



## *Conversations with the Experts*

### **Dual-Earner Couples and the Transition to Parenthood: Study Looks at Challenges Facing Working Class Families**

#### **A Conversation with Maureen Perry-Jenkins**

**Bio:** Maureen Perry-Jenkins is an Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and past director of the Center for the Family at UMass. She received her doctorate in Human Development and Family Studies from Pennsylvania State University. Her main research interests are in the area of work and family and her most recent research focuses on working-class families and the transition to parenthood for dual-earner families, on which she has published widely. Maureen and her colleagues recently completed a five-year, longitudinal study funded by the National Institute of Mental Health: "The Work and Family Transitions Project". This study examined the transition to parenthood and transition back to paid employment for working-class couples. She was recently awarded a second grant from NIMH to follow-up on this fascinating study and to replicate the study with three new samples: 1) African-American, two-parent families, 2) African-American, single-mother families, and 3) European-American single-mother families.

**Editors Note:** Maureen Perry-Jenkins has been committed to exploring work and family issues for working-class families for over a decade now. She spoke eloquently at the 2003 NICHD conference about the unique challenges that working-class families face during the transition to parenthood both in their work lives and personal lives. We had the pleasure of speaking with Maureen recently about her current research and its implications for the study of working families.

When Maureen Perry-Jenkins, Ph.D., set out to research the challenges facing new parents who hold working-class jobs, she ran into a problem of definition. What exactly constitutes the working class? The various definitions of middle class point to the ambiguity surrounding class delineation: New York Governor George Pataki defined the middle class as any household earning up to \$175,000; former Labor Secretary Robert Reich pegged the middle class as families with incomes between \$20,000 and \$60,000, while the Congressional Budget Office says a family of four is middle class if it earns an income between \$19,000 and \$78,000.

Perry-Jenkins points to these wide-ranging definitions of class in the chapter she authored, entitled "Work in the Working Class: Challenges Facing Workers and Their Families". What each characterization fails to do, she says, is illuminate the day-to-day challenges faced by members of any one social group. For instance, the working class earns more than those of low-income status, making them ineligible for child care subsidies or federal programs like Head Start. Yet, they don't earn enough to pay for quality child care. Looking within the lives of low-wage earners entering parenthood rather than comparing them as a group to other classes highlights the unique problems they face and should inform policy to address these issues.

In the current economic climate, the plight of the working class is shakier than ever. This population lacks a safety net, such as financial savings or severance pay. Additionally, low-wage earners may work two or three jobs "under the table," to make ends meet and because of job insecurity issues.

"Being laid off at any level is a difficult thing but when you're talking about those with the least resources having to deal with that, it's a very different phenomenon," says Perry-Jenkins. "I think that the economy has just heightened people's sense of insecurity."

To better understand the work and family issues faced by the working class transitioning into parenthood, Perry-Jenkins examined the experiences of 150 couples in which the mother returned to work within six months of giving birth. She chose the couples by their level of education and the position they held at work, defining a working class person as someone with an associates degree or less and who is employed in an unskilled or semi-skilled job. The highest level of education attained by the all of the participants in Perry-Jenkins' study was some high school or a

high school diploma and technical training. This meant that the jobs held by both husbands and wives required them to be “order takers,” at work, rather than “order givers,” with little or no autonomy at work, according to Perry-Jenkins. The researchers left income out of the equation because it can vary greatly due to multiple jobs and therefore is not an accurate measure of social class.

“The reason we let income vary is because we had people who reported incomes of \$50,000, \$60,000 but when you went back and looked at them, they were working two or three jobs,” says Perry-Jenkins. “But it’s very different to work 70 hours for \$60,000, then to work 40 hours for \$60,000 at a more upper-class job.”

Further, Perry-Jenkins points out, both partners in a working-class couple contribute to the family income. A job loss could put the family on the brink of poverty.

### **Challenges of New Parenthood among the Working Class**

Low-wage earners in general do not enjoy the same benefits as those in white-collar occupations, a reality that became painfully clear in the subjects’ responses to the researchers’ questions. Queries about flextime, job sharing, options to work at home, part-time pay with full-time benefits, paid parental leave, child care reimbursements, referral services, on-site care and dependent care assistance plans were often met with humor or irritation by respondents. Less than 5 percent said their employer offered child care reimbursement, referral services or on-site care. Twenty-four percent said their workplace allowed them to pay for child care with pre-tax dollars, but only 2 percent took advantage of this benefit. Only 13 percent could work at home when needed, 19 percent reported that they could work part time with full-time benefits, and 4 percent said there were job-sharing opportunities at work.

#### *Maternity Leave*

The challenges for new parents became apparent right away when they considered how they would care for their newborn. The 1993 Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) gives workers up to 12 weeks of unpaid leave with job protection to care for a new child or a sick relative. However, few working-class employees can afford to lose that much income. Further, the FMLA applies only to businesses that employ 50 or more, excluding 95 percent of employers and 50 percent of employees. And while the FMLA requires an employer to hold a job open for a worker on leave, it does not guarantee the same hours. This can wreak havoc on new parents who are trying to arrange child care. In her chapter, *Work in the Working Class*, Perry-Jenkins describes an express-mail delivery worker who was shifted to later hours when she returned to work after having a baby. The new schedule left her little time to spend with her new son.

To stay home with their new infant, parents will often piece together vacation time and sick leave. However, this leaves them without a cushion if they or the child gets sick after they return to work. In the study, 61 percent of parents reported having some paid leave. However, only 16 percent had paid parental leave. The rest used vacation time, sick time and personal days to stay home with their newborn. When these workers had to miss work because of an illness, some were “written up” by supervisors and/or docked pay. As a result, new parents worry that their job is insecure.

“That’s becoming a real issue, especially for moms,” says Perry-Jenkins. “They’re getting written up or getting warnings in their files and feel like they may lose their job and that’s a huge problem.”

Still, work was found to be a positive and fulfilling experience for some new mothers, who said they were “bored” at home, they liked to be with other adults, and they felt a sense of accomplishment on the job. While 90 percent of working mothers said they kept their jobs out of financial necessity, 61 percent asserted that they would work even if they didn’t have to.

#### *Mandatory Overtime*

The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 allows employers to require workers to put in more than 40 hours per week at higher pay for additional time worked. While new parents welcome the extra money, compulsory overtime can upset carefully arranged child care. Mandatory overtime occurs most often in highly supervised, low-control occupations, such as manufacturing plants. Often, employees are asked to work overtime with no or little warning. By law, employers are allowed to fire, demote or otherwise punish a worker for refusing to work overtime.

“You literally find out in the middle of your shift that you need to work until 8 tonight. You are supposed to pick up your child at 5 and you’ve been given mandatory overtime. Then you’re in a real bind,” says Perry-Jenkins. “The issue is, if you don’t do the mandatory overtime, the company can legally dock your pay the next day or for multiple days. They can demote you. They can do all sorts of things. So, it’s kind of a mixed bag because many of these lower-income families want the extra money, but the unpredictability of when it will happen and how to manage child care is really a problem. All of these issues of time and timing and who has control over it, are really big challenges for a lot of our families.”

### *Health Insurance*

Among the study participants, only one spouse had health insurance in 25 percent of the couples and 65 percent of that figure had individual coverage only. This does not make a lot of sense the point is a majority have health insurance but often only one worker holds the insurance, usually the mother which affect leave issues. Often the man will take a higher paying job without health benefits, while the woman earns less, but carries the health insurance. However, in some cases, women who took unpaid leave to stay home with their newborn discovered that their health insurance didn't continue while they were off the payroll. They had to pay out of pocket to keep up their coverage, and as a result, went back to work earlier than planned to curtail the extra expense

### *Child Care*

New parents favor shift-work because it allows the couples to stagger their schedules and cut down on child care. In the study, 20 percent of participants were able to eliminate outside child care entirely by working alternating schedules. However, shift work has been cited as the cause of marital instability as well as depression in news parents. Forty-seven percent had relatives care for their children, either in or outside of their home, while 19 percent put their child in a family day care setting and 13 percent used a mixture of relative, parental and family day care arrangements. Just one family used a day care center. While many parents felt fortunate to have family care for their children, many said they felt beholden to their relatives as a result.

### **Conclusion**

The study suggests that policy makers have been asking the wrong questions when it comes to the working class. Traditional family-friendly employee benefits simply don't apply to this segment of the population. The nature of low-paying positions, whether they be service or manufacturing jobs, require employees to be present in the work place. Flex-time and working from home are not options. Therefore, a paid family leave policy at the federal or state levels and legislation addressing mandatory overtime would ease the pressures on new parents. Perry-Jenkins notes that individual employers are most familiar with the circumstances of their employee population and therefore, should institute family-friendly policies designed to meet the needs of all their workers, not just the salaried ones.

"Our data suggest that working-class families face unique challenges when combining work and family life, challenges that will require unique solutions. We must be careful not to assume that the large literature on dual-career couples' can inform us about the experiences of lower income families."

### **NIMH Funds a Follow-up to the "Work and Family Transitions Project"**

A new study funded by the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH) will expand upon the findings in the "Work and Family Transitions Project" by looking at how the transition to parenthood differs by race and family structure.

The 153 working-class couples interviewed between 1996 and 2001 for the initial project will be re-interviewed as their first child transitions to kindergarten. This will allow researchers to track how patterns established in the first year of parenthood are related to the mental health of family members and the quality of their relationships with one another over time. Additionally, the study conducted in the initial grant will be replicated with three new samples: 1) African-American, two-parent families, 2) African-American, single-mother families, and 3) European-American single-mother families. The findings will reveal how parents in each group adjust to parenthood and the return to full-time employment; how factors such as social support, gender ideology, access to quality child care, expectations about parenthood, quality of the marital relationship, and characteristics of the child mediate the effects of these multiple transitions on parents' psychological well-being; and how work conditions and family-friendly workplace policies impact parents' mental health and marital quality across these transitions.

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