings of happiness, conflict, or strain; their individual feelings or emotional responses to life under a shiftwork regimen (i.e., ones they might not discuss in the presence of their spouses); the devices or adjustments they, as individuals or as a family, developed to cope with shiftwork schedules (e.g., around meals, child care, recreation, family ceremonies, and holidays); and factors that influenced decisions whether or not to combine two jobs, children, and household chores.

All interviews lasted one and a half hours, were tape-recorded, subsequently transcribed, and then coded. We conducted additional interviews with selected officers and unmarried volunteers. Two-thirds of the security specialists worked rotating swing and mid shifts, while the other one-third worked on the day shift. This ratio of days to shifts is identical to the overall figures on each base. Nationally, the bulk of Air Force security guards are between the ages of 18 to 22. The median age for both husbands and wives in our sample is 24 years, reflecting our over-sampling of second-termers. These security specialists are enlisted personnel, not commissioned officers, and so are in the lower half of the military caste system. A high school diploma was the highest degree the majority of security specialists held, although several reported taking college classes part-time.

Of the 44 couples, twenty-eight have one or more children living at home (see Table 1). Nearly sixty percent of the wives are employed outside the home. These couples have been married from two months to 16 years (median 3.5). However, since we deliberately oversampled re-enlistees, our sample is more mature and more established than one would expect of security specialists overall; if these families experience difficulties linked to shiftwork schedules, one would predict that younger couples, married for shorter periods of time, would experience them even more intensely.

3. Shift assignment is a complex process in the Air Force. Seniority (classification and time-in-rank) often does not influence shift assignments; rather, the needs of a given base are the principle determinant. Thus, with the institutionalized system of periodic transfers between bases, someone who had been on days may be moved to rotating shifts at his or her next base, independent of classification or time-in-rank.

Table 1 • Shift Type and Family Status

	Families w/Children		Families w/o Children		Total
	<i>Days</i>	<i>Shifts</i>	<i>Days</i>	<i>Shifts</i>	
Wife employed	36% (4)	71% (12)	50% (2)	67% (8)	59% (26)
Wife/homemaker	64 (7)	29 (5)	50 (2)	33 (4)	41 (18)
Total	100 (11)	100 (17)	100 (4)	100 (12)	100 (44)

Living a "Normal" Family Life

Time is a dimension critical to the maintenance of shared activities that define the family as a primary group (Hood and Golden 1979). The 24-hour "clocks" in Figure 1 (below) were derived from our interviews and provide graphic evidence about how shiftwork schedules affect family time. Three contrasts between day and shiftworker families are important here. First, day worker families have more consistent opportunities to be together. His schedule and those of the children overlap substantially on a daily basis. Shiftworkers are not denied the opportunity for family time, but those time slots are far less consistent. Second, shiftwork schedules have a pronounced effect on the amount of interaction time available to families with children of different ages. Interestingly enough, shiftworker families with pre-school children have more opportunity to interact than even day worker families—an average of slightly over nine hours as against eight (see Staines and Pleck 1983). Yet, if we bear in mind that shiftworkers may spend a portion of their "awake" hours physically adjusting to their rotating schedules, then the advantage disappears. Third, shiftwork schedules directly affect the opportunities families have to participate in routine events such as the evening meal (Young and Willmott 1973; Tasto et al. 1978). Day worker families can eat together on a regular basis without substantially altering children's or husbands' routines; shiftworkers, by contrast, must suspend the evening meal as a family event for three to four days of a cycle or adjust the family meal (and the digestive process) to fit the husband's schedule.

Interviews with husbands and wives revealed that time together was more than just a background condition; it represented an important attribute of what they defined as a normal family life. For example, one day worker offered this assessment of shiftwork's effects: "I'd say the guys that work nights have a tougher job than I do now. It upsets the whole family structure . . . because of the fact that the husband and wife is not spending time together, and the husband's not spending enough time with the whole family as a whole." One particularly troublesome way shiftwork detracted from normalcy concerned the timing and the symbolic meaning of meals. Recalling the effects of types of shifts on family life, a dayworker said:

When I worked swing shifts, instead of us having dinner at a normal hour, at five or six o'clock, we had to have dinner at twelve o'clock in the afternoon. And that disrupts the whole family life, because who could picture an average normal couple having dinner at twelve o'clock in the afternoon?

One woman with a pre-school child said: "I figure if he went on days it would change all that [rotating meals]. It'd be sort of more like a family."

"Normal" families also were seen as those that did things together, such as socializing, recreation, or simply getting to know one another. But one former shiftworker talked about

Figure 1 • "Family Time" for Shiftwork Families When Wives Do Not Work Outside the Home

how his need for sleep clashed with his wife's desire for socializing and their going out together: "I know when I first got married, I was going home and I was hitting the sack and my wife was wide awake and wanting to go out and see places and do things." Because they were in and out of the house at odd hours, many shiftworkers were sensitive to the fact that even though they were home sleeping, they might just as well have been working from their children's point of view. One man captured this sentiment:

My kids don't really know where I am. When I wake up after a mid or something like that, I'll come downstairs and Randy'll say, "Dada's home." I have been home all day, but if I've been in bed, he thinks I'm gone. They think I'm gone all the time. When I do wake up or whatever, they are overjoyed to see me. "Dada's home. Dada's home." I've been there but I haven't been there.

This quote highlights a peculiar, but nonetheless very real, feature of shiftwork: the physical space in which the family resides remains fixed, but the temporal and social patterns that define it change dramatically over the course of the nine-day cycle.

Time for shared meals, family activities and togetherness are important parts of family

life in many settings. DeVault (1984) and Douglas (1972) argue, for example, that meals taken together bring family members out of the company of strangers and into a ritual which affirms the family unit. But, in equating shared meals and other activities with normal family life, the families in this study suggest implicitly that shiftwork intrudes into a "private" sphere and denies it control over the activities which exclude (or selectively include) strangers. As we will show in the next section, similar issues carry over to the way couples define marriage.

The Meaning of Marriage

Shiftwork couples, given the impediments described, still maintained a traditional stance regarding the meaning of marriage and the expected roles of husband and wife. Respondents expressed a willingness to do "whatever it takes" to approximate their view of a proper marriage, including sacrificing sleep and doing conventional things at unconventional hours. For the overwhelming majority of couples interviewed—even when wives worked outside their homes—a proper marriage is characterized by a very clear division of roles: husbands are "providers" whose principal responsibility is supporting the family; wives are "homemakers" who clean, cook, and care for husbands and children.

This traditional view of gender and family may be accounted for by social class background. Almost without exception, the security guards on the bases we studied came from working class families and few had been able to find full-time employment in their home towns. The majority of men enlisted in the Air Force within a year of completing high school. Like the working class couples in Rubin's (1976) study, these Air Force couples saw marriage as a way to leave their parent's homes and establish their independence. The couples we interviewed married young (the average age at time of marriage was 19.5 years for women and 20 years for men) and, for many, parenthood quickly followed. Asked what she thought marriage would be like, a twenty-year-old mother described expectations typical of her peers:

I just thought it would be heaven. I mean to be on your own, to just have you and your husband—not really have anybody to tell you what to do but rather you could talk about it. And just the independence. And just having that one person to care for, being able to share anything and everything with them.

As couples encountered shiftwork schedules, however, initial expectations about what it would take to create a marriage and family were put to a test. One woman, voicing her resignation to a fragmented life with her husband, expressed her dreams about what marriage was supposed to be:

[On days] it would make me feel like I had more of a home atmosphere, you know. That's the way I always expected being married—having the husband go off, come home in the evenings and spend the rest of the evenings together, you know that's the way we thought it would be. It don't work out that way.

But being out-of-sync has not led these Air Force couples to alter their traditional beliefs about marriage or to redefine marriage in response to work demands (see also Charles and Brown 1981; but see Gerstel and Gross 1984). When asked in the separate interviews what it meant to be a "good wife" or a "good husband," traditional views prevailed. Wives emphasized support, nurturance, and homemaking: "A good wife? Understanding, compassion, accepting and, um, just being there for him, through the good times and the bad times and being able to sit down and just talk." Another woman said:

Being a good wife, I think, is having dinner when he's exhausted, or coming home from work tired and having dinner, and saying, "Is there something I can do for you?" I mean not too much, 'cause he'll take advantage of you. But I think to have dinner ready for him, and to make sure his clothes are cleaned and ironed, and make sure the house is straightened up when he comes home.

The women's definitions of a "good husband" are typified by the following wife's response:

I expect him to be a good provider, and be there when I need him, loyal, about the same things as he would expect out of me, except I expect him not to dominate over me. But in a manner of speaking, when it's time to be a man I expect him to stand up and be one instead of sitting back expecting me to do everything.

Husbands, in turn, emphasized their roles as breadwinners, providers, and parents:

To be a good husband? Well, I guess in my upbringing, it's always been the provider. You know, being there when it counts . . . being there in a crisis. If there's a crisis going on and you gotta be there sorta to help straighten it out. Like I said, it's being there, being a good provider, being a good father, I guess.

To these men, a good wife was someone who was:

[U]nderstanding of what I feel I go through at work. I need that respect at work, or I hope I get it at work. I want my wife to realize what I expect at work. I don't want her to give me a lot of shit when I come home from work because—I don't know if this makes much sense but—I expect to be treated one way at work and once I come home I don't want to have it flip flop. I'm a supervisor and from the lower half of the flight I don't expect a bunch of crap. When I come home, I want the same thing.

More than just platitudes, these views seemed critical to maintaining the marriages and families of the shiftworkers we studied. First, they endorse a marital bond that transcends the physical and temporal separation between husbands and wives. Second, they provide a reference point—however distant it may seem—for defining a "normal" marriage. And, third, they lay the foundation for a marital division of labor in which "homemaker" and "provider" are accurate descriptors of daily life. And, while these views and this division of labor may enabled these couples to maintain what they believe to be a normal family, they also benefited the Air Force. Wives' commitments to husband and family provided a hidden benefit to military employers in the form of activities in the private sphere (e.g., staggered meal preparation, adjustment of time schedules and events) that are essential to his following a shiftwork schedule. To the extent that characteristics of his job impose demands on her life and that of the family, the fiction of a public as distinct from private sphere becomes more apparent. In this context, it is useful to examine the roles of "homemaker" and "provider" separately.

Women's Work: Constructing Family Life

For all families, external institutions and relationships structure the opportunities members have for interacting and, thus, for achieving a sense of cohesiveness (Kanter 1977). Work and school schedules and commercial store hours establish a pattern of convenient opportunities for family members to share space and time. These institutions, however, also presume the availability of someone or some mechanism to coordinate people's comings and goings. For shiftworkers, the importance of this coordination to "making time" for family is underscored by its disruption. In this study, we found that wives bore that responsibility in three principal ways: (1) by altering the time segments in which family activities took place; (2) by adjusting children's routines and, in the process, learning to deal with children in the absence of their husbands; and (3) by subordinating their own feelings of boredom and frustration to their husbands' work. These actions bind family members together and are essential prerequisites for husbands' successful job performance.

Managing Time and Activities

Shiftwork affects the ability to reproduce family on a daily basis and shiftwork wives must learn early on how to adjust the family schedule every three days. Without this "adjustment work" (DeVault 1984:80), few feel they can approximate "normal" family life. For instance, wives transfer household tasks and activities to atypical hours because following typical schedules would disrupt husbands' sleep. One working wife of a shiftworker explains:

Most people do their cleaning at maybe 10 o'clock in the morning and I'm doing mine at 8 o'clock at night instead, I'm going with the vacuum cleaner. I just adjusted . . . that's basically why Amy [her two-year-old daughter] doesn't go to bed early either. She's adjusted too.

Moreover, she tried to synchronize her children's eating with her husband's shift schedule:

Your life is more of an even thing on days [day shifts], instead of always being switched around. 'Cause right now, the kids come in, say he's working a mid, "I'm hungry." "Well, grab an apple." "I'm tired of apples, I want food." "I'll cook in a minute. Wait 'til Dad wakes up." And then they say, "But why do we have to wait, why can't he eat it cold?"

While day-shift wives also stall children's meals as a form of adjustment, shiftwork wives commonly switch schedules as their husbands rotate between shifts. One wife with school age children describes two typical routines:

On swings, he stays in bed, I get the boys up and feed them, they go to school. Then he gets up, he eats and then he goes to work. Then the kids come home and then I feed them, put them to bed, then he comes home and I feed him, and I go to bed and he stays up. On the mids, then he comes in, okay, I'm feeding the kids, get them ready for school. While I got them finishing their breakfast and he sees 'em for a few minutes, if he gets home in time. And then I set them to school, and me and him just sit up for a little bit and watch TV. Then he goes to bed, and the boys come home from school, and then I start dinner.

Since men are absent during the dinner meal on the swing portion of the cycle, some wives report that they do not eat as well themselves. Only on certain segments of the shift cycle can all family members eat dinner together; meals with the husband present are more elaborate. In general, shiftwork wives reported having twice as much meal preparation as day-shift wives.

Leisure activities and intimate moments that occur for day-shift families before and after dinner must take place for shiftwork families after midnight on swing shifts. They thus must be managed, and wives generally assume that responsibility. As one wife explained: "What time we have together is usually after the kids are in bed. [On mids] it's one o'clock in the morning. It's a later time which cuts away from sleeping because the kids are going to be up at seven o'clock in the morning." Extraordinary events—such as holiday celebrations—may have to be moved to a different day to fit the husband's shift schedule.

For example, we interviewed at the first base several weeks before and after Christmas. Husbands and wives talked about the need to devise creative solutions in order to preserve family traditions. One veteran wife explained the contingent plans she devised for their holiday celebration:

I think he's on a swing on Thanksgiving. So uh, we'll have to see—dinner we're going to eat a noon meal or we'll have our big Thanksgiving dinner three days early or three days later. Christmas, if he's working a swing, okay, Christmas is pretty normal. If he's working a mid, like a mid Christmas Eve and a mid Christmas morning, we have our Christmas, Christmas Eve night, before he goes to work. When the kids were very small . . . a lot of times he would be out in the fields over Christmas. So then you'd have to celebrate your Christmas three days early or three days late.

Similarly, an employed wife explained:

He bought the tree while I was working . . . and he didn't want me to decorate it by myself. He

wanted to do it together. So I had to wait until 12:30 [a.m.] when he came home from work. I was sleeping. I had to wake up and get dressed and go decorate the tree in the middle of the night.

Thus, the activities are the same but the block of time during which they occur is shifted. By manipulating the time—not the activity—wives' adjustment work makes family life possible.

Adjusting Children's Lives

Wives not only adjust the time family activities occur but many also attempt to adjust their children's lives to coincide with the husbands' work schedule. In this regard, the life stage of the family becomes critical since another external organization—the school system—intervenes to structure family life. Two general patterns appear in our data: the family lives on the husband's work schedule regardless of whether the schedule calls for days or for rotating shifts; and wives and children live on a different schedule from the husband. When husbands work days, wives and children commonly match his schedule. Among shiftworkers, however, the first pattern is most often followed when children are pre-school and the wife is a homemaker; the second pattern tends to be followed when children are school age or the wife is employed outside the home.

Even though accommodation to the shiftworker's schedule threatens to render both children and wives "out-of-sync" with the outside world, it does provide a measure of family integration. One woman described why she let her son get into the habit of staying up late:

My son will stay up sometimes, like until midnight. I mean, because he's used to that. He likes to wait up for his Daddy to come home—a lot of times. He says, "Mom, where's Daddy?" Like that, and he'll wait for Daddy to come home. He got into that habit and if I do put him down at eight o'clock or nine o'clock at night when he's tired, he'll usually wake up around eleven or twelve and then he's up for a couple of hours.

Without adjustments of this sort, younger children often find it difficult to keep track of their father's schedules. For example, the kinds of questions shiftwork children ask are instructive:

They don't have his schedule down pat. The girls come in, "has Daddy eaten yet, tonight? Is Daddy sleeping here tonight?" I said, "Well, eating no, sleeping yes. He'll be in later on." You know and uh, so after they go to bed he'll go up the stairs and give 'em a kiss good night and check on them before he goes to sleep.

Older children, whose playmates and school bells do not operate on rotating shifts, are encouraged to plan for when their father is home. With their mother's help they figure out well in advance when they will have time to spend with their fathers. The nine day work cycle makes coordinating days off problematic for day families also. As one woman told us:

They know his days off as well as I do. We plan everything. And it rotates. This last week he has Saturday, Sunday, and Monday [off] 'cause the boys were out of school. So we make our plans for that. Now they know the next three days will be Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday, and they don't make any big plans.

While wives strive to get children and fathers together when both are awake, they must also keep them apart when fathers are asleep. This is especially difficult on cold winter days when children cannot be sent outside to play. One woman expressed her dilemma in the following way:

It's rough because Jason (the son) wants to go up and down the stairs. I'm trying to feed Carrie (the daughter), take care of her. I try to get them out of the house to visit someone. Most of the time it doesn't work out. It's hard. He usually doesn't sleep too solid because Jason'll be runnin' up and down these stairs. He wants to go up and play in his room. And the rooms are right next to each other, can't get no solid sleep, you know, every half an hour I hear him screamin'. But I try to keep 'em quiet as I can and it is hard with two of 'em, with the baby.

Finally, women typically feel like single parents who must make decisions without the support of spouses. In particular, wives felt the task of disciplining children became theirs alone and that this affected their children's behavior:

Well, the only other thing is that the discipline is on me—disciplining the kids when he's on swings and mids. On day shift, though, he has a big hand in it, and the kids are a lot better cause their dad's home. They push me till I'm about ready to choke 'em. Then Dad comes in and says, "Go to your room." And they just go right up, and I have to say, "Will you go to bed, will you go to bed!" But Dad just has to look at them, and they go right to bed.

Personal Adjustments

In its emphasis on the effect of scheduling on workers, existing research has tended to pay less attention to the biological and emotional impacts of shiftwork on spouses. In this study, we found three forms of personal adjustment common among shiftwork wives: attempting to match his biological schedule, arranging her schedule around his, and coping with feelings of isolation and frustration.

Getting less sleep was one way wives found more daily time with their husbands. Time for sleep and relaxation was especially precious for wives who had to awaken early to care for children and, in some instances, get to their own jobs. One woman who worked days at a department store explained how she tried to adjust her biological rhythm to her husband's shifts in order to see him when he works swings:

It sounds really weird but I try to go home sometimes and sleep like from 5 to 9 and get all my work done and then I'm up. I've slept a couple of hours so I can see Jay for a little while, play about an hours worth of Uno, and then go to bed. I've been trying this new system with myself—trying to sleep and wake up and then sleep again. It's starting to feel like you can't catch up on sleep that you've lost.

All shiftwork wives—those who are employed and those who are homemakers—report doing this, even if it's only briefly to ask "how did your day go?" These kinds of exchanges would seem to be a minimal basis for a marital bond.

Shiftwork wives also felt responsible for their husbands' sleep schedules. One woman said:

I try to make sure he gets his sleep, you know. Sometimes I just feel like going in there and saying, "Come on, get up, you're layin' in bed and I'm sittin' down here bored. So get up, let's do something." You know, I try to be patient and I'll sit there and watch the clock. But [I have to] make sure he gets his sleep . . . have his lunch all made; and I'll try to have his dinner ready, try to have everything, I try to arrange everything right about on his schedule.

Another wife talked about how she tries to resolve the feelings of resentment that arise when her husband sleeps during the day:

When we were first married, I wasn't very respectful of him sleeping, I think inside I wanted him to get up. I had a vacuum cleaner going and the blender, I had the TV up. He needed it turned down to sleep. And he told me one day, he said, "Look, you're really noisy." So we talked about it, we got adjusted to that. Now he'll tell me what time he wants to get up and I'll wake him up; I won't wake him before then. I have a girlfriend whose husband is security too, so whenever they have to work or something, maybe one or twice a week we'll do something together when they work. That makes it easier. Maybe that was it, I expected a lot more. And you have to adjust to it, I think, you either adjust or you have problems.

While the wife quoted above found a solution to her boredom by finding another wife in the same situation, this was not common for the majority of wives in our study. Most women did not have friends in similar circumstances and their girlfriends whose husbands work day

shifts were unavailable in the evenings. Sometimes these wives went out with another couple but this rarely was an adequate solution, as one woman described:

Their husbands are home now, 'cause they work a normal job, kind of thing, and when you ask them if they want to go out they want to stay with their husband 'cause they haven't seen him all day and then you become a third party. Like a couple of times I've gone out with my girlfriend and her husband and it's really no fun because you can't giggle like two girls.

Taken together, these factors make clear that there is a substantial carryover effect from his job to her life. Not only do wives struggle to achieve their image of normalcy through elaborate adjustments of activities in time and space, but many share symptoms of their husbands' work-related stress, in the form of lost sleep, digestive disorders, and irritability. Although it would be easy to conclude that shiftwork wives are simply catering to their husbands, it is important to recognize that two distinct pressures encourage this extraordinary volume of adjustment work. On one side, husbands' and wives' own expectations about what it takes to be a good wife and what is essential for normal family life demand that wives do whatever is necessary, even if this means more work (see Pleck and Staines 1985). Thus, wives offer husbands meals at odd hours both as a demonstration of affection and commitment to their relationship and as a way to minimize the effects of his work hours on their attempts to create and preserve family life. On the other side, however, the performance of these duties is *presupposed* by the nature of husbands' work; it is a condition of his employment. Of course, wives need not adjust and family activities can be allowed to slide; but such actions would contradict the couples' expectations for normal family life.

Men's Work: For the Sake of the Family

Shiftwork husbands face a dilemma in attempting to reconcile their irregular presence at home with their sense of being a "provider": there is so little time in which to enact such a definition of self. It took extraordinary effort to find the time to share the "bread" they had "won." Wives facilitated this effort by trying to coordinate household schedules; in doing so, they construct both the family time and events in which husbands can in fact become the providers they see themselves to be. However, between meals and on days off, what a husband provides may appear to be as ghostly as he is when he is at home but asleep.

This dilemma carries over to men's responsibilities as fathers and husbands; many men described themselves as "feeling guilty." One shiftworker said:

I'm the type that likes to spend a lot of time especially with my kids. When my son was real young, I'd always have him out in the back yard doing something with him. And working shifts, he didn't see me all the time . . . and if the other neighborhood kids are gone, he's on his own a lot. And that's when I used to feel really bad for him. My daughter . . . she'd always be questioning, "Dad, why is it you got to work?"

Another man, recalling his own experience living with a shiftwork father, saw himself reliving a situation he resented: "I always remember my father as sleeping during the day. Never seeing him because he'd be in bed. Then I'd hear him get up and go to work at night. I didn't see much of my father. I missed that. Now I feel guilty if I can't have it with my family." When asked how he attempts to make life easier for his wife, one man voiced his frustrations with their current life:

Jeez! That's hard 'cause I know she does a lot more for me than I do for her. I'm not a good listener but I try to listen to her. I just try to buy her anything she wants. I try to spend as much time with her as I can. [A]t my last base, every payday she had flowers sitting on the counter. I try to make dinners for her once in a while.

Unable to control their work schedules, many shiftwork husbands reported “stealing time” from sleep in order to participate in family life, often paying a substantial physical price. Above and beyond the biological effects associated with rapid shift rotation, the men we interviewed typically described themselves as being “jumbled,” having “no body rhythm,” and “feeling wobbly.” One young airman said vividly: “When you work three shifts your body falls into a rhythm and then, boom! That first midnight shift and the sandman seems to did a deadly dance on everybody’s eyelids.” What sleep they do get is often not restorative: “When I get up, I don’t feel like I’ve slept at all. When you sleep at night you feel like you’ve had a good night’s sleep. You sleep during the day and you just don’t feel like you’ve had the same amount.”

As Melbin (1987) points out, shiftworkers commonly move to day hours when they have time off. However, many of these men try to adjust to shift rotations by getting little or no sleep on the transition day (or night). They see this as the quickest way to fit themselves to the schedules of other family members. Several noted that they try to eat the same meals as spouses and children even though the meal that is served may be out of sync with their biological rhythm. A day worker described his earlier habits as a shiftworker:

I’d get up at 3:00 when the wife and kids’d come home. And they’d eat about 5:00 or so. I just wasn’t ready to eat until, God, 9:00 or 10:00 at night. That’s when I started eating junk. And it affects the home life, too, because I’m not there at the dinner table. If I’m there, I’m not really. I’m really out of it a bit, too.

Many spoke very openly about the mood swings that attend being out of sync and how that affected their relations with wives and children.

Dual-Earner Couples: Working around the Clock

Almost 60 percent of the wives in our sample also were employed outside their homes. Respondents said that while husbands’ wages covered most of the families’ essential needs, wives’ earnings helped make ends meet. Her paycheck enabled them to eat out once a week, to make payments on the furniture, to visit extended family during leaves, or to save for a home after his retirement from the military.

Because the Air Force bases were located in semi-rural areas, job opportunities for the wives were largely limited to the bases themselves, and to the surrounding ring of fast-food chains and retail stores. Most of the wives worked part-time, ranging between 20 and 30 hours a week, and earned the minimum wage or slightly above, receiving a gross income of \$70 to \$100 a week. The fraction who worked in secretarial or “white collar” jobs worked more hours at better pay; but the best paid among them grossed only \$250 a week. In this regard her employment is dictated by his job.

Husbands’ schedules influenced wives’ employment in two distinct ways. First, the cyclical nature of all the husbands’ jobs (six days on, three days off) limited wives’ job search to work places that allowed flexible hours. Non-intersecting work schedules did occur among dual-earner couples in the sample, but they were almost exclusive to childless couples. The following pair of quotes from one couple describes the consequences of non-intersecting schedules. The wife, pregnant with their first child, said:

So, when he’s working swing shift, we usually spend the morning together and I fix a good meal and then we both go to work. When he’s working mid shift I don’t see him because he sleeps during the day and I’m at work. And then when I come home he’s gone to work. Then on his days off—usually we don’t have the same days off. Once in a while we do, but if he’s off he usually has things that he has to get done, and then if we have a day off together, we always spend it together because they come maybe twice a month.

Her husband, in a separate interview, said:

Yeah, a lot of times the only time we see each other on mids is when I get into bed and give her a kiss and ask her how she slept and she says, "How did work go?" And you know she's still groggy and I'm pretty tired and it's just, you know a matter of ten minutes, "Hi. How are you doing?"

Second, differences between day shift and mid or swing shifts actually increased the likelihood of wives' working (see Table 1). This, according to our interviews, came about because of the seemingly continuous absence of husbands from the home. To many shiftwork couples, it made sense for her to earn additional income if he was asleep during hours she was awake. For at least one husband, this logic was compelling enough for him to pass up the opportunity to move to the day shift: "Because I need my wife to work and it wouldn't be economical for us if I went to days and then I had to pay a babysitter each day to watch my kids while my wife is working. You know, to me, that wouldn't make it worth it. I'd rather have the money."

Job market conditions and husbands' shift schedules together limit wives' employment prospects to low-wage, dead-end work. Couples treat wives' paid employment as secondary in importance to husbands' employment and children's needs. This hierarchy of female priorities has deep structural and cultural roots (Mitchell 1966; Smith 1973; Hartmann 1976; Finch 1983); more immediately, however, it diminishes the potential for conflict between the demands of husbands' and wives' employment. Wives' employment therefore poses no challenge to the "normal" sexual division of labor.

Our respondents used a strategy to contain the cost of child care similar to that reported by Presser (1988) for civilian dual-earner couples: a combination of informal child care (e.g., arrangements with other military wives or teenagers) and husbands taking on responsibility for children. The latter approach might seem improbable given what we described earlier as the traditional "provider" role to which couples subscribed. However, upon closer examination it became clear that for both day shift and rotating shift families, "father care" represented an economic and a *social* solution to the combination of children and jobs.

Both day and rotating shift couples preferred fathers as child care providers because such arrangements enabled fathers to have more time to spend with children. Caring for children did not contradict the fathers' "provider" role; rather, it gave them the opportunity to realize the role and, at the same time, to assuage feelings of guilt described earlier. Couples also preferred fathers and neighbors because they represented a more intimate solution than, for example, base-provided care. Women, in particular, felt better about leaving their children in the care of neighbors or friends rather than with "strangers" at the base facility (also see Fløge 1985).

But father care did not appear to coincide with or result from a redefinition of husbands' roles. As Hertz (1986) suggested in an earlier study of dual-career couples, men may be more active participants in household duties, but wives retain responsibility for seeing to it that those duties are accomplished. In this study, we found that even when husbands wanted to participate in child care, it was wives who adjusted their own work schedules to allow this to happen. One woman with a two-year old daughter worked in a department store. She said:

When John works a swing it's two to twelve basically. So I work in the mornings from about 9 to 1:30, or one o'clock. So swings: I get up. I usually get Heather up. Then depending whether John's tired or whether he's not he has breakfast with us . . . the two of them will sit and talk or she'll read a book or whatever. When he works a mid, I work nights which would be like 3:30 or 5:30 to 9. I'm just lucky. I have the job that I write the schedule [for].

Most women, however, were not employed in organizations willing to set hours according to their individual needs. Instead, they must secure child care providers (other wives) to cover the time gaps between jobs. An especially daunting set of arrangements was described by a wife with two preschool children:

Well, if my husband's working a swing, and I'm working in the morning, cause I work different hours, too, say I'm working 9:30 to 5:30 and he's working from 2 to 11, supposedly 3 to 11 but they go in early. I get up and get the kids breakfast and let him sleep as late as I can until I have to walk out the door. Then I go tell him that the kids have been fed breakfast and they're usually watching cartoons, and kiss everybody goodbye and leave. At 2 or around 1:30 I guess, he goes and takes the kids to the sitter's. And then I pick them up when I get home. And he doesn't get home until about 11:30 or 12, and then I'm usually up because I want to see him. I haven't seen him all day, so I try to spend a little time with him at that time.

Then, it's not always like that either because there are times when I work in the night, where I work from 1 to 9. I don't work late, but in that case if he's still working a swing, I take the kids when I leave so he doesn't have to mess with that, 'cause we have only car. And then I pick them up whenever I get home. In most cases when I work night shift I have a teenager that comes and babysits, so it's real easy. In that case what I would do is take them to the day babysitter until five-thirty. At 5:30 I'd leave work, come home and bring them back to my house, so that the teenager can babysit them. My day babysitter doesn't work nights. So only on a few nights out of the week, not even that; really it's just one night a week, usually on Friday night.

And then if Jim's working mids, I get up and take the kids to the babysitter's as I leave to go to work and when he wakes up at 2 or 3 o'clock in the afternoon he goes and picks them up and brings them home. He feeds them lunch, or whatever they haven't had, and starts dinner for me, just has fun with them, takes care of them, does things with them. Or he washes clothes and folds them for me until I get home. It's a joint effort.

These descriptions suggest that while husbands' participation in child care is an important feature of the dual-earner family, it is not a signal of a dramatic shift in marital roles or a movement toward a more egalitarian division of labor.

Discussion

This research has presented detailed evidence that shiftwork affects family life in complex and often subtle ways. At minimum, interviews with these couples suggest that prior characterizations of shiftwork's "carryover" effects seriously underestimate the accommodations required of husbands, wives, and children. However, there are two equally significant issues raised by this study: the first centers on methodology and its consequences; the second pertains to the way we conceptualize the relationship between work and family.

Couples in this study demonstrated the shortcomings in prior approaches in two basic ways. First, they responded to questions about shiftwork and its effects in terms of how closely their current lives and family situation approximated a "normal" life. Couples used one of three reference points for normalcy, depending upon their understanding of the question. Shiftwork couples occasionally used day shift families as the model for normal families and other times referred to prior experience of life on a day or a rotating shift. More generally, idealized versions of normal family life were employed as the point of comparison. Without specifying these reference points, it would be virtually impossible to know whether claims of satisfaction or dissatisfaction referred to the "here and now" or some other point in time.

Second, the interviews illustrate the risks associated with asking one group of respondents—husbands—to serve as the principal data source about others (especially their wives) and about the details of family life that take place in their absence. Separate interviews with husbands and wives provided a much more detailed and complex picture of the effects of shiftwork on family life. For example, interviews with wives revealed two features of shiftwork that might otherwise have been invisible: (1) that wives, even working wives, carried out the bulk of adjustment work, including their coordination of meals, holiday celebrations, household chores, child care, children's "visitations" with their fathers, and their own work schedules; and (2) that shiftwork wives pay a price for this adjustment work in the form

of biological and emotional symptoms quite similar to those previously reported only for shiftworkers, leading us to suggest that husbands' jobs can cause stress in wives' lives. Separate interviews gave individuals license to talk about aspects of their lives that they did not normally discuss with spouses (e.g., the rigors and consequences of boredom on the job and the many aspects of adjustment work at home).

Our findings also suggest that adjustments in family activities and marital roles are essential but largely invisible underpinnings to the employment relationship between shiftwork husbands and their employers. Paradoxically, many couples criticized the military for treating families as secondary in importance, while the officers we interviewed claimed to have no desire to intervene in their subordinates' family affairs; yet, without the remarkable accommodations families made, husbands would receive little of the comfort, nurturance, or physical support that the military implicitly assumes in order to have a reliable labor force. Earlier researchers have noted this paradox of military life (e.g., Dobrofsky and Batterson 1977; Goldman 1973) and prior studies of shiftwork have suggested that work schedules influence the quality of family life; however, this research brings the two together to show the extraordinary contributions families make to work.

The point can be made even more strongly about wives' role in their husbands' job performance. As Papanek (1975) and Finch (1983) have suggested from their studies of men in professional and managerial occupations, wives are not simply affected by husbands' work: his job presupposes she will perform tasks that are part of his job, substitute for him in work-related activities, and provide meals and entertainment for his work peers and superiors. This study carries the analysis a step further by demonstrating that wives may be "married to his job" in blue collar employment, as well. The military context enforces the contributions wives make through the elaborate rules attached to husbands' jobs and the severity of penalties threatened should he fail to obey them. Wives' adjustment work is, therefore, essential to his job performance in ways that might not be as direct in other blue collar jobs. However, the military context should not detract from the more general point: the importance attached to men's role as workers encourages wives to labor in ways that support his work, and therefore his employer, and encourages families to create marital roles and a division of labor that distinguish between provider and homemaker.

More broadly, these findings support the argument that a capitalist economy presupposes the subordination of the family to work but masks that subordination by assuming distinct boundaries between public (work) and private (family) spheres (see Finch 1983). Family life under shiftwork may represent an extreme case of the general argument but, as an extreme case, it reveals a great deal about the pervasiveness of that assumption. In the settings we studied it would seem impossible to sustain the illusion that work and family are separate spheres. His job imposes on their life in many ways. Yet, we found couples going to extraordinary lengths to enact a vision of "normal" family life and "proper" marital roles, which seems to center around a *separation* between public and private. Thus, the pursuit of privacy under conditions hostile to its achievement reveals the fundamental contradiction of family life under shiftwork: if families are to succeed in the Herculean task they have set for themselves, they are likely to do so through a marital division of labor that only further subordinates their lives to his work.

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