

OCCUPATIONAL COMMITMENT OF MOTHERS IN ONE-CHILD FAMILIES

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BACKGROUND

During the last decade, many cultural ideals in the United States have been challenged. The agricultural tradition of the last century prescribed large families controlled by a mother whose life mission was to keep the home functioning smoothly. Some families chose to rear an "only" child for the advantage of having two careers, reducing expenses, or developing intense, high quality, parent-child relations, but strong, normative pressures prodded most families to follow the multi-child ideal (Kawke & Knox 1977a; Blake 1966; Nye 1974; Thompson 1974). Through history, women have made substantial economic contributions, but these were seen as secondary to their prime responsibility with home and children. Women working outside the home were accused of causing social problems such as juvenile delinquency, divorce, mental illness in mothers and children, and frigidity (Nye 1974). Despite such pressures, a growing proportion of married women are working outside the home.

EFFECT OF THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

Since the late 1960s, the women's movement has challenged the belief that women can only be fulfilled through bearing and rearing children. This movement supports women's right to pursue a career, and it provides a highly visible and supportive reference group for those couples choosing to limit family size to advance the wife's career.

At the same time, public concern over our rapidly increasing population and limited resources began to be expressed. The Commission on Population Growth and the American Future (1972) strongly recommended that the family in the United States be limited so as to average 2 children. This approach challenged many of the negative labels applied to married couples who wanted to limit family size.

ACCEPTANCE OF THE ONLY CHILD

The moral consensus against the one-child family began breaking down by the early 1970s. A 1971 Gallup poll of college students indicated that the one-child family was still unpopular, with 64 percent of the men and 60 percent of the women responding that such a family was too small. How-

ever, they did recognize local reference groups and peer support for couples choosing a one-child family. A study of single-child parents indicated that they met no open criticism of the choice to have a single child, and 58 percent met people who expressed approval (Hawke & Knox 1977b).

In 1945, only 1 percent regarded the one-child family as ideal, and in 1977 only 2 percent recommended this size (Gallup 1974, 1977). Since these polls asked for *ideals*, practical factors such as cost and career effects are ignored. But Census data on the number of wives expecting to have only one child increased substantially from 1967 to 1974, as shown in Table 1. The magnitude of the change ranged from 150 percent for young wives ages 21 to 20 percent for wives aged 35-39. In every age group there is an increased proportion of wives who expect to rear an only child. The practical acceptability of the one-child family has increased markedly.

When confronted with strong moral consensus, both against only-child families and against serious labor-force participation, women should tend to avoid the double stigma. Added children means more work for career women, but that may be more acceptable than the moral pressure of kindred and community. Younger women whose child bearing comes in a more pluralist environment experience less pressure. More recently, logistic factors should result in a strong association between one-child families and the mother's full-time, labor-force participation.

METHOD

This research derives from analysis of secondary data from the National Opinion Research Center for the 1975 General Social Survey. Only those respondents currently married, with one child, who did not expect to have more children, were included. The sample size was 602. There were 209 younger families (under 40 years), and 393 older families, with respondents over 40 years of age. Of these respondents, 14 percent of the younger families, and 10 percent of the older respondents, had themselves been only children.

Five variables were used to measure the wife's economic potential, including education measures, and employment measures.

Career commitment was judged low if the wife had worked less than one year, or if she currently defined herself as a full-time housewife. Being employed full-time demonstrates a higher level of career commitment. Since most of these variables are ordinal or dichotomous, the TAU B and TAU C statistics were developed (Nye et al 1975).

Older women whose families were born in an era of moral consensus were expected to avoid the double stigma of an only child plus serious labor-force participation. While they should not differ from the mothers in multi-child families in economic potential, they should exhibit less commitment to work and more commitment to the family. There should not be a strong relation between family size and education or family size and occupation. Older mothers of a single child should more likely be full-time housewives, and less likely to work full time. Younger women whose child bearing came during a pluralist era should exhibit different patterns. The wife in one-child families was expected to have a greater economic potential, and to show greater commitment to her career than the wife in multi-child families. Single-child mothers were also expected less often to be full-time housewives, to have participated more in the labor force, and to be employed full time more often than multi-child mothers.

RESULTS

In older families, neither of the variables indicating economic potential was significantly associated with family size, as shown in Table 2. Older wives of one-child families had similar education level and pursued careers similar to those of multi-child wives. However, each of the variables indicating commitment to a career was significantly related to family size. Compared to mothers with several children, relatively few of the one-child mothers had never been employed (16% vs 5%); and more multi-child mothers were currently full-time housewives (74% vs 55%); and fewer multi-child mothers were employed full time (13% vs 26%). A different pattern emerged for younger wives. The wife's level of education was not associated with family size, but single-child mothers pursued higher-status occupations than multi-child mothers. Since occupations classified as professional or managerial are more likely to require a career orientation

than a job orientation, it is important to note that single-child mothers predominate at the higher employment level (39% vs 20%). The association between family size and being a full-time housewife was not significant. Finally, there is a significant relation between family size and the wife working full time (42% of one-child wives vs 20% of multi-child wives).

TABLE 1: CHANGE IN EXPECTATION OF ONE-CHILD FAMILY 1967-1974 (Wives expecting only one child)

Wife Age	1967	1974	Increase
20-21	5.4%	13.8%	156%
22-24	5.2	10.7	106
25-29	5.1	9.5	86
30-34	5.8	9.0	55
35-39	7.8	8.7	19

(Source: Census Bureau 1971, 1975)

TABLE 2: ASSOCIATION OF FAMILY SIZE AND WIFE DESCRIPTORS BY AGE (Tau)

Wife Descriptor	Younger	Older
Education level	-.04	-.01
Wife working	-.11*	.01
Housewife full time	.11*	-.11*
Worked one year?	.05	.09*
Works full time?	-.18*	.09*

(Level of confidence: .05)

DISCUSSION

There are sharp contrasts by age on the economic variables. The older single-child mothers display a pattern of higher commitment to their families and a lower commitment to work than the multi-child mothers, while the reverse is true for younger mothers. This shift in the commitment level may result from the attempt of the single-child mothers to justify their one-child status to themselves and to others. The differences in terms of older versus younger families reflect the different social environments in which they spent their child-bearing years. Older families spent their young adulthood in a time when almost no one publicly approved the one-child family. Then, it was commonly believed that the only meaningful and proper involvement for a woman was in the home. If these cultural forces did not keep a woman's commitment to employment low, sex discrimination severely limited her chances of advancement or salary increase.

In such an environment, women who had a single child as the result of medical problems or financial or marital stress were limited in the ways they could compensate for their deficit in maternal productivity. An available compensation was to accent the full-time housewife ideal. Younger wives met a different situation. Groups that advocate and support one-child families had appeared. Other groups publicly acknowledge that jobs and careers are a proper part of many women's lives, and stress that women have *rights* in that area. These beliefs have been incorporated into the legal code. While sex discrimination still exists, affirmative-action programs and equal-opportunity requirements have opened careers to women that were closed a decade ago in the United States. Mothers of one-child families see no need to justify their family size. Instead, they emphasize the positive aspects of their work and careers.

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