GENDER DIFFERENCES IN REFERENCE GROUPS, SELF-EVALUATIONS, AND EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE AMONG EMPLOYED MARRIED PARENTS

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ABSTRACT

This paper first reviews the conceptual and empirical work on reference groups and suggests ways in which attention to reference groups, and the self-evaluations based on such groups, could enhance theory and research on gender differences in the psychological consequences of multiple role occupancy. To illustrate the potential importance of social comparisons in the stress process, the paper then examines gender differences in reference groups, self-evaluations, and emotional experience among employed married parents. Based on data from follow-up, in-depth interviews with 40 individuals who participated in a community panel study of mental health, I find that men's and women's evaluations of themselves as spouses and parents vary. I suggest that differences between men's and women's self-evaluations are traceable to the different groups they select as their frame

of reference. Women tended to compare themselves to their mothers or other nonemployed women who were more involved than they were in family life. Social comparisons were associated with negative self-evaluations (as wives and mothers) and negative feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and guilt. In contrast, men tended to compare themselves to their own fathers and other employed males who were less involved than they were in family life. Social comparisons were associated with positive self-evaluations (as husbands and fathers) and positive feelings of pride, self-satisfaction, and self-worth. By identifying gender differences in reference groups, self-evaluations, and emotional experience among employed married parents, this paper provides further insight into why the psychological benefits of combining work and family roles are greater for men than for women. The utility of the concept of reference groups, and the self-evaluations based on such groups, for future theory and research on gender, social roles, and mental health is discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Reference groups, and the social comparisons that are based on such groups, are important sources of information about the self. Because social comparisons provide self-relevant information, the *selection* of reference groups has important consequences for self-evaluations and feelings of inadequacy or self-worth. In this paper, I first review the conceptual and empirical literature on reference groups and discuss ways in which attention to reference groups, and the self-evaluations based on such groups, could enhance theory and research on gender differences in the psychological consequences of multiple role occupancy. I then provide a few examples from in-depth interviews that highlight the relationships among reference groups, self-evaluations, and emotional experience among employed married parents. In the final part of the paper, I discuss the utility of the concept of reference groups, and the self-evaluations based on such groups, for future theory and research on gender, social roles, and mental health.

CONCEPTUAL AND EMPIRICAL WORK ON REFERENCE GROUPS AND SOCIAL COMPARISONS

The concept of the reference group has had a relatively long history in sociology. A reference group refers to either a social organization or an individual which social actors employ as a basis for self-knowledge and self-evaluation. The basic idea underlying the concept of the reference group is that individuals routinely engage in social comparisons with a group or an

individual in order to interpret whether their social situations, values, and behavior (e.g., their role performances) represent successes or failures (Hyman 1942, 1960).

Early conceptual work on reference groups indicates that there are two distinct, though related, ways in which individuals use reference groups (Kelley 1968). The first way individuals use reference groups is as a *standard of comparison* against which they could evaluate themselves. In this situation, reference groups serve as a frame of reference, or a yard stick, for making judgments about oneself and assessing the adequacy of one's beliefs and role performances. In addition to their comparative function, individuals also use reference groups to *ascertain norms* for role-related behavior. In this case, reference groups represent standards for how an actor should or ought to think, feel, and behave in social situations.[1] Reference groups are thought to be particularly important sources of comparative and normative information when clear norms and objective standards for self-appraisals are unavailable (Festinger 1954). Moreover, while people may invoke different reference groups for comparative and normative purposes, a single individual or group is commonly used for both of these functions. For instance, the same group may serve as a standard against which individuals evaluate the adequacy of their role performances as well as the source of their norms and attitudes. Some have argued that social comparisons have consequences for self-evaluation only to the extent that the standard of performance constitutes an expectation that the individual feels *should* be met (Hyman and Singer 1968; Singer 1981).

Theory and research on reference groups have focused on two analytically distinct, though related, aspects of reference group behavior; these include the *selection* of comparison groups and the *consequences* of social comparisons for attitudes and conduct. Overall, sociologists have devoted more attention to the effects of social comparisons than to the determinants of reference groups.

With respect to the selection of reference groups, it has been suggested that people choose, as their referents, others who are similar or close to themselves in one way or another (e.g., in sex, age, race, class, social status, social roles, group membership, ability, and proximity [Festinger 1954]). Because of their emotional importance, family and other primary group members are often selected as frames of reference. Since people typically hold multiple statuses and roles, it is likely that they have numerous reference groups of varying importance. The little empirical sociological research that exists on this aspect of reference group behavior has not provided a clear understanding of what determines the selection of reference groups, although the structure of situations, social norms, as well as aspirations for group membership all seem to be important factors (Form and Geschwender 1962; Hyman 1942;

Rosenberg and Simmons 1972; Rosow 1967; Stern and Keller 1953; Strauss 1968).

With regard to the consequences of reference groups, sociologists have focused on either the effects of normative reference groups for conformity, or the consequences of comparative reference groups for self-evaluation.[2] A central idea is that normative reference groups play a role in socially shaping individuals' attitudes and behaviors, and are instrumental at producing attitudinal and behavioral change. To the extent that attitudes and behavior are organized around a particular social status or role, a consequence of social comparisons is socialization (Singer 1981). Scholars interested in the effects of normative reference groups have sought to specify the conditions that impede or facilitate conformity. For instance, in his classic study of attitudinal change, Newcomb (1943) found that college student's desire for membership in a sorority or fraternity facilitated their adoption of (i.e., their conformity to) the reference group's values and behaviors. This and other similar findings (Eisenstadt 1968) suggest that the psychological salience, or importance, of an existing or a desired identity for one's self-conception would increase the influence of the reference group. To date, however, the degree to which the relative salience of identities *moderates* the influence of normative reference groups has not been explored in much detail.

While the work on normative reference groups focuses on their effects for conformity, another line of work emphasizes the effects of social comparisons for self-appraisals. Several authors have noted that reference groups, and the social comparisons that are based on such groups, are important sources of self-evaluation and self-esteem and are, therefore, central to the self-concept (Rosenberg and Simmons 1972; Rosenberg and Pearlin 1978). Because individuals learn about themselves primarily through reflected appraisals and social comparisons, the self in part depends on reference groups (Suls and Miller 1977). Insofar as social comparisons are a source of self-evaluation and feelings about oneself, the choice of reference groups would be particularly important for those aspects of self that are perceived by the individual to be highly salient. However, the implications of either positive or negative social comparisons for highly salient versus non-salient identities have not been elaborated in the existing sociological work.[3]

Interestingly, although the selection and consequences of reference groups have been conceptualized as analytically distinct phenomena and processes, the most interesting finding from the corpus of research on reference group behavior is that the *effects* of social comparisons depend, in large measure, on the *choice* of the reference group. Numerous studies have documented that feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with one's self or situation, and feelings of self-worth or inadequacy, depend neither on the situation itself nor on the

objective characteristics or circumstances of individuals. Rather, social and self-evaluations depend on the individual's comparison between themselves and some other group or individual (Crosby 1976; Hyman 1942; Merton and Rossi 1950; Rosenberg and Simmons 1972; Strauss 1968). In other words, self-appraisals and subsequent feelings of self-esteem appear to be *contingent* on the particular reference group selected as a frame of reference.

For instance, in the first explicit discussion of reference groups, Hyman (1942)[4] showed that people's perceptions of their social position depended on the particular group they used as a framework for comparison, rather than on the objective indicators of their status (e.g., their education and income). People who were experimentally assigned high status comparison groups perceived themselves as having lower status than they actually had, whereas those assigned to low status groups perceived themselves as having relatively high status. Hyman further showed that changes in judgment about one's social position could be brought about by experimentally changing the status of the reference group. Similar findings are also evident in nonexperimental situations across a range of social phenomena.

Merton and Rossi (1950) showed that World War II soldiers' feelings of satisfaction with their situations depended on the groups they compared themselves to, and not on the objective characteristics of their situations (such as how close they were to combat areas). Similarly, Crosby (1976) found that despite their relatively low wages, employed women did not perceive their wages as either low or unfair because they compared themselves not to men, but to other female workers who were equally low paid. Along these same lines, Strauss (1968) reported that blind people were more likely to experience feelings of inferiority and incompetence when their frame of reference was the sighted. However, when blind respondents compared themselves to other blind individuals, they were more likely to perceive themselves as competent social actors. Other studies on different aspects of social life have yielded similar results (e.g., see Easterlin [1973] and Elder [1974] on feelings of economic deprivation; Rosow [1967] on feelings of competence and self-worth among the elderly; Patchen [1961] on job satisfaction; Pettigrew [1968] on perceptions of racial inequality; Parker and Kleiner [1968] on mental illness; and more recently, Felson and Reed [1986] on self-appraisals of academic achievement among children).

One of the most notable examples of this phenomenon can be found in Rosenberg and Simmons' (1972) study of self-esteem among Black and white children. As part of a larger project on the effects of school desegregation, Rosenberg and Simmons found that Black secondary school students in integrated settings had lower self-esteem than those in segregated settings because they compared themselves to white children in their school who were

comparatively better off. Ironically, Black children in segregated middle
schools had relatively high self-esteem because they compared themselves to
other Black children who were as, or more, disadvantaged. In short, these
findings indicate that the consequences of social comparisons for global self-
esteem depend in large measure on the particular group which is employed
as the frame of reference.

On the basis of both experimental and nonexperimental research, it thus
appears that feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction with one's self and social
situation, and feelings of self-worth or inadequacy, are contingent on the
selection of the reference group. When individuals compare themselves to
others who are worse off than (or not doing as well as) themselves, the result
is satisfaction and self-enhancement (i.e., a positive self-evaluation).
Conversely, when social comparisons are based on others who are better off
(or doing better than) themselves, the result is dissatisfaction and self-
depreciation (i.e., a negative self-evaluation) (Singer 1981). While the
implications of positive evaluations have not been fully specified, Crosby (1976)
noted that negative evaluations may lead either to striving for achievement or
emotional and/or physical symptoms of stress, depending on the individual's
sense of control to change his or her self or social situation.

Although not itself a theory, the importance of reference groups and social
comparisons have been acknowledged in numerous social psychological
theories. For example, in addition to social comparison theory (Festinger 1954;
Merton and Rossi 1950; Suls and Miller 1977), theories about socialization
(e.g., symbolic interactionism and social learning theory), deviance (e.g.,
differential association and control theory) and social influence, role theory
(Turner 1956), equity theory (Walster, Walster, and Berscheid 1978) and its
offshoot, relative deprivation theory (Crosby 1976) all emphasize the role
reference groups play in socially shaping individuals' attitudes and behaviors.
Theories about the self-concept have also recognized the impact social
comparisons have on the development and maintenance of self-concept and
self-image (Rosenberg 1979; Rosenberg and Simmons 1972; Rosenberg and
Pearlin 1978). Interestingly, while these theories highlight the contributions of
reference groups to a broad range of social psychological phenomena,
sociological theories about the mental health effects of social roles have
generally not considered the potential importance of social comparisons in the
stress process. Nor have these theories considered the potential links between
reference groups, self-evaluations, and emotional functioning. The lack of
attention to the psychological consequences of reference groups and social
comparisons in theories about social roles and mental health is surprising since
scholars have long recognized that reference groups, and the social comparisons
based on such groups, are a means through which individuals assess their own

self-worth and the adequacy (or conversely, the inadequacy) of their various role performances.

In light of the current ambiguity of norms governing certain major adult social roles, as well as the unclarity of standards for role-related behavior, it is likely that reference groups and the self-evaluations based on such groups are important for understanding gender differences in the emotional effects of multiple role occupancy. In fact, an examination of the reference groups men and women employ as a basis for social comparison and self- evaluation may provide insight into why combining work and family roles is more stressful and less protective of the well-being of women relative to men. To date, the only sociologists who have considered the mental health effects of social comparisons and self-evaluations are Parker and Kleiner (1968). In their attempt to explain the higher rates of psychological disorder of Blacks who had recently migrated to northern cities compared to native urban Blacks, Parker and Kleiner hypothesized (and found) that individuals' evaluated themselves as failures if, in an area relevant to their self-esteem, they perceived their performances as falling below that of the reference group. Conversely, people evaluated themselves as successful if, in an area relevant to their self-esteem, they perceived their performances as living up to or surpassing that of their reference groups. Although they focused on the effects of reference groups for self-evaluations of social position (rather than the effects of self-evaluations in *specific* role domains), Parker and Kleiner's work showed that negative discrepancies between one's role behavior and that of their reference group is psychologically stressful, assaults self-esteem, and results in a propensity for psychological disorder.

The well-documented phenomenon of gender differences in mental health among employed married parents provides a unique opportunity to examine the potential links among reference groups, self-evaluations in specific role domains, and emotional functioning. Over the past three decades, epidemiological research has consistently showed that employed married mothers report significantly higher levels of psychological symptoms than employed married fathers.[5] On the basis of the preceding discussion, we could expect that employed husbands' and wives' evaluations of themselves as spouses and parents, and their feelings about combining work and family roles, vary, depending on whether they perceive themselves (and their role performances) as falling short of, or living up to and perhaps exceeding, the standards of their respective reference groups. To the extent that social roles, and the identities based on these roles, vary in their psychological salience, it is reasonable to also expect that negative self-evaluations in family role domains will be particularly troublesome for well-being if the roles and corresponding identities being evaluated are perceived by the individual as central to his or her self-concept (Simon 1992a; Thoits 1991).

THEORY AND RESEARCH ON GENDER
DIFFERENCES IN THE PSYCHOLOGICAL
CONSEQUENCES OF MULTIPLE ROLE OCCUPANCY

Much of the now extensive literature on the relationship between social roles and mental health has focused on gender differences in the psychological consequences of multiple role occupancy. Theory and research on this topic indicate that the impact of social roles on men's and women's well-being differs, depending on the specific role combination in question. In light of recent increases in female employment, and subsequent changes in married women's role configurations, it is not surprising that the "breadwinner" role combination (i.e., spouse-parent-worker) has received considerable scholarly attention. Social change in married women's role constellations over the past few decades has been accompanied by a proliferation of both theory and research on the emotional effects of employment for married women.

The initial work on this topic was concerned with assessing whether employed wives are *less* distressed than homemakers, and if employed wives enjoy the *same* mental health advantages as employed husbands. Overall, the findings of studies based on within gender comparisons have been mixed with respect to the psychological consequences of employment (and multiple role occupancy) for married mothers. For instance, although several studies showed that employed wives are less distressed than homemakers (Gore and Mangione 1983; Gove and Geerken 1977; Kandel, Davies, and Raveis 1985; Kessler and McRae 1982; Rosenfield 1980), other studies found no difference between the symptoms of employed wives and homemakers (Aneshensel, Frericks, and Clark 1981; Cleary and Mechanic 1983; Gore and Mangione 1983; Kandel, Davies, and Raveis 1985; Pearlin 1975; Radloff 1975; Roberts and O'Keefe 1981). In contrast to these studies, findings of research that compared the symptoms of employed wives and employed husbands have been more consistent. Several studies have documented that employed wives with children at home are more anxious, somatic, and distressed (and sometimes more depressed) than similar husbands (Cleary and Mechanic 1983; Kessler and McRae 1982; Menaghan 1989; Thoits 1986). Taken together, this research indicates that the mental health advantages of combining work and family roles are greater for men than for women.

While this earlier work was preoccupied with documenting the emotional effects of employment for married mothers, more recent research has been concerned with identifying the factors that are responsible for why the psychological benefits of multiple role occupancy are fewer for women relative to men. A variety of factors residing within as well as outside the family are now recognized as contributing to the gender gap in mental health among employed married parents.

For example, the current division of housework and child care within the family, and husbands' modest contribution to it, results in role conflict and role overload for employed wives which puts them at higher risk of psychological disorder relative to employed husbands (Pearlin 1975; Kessler and McRae 1982; Ross, Mirowsky, and Huber 1983). Husbands' and wives' preferences for the wife's employment versus homemaking are also partially responsible for gender differences in distress among married persons (Ross, Mirowsky, and Huber 1983). Moreover, labor market inequality for women, another feature of contemporary social organization, also contributes to distress differences between employed wives and husbands. A consequence of occupational sex segregation is that women tend to be concentrated in jobs that offer less potential for control and autonomy, job advancement, and personal gratification; all of these job characteristics promote feelings of self-esteem and psychological well-being for both men and women (Haw 1982; Kasl 1989; Lennon and Rosenfield 1992; Link, Lennon, and Dohrenwend 1993; Loscocco and Spitze 1990; Lowe and Northcott 1988; Miller, Schooler, Kohn, and Miller 1979). Wives' relatively low incomes also have implications for mental health as they affect their marital power and sense of personal control vis-à-vis their husbands (Rosenfield 1989, 1992).

Other researchers emphasized the role of cultural factors. The lack of cultural support for married mothers' employment and the relative proportions of employed wives to homemakers have been linked to gender differences in the mental health advantages of employment for married parents. According to Thoits (1986) and Menaghan (1989), the breadwinner role combination is more protective for males than for females because it continues to be a "normative" role situation for men and a "nonnormative" role situation for women. It is interesting that implicit in these authors respective accounts of gender differences in the emotional benefits of multiple role occupancy is the assumption that employed married mothers lack appropriate *role models* of *working* wives and mothers.

Finally, I have argued that gender differences in the meaning of work and family roles, which are rooted in sociocultural beliefs about the interrelationships between work and family for men and women, also contribute to the gender gap in mental health among employed married parents. In a recent qualitative study (Simon 1992b, 1995), I found that men and women believe there is greater overlap, or interdependence, between work and family role obligations for men than for women. This research suggests that married fathers may derive more psychological benefit from employment than married mothers because employment contributes to men's ability to meet their normative family obligations, whereas employment detracts from women's ability to meet their traditional obligations as wives and mothers.

However, while these authors have all identified a variety of role-related factors that help account for distress differences between employed husbands and wives, most scholars working on this topic have neither acknowledged nor explored men's and women's *evaluations* of themselves as spouses, parents, and workers and their *feelings* about combining work and family. The lack of attention to these self and emotion processes is unfortunate, since the breadwinner role combination has different implications for men's and women's self-evaluations and feelings, particularly as spouses and parents. Differences between men's and women's evaluations of themselves as spouses and parents, and their feelings about combining work and family roles, may be additional social psychological factors contributing to the gender gap in mental health among employed married parents.

Because reference groups are an important source of self-knowledge and constitute the basis for self-evaluations and feelings of self-worth or inadequacy, the particular groups or individuals men and women select for social comparisons may provide insight into why combining work and family roles results in different self-evaluations and feelings for men and women. For example, if employed married fathers compare themselves to others who are *less* involved than themselves in family life, social comparisons should result in favorable self-evaluations (as husbands and fathers) and positive feelings (e.g., feelings of self-worth). If, on the other hand, employed married mothers compare themselves to others who are *more* involved than themselves in family life, social comparisons should result in unfavorable self-evaluations (as wives and mothers) and negative feelings (e.g., feelings of inadequacy). It also is possible that if husbands of employed wives compare themselves to husbands of homemakers who are *able* to provide a family wage, social comparisons should result in unfavorable self-evaluations (as husbands, fathers, and providers) and negative feelings for these men. To the extent that family role-identities are important for men's and women's self-conceptions, positive self-evaluations in family role domains and feelings of self-worth should enhance well-being, whereas negative self-evaluations in these role domains and feelings of inadequacy should erode well-being and be troublesome for mental health (Simon 1992a; Thoits 1991).

Given social change in men's and women's roles over the past few decades, and the unclarity of norms underlying role-related behavior, the groups men and women employ as their frame of reference may, therefore, also be involved in why combining work and family roles is more stressful and less rewarding for women relative to men. Since the outcomes of social comparisons for self-evaluation, feelings of self-worth or inadequacy, and emotional well-being may be *contingent* on one's choice of a reference group, it is important to examine the groups or individuals men and women draw on as their frame of reference.

In my research on the emotional effects of multiple role occupancy (Simon 1992b, 1995), I found that combining employment with marriage and parenthood resulted in *different* evaluations for men and women as spouses and parents. Although it was not my intention to examine men's and women's reference groups (and social comparison processes), there was some evidence in my data that suggests that employment and multiple role occupancy resulted in different self-evaluations for men and women as spouses and parents, in part, because they employed *different* individuals and groups for self-appraisals.

In a following section of the paper, I will discuss differences between men's and women's self-evaluations as spouses and parents and their feelings about combining work and family which were evident in my research. I also will provide a few examples from in-depth interviews that suggest that men's and women's evaluations of themselves as spouses and parents, and the emotions they experience from combining work and family obligations, can be traced to the different reference groups they employ for social comparisons. Before I turn to these examples, however, it is important to first briefly describe the larger study, including the data and methods.

DATA AND METHODS

The examples presented in this paper come from a study based on follow-up, in-depth interviews with men and women who had participated in a two-wave prospective panel study of mental health in Indianapolis. Structured personal interviews were administered in 1988 to a representative sample of 354 married individuals (located through random digit dialing) and again in 1990 with 289 located persons. Information about sampling procedures, response rates, attrition, and the characteristics of the panel are reported elsewhere (see Simon 1992a, 1992b; Thoits 1992, 1995). In-depth interviews were conducted in 1991 with a subset of 40 *full-time employed married mothers* and *fathers* who had at least *one child under 18 years in the household* and whose *spouse* also was *employed full-time.* This subset was selected because the purpose of the follow-up study was to explore gender variation in the meaning of social roles for men and women who have the same role configuration and role situation, and to generate hypotheses about the social psychological processes which may help account for sex differences in distress. Since I expected that these social psychological processes vary by race, I restricted the follow-up sample to white respondents, thereby limiting the generalizability of the follow-up study. Eligible respondents were identified by computer generating the case identification numbers of those persons whose characteristics "fit" the sample requirements. Over 90 percent of the eligible contacted persons agreed to be

reinterviewed. Although the findings discussed in this paper may be generalizable to other white employed married parents in dual-earner marriages, they are not meant to reflect the experiences of all men and women.

Selected sociodemographic characteristics of the follow-up study are reported in the Appendix. This sample included men and women from a range of social class and educational backgrounds. With the exception of age and family income, male and female respondents were similar in sociodemographic characteristics. The men were slightly older than the women and were somewhat more likely to have higher household incomes.

The in-depth interviews included a series of questions designed to tap respondents' beliefs about the obligations underlying their social roles. To examine respondent's self-evaluations in family role domains, they were asked to evaluate how "good" a spouse and parent they thought they were, and if being employed "adds to," or "takes away from," their ability to be the type of spouse and/or parent they would like to be. Additional role performance data were obtained when respondents described their feelings about combining employment with marriage and parenthood as well as their feelings about having a spouse who combines work and family. To further explore gender variation in self-evaluations, I asked respondents to compare their own feelings about combining multiple roles with their perceptions of their spouse's feelings about combining work and family. Probes were used in conjunction with each question in order to obtain detailed and specific answers. Tape recordings of each interview were transcribed and themes were content coded. Computer searches were conducted on the codes in order to identify all references to information relevant to reference groups, social comparisons, self-evaluations, and feelings.

Three points about the analyses are noteworthy: First, because I did not question respondents about their reference groups, it is likely that my findings *under*estimate both the implicit and explicit social comparisons men and women make for self-appraisals. The inclusion of questions on reference groups may also have revealed more *within* gender variation in reference groups, especially among women, than my data suggest. Second, while the paper highlights the importance of men's and women's *choice* of reference groups, my data do not allow me to examine the processes through which selection occurs. Relatedly, although I suggest that differences between men's and women's reference groups *contribute to* their different self-evaluations as spouses and parents, it is equally possible that men and women choose reference groups that allow them to *maintain* and/or *confirm* preexisting self-evaluations and feelings. Although it is important for future research to sort out the causal direction of this relationship, the purpose of this paper is both to illustrate the associations among reference groups, self-evaluations, and emotional

experience as well as to develop hypotheses about their potential consequences for stress and mental health.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SELF-EVALUATIONS AND EMOTIONAL EXPERIENCE: MEN'S AND WOMEN'S REFERENCE GROUPS AND SOCIAL COMPARISONS

The in-depth interviews revealed that employment and multiple role occupancy have different effects on men's and women's evaluations of themselves as spouses and parents as well as on their feelings of adequacy and self-worth. For almost all of the men (90%), combining work and family obligations resulted in positive self-evaluations as fathers and husbands and positive feelings. In contrast, holding work and family roles resulted in negative self-evaluations as mothers and wives and negative feelings for over two-thirds (70%) of the women. I suggested that employment and multiple role occupancy have different effects on men's and women's self-evaluations in family role domains because wives' employment means they are not continuously available to their spouse and children for emotional support and nurturance, whereas husbands' employment means they are partially fulfilling their roles as husbands and fathers. I interpreted these findings as suggesting that sex differences in role meaning and self-evaluations are important mediating variables in the production of distress differences between employed wives and husbands (Simon 1995).

Yet, differences between the groups men and women employ as their frames of reference also appeared to be implicated in gender differences in self-evaluations and the emotional benefits of multiple role occupancy. In the process of conducting the interviews (and later, analyzing the data), it became evident that when assessing themselves as spouses and parents, several respondents ($N = 28$) *spontaneously* compared themselves to their own parents and/or same sex peers. In some cases, social comparisons were quite explicit, while in other cases they were more covert and implicit. These data suggest that men's and women's evaluations of themselves as spouses and parents, and their feelings about combining work and family (e.g., their feelings of self-worth or inadequacy), are associated with the different groups they employ as their frame of reference.

The following examples from the in-depth interviews illustrate the links between reference groups, self-evaluations, and emotional experience among employed wives and husbands. From these examples, it is clear that men's and women's reference groups, which often times consisted of childhood role models, served not only as a *standard for social behavior*, but also as a *source*

of norms regarding gender specific family role behavior. The groups men and women selected as frames of reference not only represented, but also embodied, sociocultural beliefs about the traditional family role obligations of males and females.

Women's Reference Groups: Employed Married Mothers' Negative Self-Evaluations as Wives and Mothers and Feelings of Inadequacy

Overall, combining employment with marriage and parenthood resulted in negative self-evaluations for the majority of women. As indicated earlier, 70 percent (N = 14) of the women interviewed indicated that they often feel inadequate as wives and mothers because they are employed. A theme which emerged from the female data was that women think their employment interferes with their ability to adequately fulfill their family roles which, for them, involves the provision of *round-the-clock* emotional support and nurturance. According to the women in the sample, employment was a threat to their identity as a "good" mother and wife because it prevented them from "being there for" (i.e., spending *enough* time with) their children and husbands. The emotions these women experienced from combining work and family obligations were consistent with their self-evaluations of performances in family role domains. In addition to feelings of inadequacy, these women also felt guilty because they perceived that a consequence of their jobs and their multiple role involvements is that they do not give their children and husbands the attention they need.

When I probed their responses and asked them why they experienced these negative feelings and emotions, several of these women (N = 11) responded by comparing themselves to other groups or individuals. Interestingly, the groups to which these women compared themselves tended to consist of *non*employed females, most notably their own mothers or other homemakers, who were *more* involved than they were in family life. By comparing themselves to more "traditional" wives and mothers, these women perceived that their own family role behavior *fell short* of the behavior of their reference group.

For example, although this 40-year-old divisional assistant said she no longer feels guilty about combining employment with parenthood because her children are older, she reflected on an earlier period in her life when she experienced this negative emotion.[6] When I asked her why employment resulted in negative emotions when her children were younger, she explained that being home with her children (rather than at work) was what she thought society *expected* of her.

> From a guilt point of view, [it was] what I thought society expected of me. That a mother should be home with her children. (#0022F)[7]

When I continued to probe and asked her why combining work and parenthood made her feel guilty when her children were younger, she immediately referred to her own childhood experiences of growing up in a family with a *stay-at-home* mother.

> Probably the biggest thing was that I didn't grow up that way. My father worked and my mother was always at home, so I didn't grow up in an environment where both parents worked. That was probably the biggest thing, the single most important way I looked at things, because I think the way a person grows up has a lot to do with the way they view life. And so [the reason] why I felt guilty [was] because it wasn't the way I grew up. (#0022F)

For several other women, combining work and family roles resulted in feelings of inadequacy. For example, a 27-year-old bookkeeper who was pregnant with her second child mentioned that she often feels inadequate as a mother because she is unable to care for her child during the day. She described her current feelings and also projected the negative emotions she expects to feel when she returns to work after her second child is born.

> It makes me feel like I am failing him [and that] I am not being a good mother. I think I'm going to feel the same way when this one is born. It's going to help that the baby [will be] with my sister-in-law, but she still isn't going to give him the care that I want to give him. She babysits for several other children, so he's not going to have the individualized time that I could give him [by] having only two at home. She's got ten other babies that she babysits for. They're all relatives, but... (#0980F)

Interestingly, although this respondent's own mother was herself employed when she was growing up, she nevertheless compared herself to an earlier cohort of nonemployed mothers and wives who were able to spend more time taking care of their children, their husbands, and their homes.

> Well, I think it [has to do with] the way you're brought up. I think with the generation today, the way we grew up, there were so many more women who didn't work. They were able to keep the house spotless, keep all the laundry done, take care of the kids, have dinner on the table. So it's like, we're suppose to be able to do all of that plus we're suppose to be able to have a full-time job and keep our husbands happy. (#0980F)

In addition to feelings of guilt and inadequacy, several women also talked about their feelings of *self-doubt*. For example, a 33-year-old sales manager described her feelings of uncertainty and mentioned that she copes with her feelings of self-doubt by decompartmentalizing her various role obligations (see Stryker and Statham 1985).

> [I wonder] who's suffering. Am I spending enough time with my kids? Am I doing the right thing? Would my kids be better off with less of a lifestyle, less of a neighborhood, and more time with me? Or are they better off growing up in this environment? It's an overwhelming sense. I pretty much have found [that] in order to handle everything, you have to break everything down. You really can't look at the whole picture. [When] you look at the whole picture, you start to wonder how in the hell are you doing it and then you start having doubts. Am I doing it okay? Who's suffering? You really have to break it down and take one thing at a time, in my opinion anyway. I can't handle the whole thing as one ball of wax. (#0473F)

When I probed her response and asked her why she has feelings of self-doubt as a mother and concerns that her children may be "suffering," she attributed those negative feelings and emotions to the fact that her mother did not work outside the home and was "there" for her when she was growing up.

> I think it's pretty much the way we were brought up. You know, mom was pretty much it. Mom didn't work. Mom was there. (#0473F)

In short, employment and multiple role occupancy resulted in negative self-evaluations for many women as mothers and wives and negative feelings such as self-doubt, inadequacy, and guilt. The examples presented here suggest that the groups and individuals women selected as their frame of reference may have contributed to their negative self-appraisals and emotions. In the absence of clear norms and objective standards for evaluating their various role performances, employed wives appeared to engage in social comparisons with other *women*. When evaluating themselves as wives and mothers, several women spontaneously compared themselves to their own mothers and other nonemployed wives, who they perceived as being more active than they were in family life. By choosing as their reference group an earlier generation of traditional homemakers, social comparisons led to perceptions of their own inadequacy as wives and mothers, since their family role behavior did not live up to the *standard* of their reference group. However, it also appeared that women's reference groups served not only as a standard for family role behavior, but also as a source of norms regarding how they *ought* to act as wives and mothers. In addition to experiencing negative feelings of inadequacy

and self-doubt, these women also felt guilty toward their children and husbands because they violated the norm for women of continuous emotional support and availability, which was a norm embodied by their reference group.

In light of the centrality of family roles for women's self-conception, it is not surprising that employment and multiple role occupancy are both stressful and distressing for them. To the extent that family roles continue to be an important source of self-definition for employed women, it is reasonable to expect that unfavorable social comparisons as wives and mothers have negative consequences for their mental health. Negative self-evaluations and a configuration of negative emotions (including feelings of self-doubt, inadequacy, and guilt) in these highly valued role domains—which, in part, reflect the groups employed wives select as their frame of reference—undermine their feelings of self-worth, which in turn, may contribute to their relatively high symptom levels.

Men's Reference Groups: Employed Married Fathers' Positive Self-Evaluations as Husbands and Fathers and Feelings of Self-Worth

In sharp contrast to the women, employment (and multiple role occupancy) resulted in positive self-evaluations for the majority of men. Recall that 90 percent (N = 18) of the men I interviewed indicated that they often feel successful as fathers and husbands because they are employed. A theme which emerged from the male data was that men think their employment contributes to their ability to successfully fulfill their family roles which, for them, involves the provision of financial support among other things. According to the men in the sample, employment bolstered their identities as a "good" father and husband because they were able to *provide*. In a parallel manner to the women, the emotions these men experienced from combining work and family obligations were consistent with their evaluations of their performances in family role domains. In addition to feelings of success, employment and multiple role occupancy resulted in positive emotions such as pride, self-satisfaction, and a sense of self-worth for men.

When I probed their responses and asked them why they experienced positive feelings and emotions from combining work and family, some of these men (N = 10) responded by comparing themselves to other groups or individuals. Interestingly, and again in a parallel manner to the women, the groups to which these men compared themselves tended to consist of other *employed* males, most notably their own fathers and/or male peers, who were considerably less involved than they were in family life. By comparing themselves to more traditional *"noninvolved"* fathers and husbands, these men perceived that their own family role behavior not only lived up to, but actually exceeded, the behavior of their reference group.

For example, although this 50-year-old systems associate worked relatively long hours at his job, he nevertheless evaluated himself as a "good" father. When I probed his response and asked him why he thought he was successful in this role domain, he responded by comparing himself to his own father who was less involved with him (when he was growing up) than he currently is with his own children.

> I think I'm a pretty good father. I think I could be better. You can always do a better job, but I think I'm a good father. I say that because my two children have never caused any problems, have never been in any kind of serious situation from being in trouble to being delinquent. I would think that's a result of the kind of things that they've learned from both my wife and myself. I look back at my childhood and I think my father didn't spend very much time with me, and again that was not because he didn't love me. He did. He had to work and it was a different situation. Being raised back in the forties, my father had to work two jobs. As a result, [he] was not able to do a lot of things [with me such as] attend school things, or [be involved] when I was active in basketball, and so on. So I think I'm a good father in that I do spend time with my children. And we've done things together. (#1086M)

In addition to their positive self-evaluations as fathers (and husbands), several men also talked about their feelings of *pride* from combining work and family obligations. A 41-year-old account executive feels "proud" to be a father (and hold a job) because he is able to spend more time with his sons than his father spent with him when he was a child.

> Being a father really makes me feel proud. Probably [because I] try to understand my sons more than my dad tried to understand me. Of course my dad worked all the time. He had his own business and he was hardly ever home. I think that is probably why [I feel proud because] I [spend more] time with them than my father [spent with me]. My father worked twelve, fourteen hours and sometimes sixteen hours a day. We very seldom saw him. Just maybe on Wednesday afternoons and Sundays. That was about it. I guess it goes back to the way we've been raised. (#1061M)

While the men in the previous two examples compared themselves to their own fathers, other men compared themselves to employed male peers such as their friends and coworkers. However, similar to the men in the previous examples, these men also emphasized how much more time they spend with their children relative to the men in their reference group. A 29-year-old aseptic operator, whose work schedule allows him to share child care with his wife, compared himself to other men at his stage of life who work a more usual eight-to-five day.

> I take care of my kids the best I can. I'm actually with my kids a lot more than most fathers because I get up in the morning with them, feed them breakfast and lunch, and sometimes give them a bath. I spend anywhere from seven to eight [in the morning] until two o'clock [in the afternoon] with them. So that's six to seven hours a day I get to spend with my kids. A lot of fathers that work days get home at five o'clock and their kids are in bed by nine so [they're with their kids] four hours. I sometimes get twice as much time with my kids than my friends from work. And we do lots of things. (#1075M)

For men whose reference group consisted of male peers, social comparisons also were associated with positive self-evaluations as fathers and husbands because they were relatively more active in family life. This same respondent evaluated himself as a "pretty good father" and also projected what his coworkers *would* do with their children *if* they had his work hours.

> I'm a pretty good [father] because I'm with them a lot. I really do take care of them. There's a lot [of] guys I know that would, if they had the same shift I have, would take their kids to day care at ten o'clock in the morning and then just have all that time to do nothing. I spend a lot of time, as much time with them as I can. (#1075M)

Later in the interview, this same respondent continued to describe how much more involved he is in home life compared to his own father and brother as well as the "other guys he knows."

> I'm a lot more involved with my kids than a lot of other guys I know. I've got a few friends that don't do nothing. I mean they get along okay with their wives, but they just don't do nothing. They come home from work and hit the couch and that's where they stay most of the night. They don't help out with kids and stuff like I do. As a matter of fact, my brother and my dad are the same way. They don't help. They don't do nothing. (#1075M)

In addition to positive self-evaluations and feelings of pride, most of the men also indicated that combining employment with marriage and parenthood makes them feel satisfied and worthwhile. The next response from a 49-year-old teacher represents this theme.

> [I feel] very satisfied and very worthwhile. I would think I was worthless if I didn't work. (#0163M)

When I probed this father's response and asked him why combining work and family roles contributed to his feelings of self-satisfaction and self-worth, he

referred to the social expectations and norms he learned in childhood— which is that men *should* be employed.

> I was always expected to work. I guess I grew up in an environment where it was frowned upon if somebody didn't work. I grew up in a family where the women did not work outside of the home. My dad worked two jobs most of his life. I just grew up that way. I think that's a lot of it. (#0163M)

Overall, employment (and multiple role occupancy) resulted in positive self-evaluations for many men as fathers and husbands and positive feelings such as pride, self-satisfaction, and self-worth. The examples presented here suggest that the groups and individuals men selected as their frame of reference may have contributed to their positive self-appraisals and emotions. As was the case for women, in the absence of clear norms and objective standards for evaluating their role performances as husbands and fathers, men engaged in social comparisons with other *men*. When evaluating themselves as husbands and fathers, several men spontaneously compared themselves to their own fathers and other *employed* male peers, who they perceived as being less involved than they were in family life. By choosing as their reference group a more traditional model of noninvolved husbands, social comparisons led to perceptions of their own success as fathers and husbands, since they were relatively more active in family life. Although they spent far less time than their wives did in family life, by using other men as their frame of reference, these husbands perceived that they not only lived up to, but actually surpassed the standard of their reference group. In addition to having positive feelings of success and pride, these men also experienced feelings of self-satisfaction and self-worth from combining multiple roles because, in spite of their employment, they managed to be actively involved in family life.

Given the importance of family roles to men, it is understandable why the psychological benefits of employment and multiple role occupancy are greater for them relative to women. Insofar as family roles are salient to men, it is reasonable to expect that favorable self-evaluations as fathers and husbands have positive consequences for their emotional functioning. Positive self-evaluations and a configuration of positive emotions (including feelings of pride and self-satisfaction) in important role domains—which, in part, reflect the groups men select as their frame of reference—increase their feelings of self-worth, which in turn, may contribute to their relatively low symptom levels and relatively high levels of psychological well-being.

Men's Reference Groups: The Consequences of Having an Employed Wife for Husbands' Negative Self-Evaluations and Feelings of Inadequacy

It is, however, important to mention that while employment (and multiple role occupancy) resulted in positive self-evaluations and positive feelings for the majority of men, there was a subgroup of men in the sample (N = 7) who felt inadequate as fathers and husbands because their wives were employed. The men who felt inadequate as husbands and fathers consisted of those who preferred that their wife not be employed and whose wife also preferred not to be employed (but the wife was employed primarily for financial reasons). According to these men, their wives' employment threatened their identities as a "good" husband and father because it *meant* that they were not able to adequately "provide." The emotions these men experienced were consistent with their evaluations of their performances in family role domains. In addition to feelings of inadequacy as providers, these men also experienced negative feelings of sadness, remorse, and guilt because their wives had to be employed to make ends meet at a time when their children were young.

When I probed their responses and asked them why having an employed wife resulted in negative self-evaluations and emotions, a few of these men (N = 4) responded by comparing themselves to other groups and individuals. The groups and individuals to which these men compared themselves tended to consist of other *employed* men, including their own fathers, male peers, and other childhood role models, who were *able* to provide a "family wage." By comparing themselves to an earlier generation of single wage-earner husbands, these men perceived that their family role behavior did not live up to the standard of their reference group.

For example, although combining work and family obligations makes this 31-year-old accounting clerk feel "happy," he nevertheless talked about his feelings of guilt and inadequacy as a provider.

> I'm really sad that she has to work and I'm really guilty that she has to work because I feel like I can't provide enough. I get that from, I think [I get that from] myself and I also think [I get that from] my parents. [My mother] didn't have to [work] and things like that. (#0256M)

When I probed and asked him why he feels sad and guilty that his wife is employed, he referred to his wife's employment preferences and emphasized the fact that he (and his wife) grew up in families in which the "mother could stay-at-home."

> She'd just rather be at home with the kids. That would've been her choice if we could've made it that way. And so that puts some stress on her. We both feel

guilty that the children have to go to day care and aren't at home because both of us were raised in families where the mother could stay at home. It all stems back to the way we were brought up. (#0256M)

In addition to feelings of inadequacy and guilt, a few of these men also felt remorse. For example, although this next 49-year-old computer programmer realized that "most families are two-income families," he nevertheless engaged in social comparisons with a male peer who he perceived as economically more successful than himself.

I don't feel good about it. [I feel] a little guilty that she has to bring in a paycheck to make ends meet. I wish I had a job good enough so she didn't have to [work]. I wish I made enough so she didn't have to work. [I feel] resignation. That's just the way it is and I'm not alone. Most families are two-income families. [I] regret that I didn't think about it earlier in life so that I'd be in a [different] financial position. The paper had an article about a fellow who graduated from the same high school I did four years before I did. He built a company from nothing. It's a two billion dollar a year business now. I didn't prepare myself for employment. (#0081M)

Whereas the men in the previous two examples compared themselves to the "type" of family they grew up in or financially more successful male peers, the next 40-year-old service technician compared himself to another childhood role model. While discussing his (and his wife's) preferences for her employment, I asked him why he prefers that his wife not work outside the home. He revealed his feelings of inadequacy as a provider when he compared himself to media images of a "traditional family" that he was exposed to as a child.

I've always thought [that in] the traditional family, the mother stays home. Like watching "Leave It To Beaver" or something. When Wards at work the mother's at home with Beaver and all that stuff. Maybe if things were different in my life. If I'd gone to college and maybe had a better job we wouldn't be in a situation that we're in. I think she carries a big load with the family responsibilities as well as her working responsibilities as well as being a wife and mother. Mothers don't have it easy. (#0072M)

In short, although employment and multiple role occupancy resulted in positive self-evaluations and positive emotions for most men, having a *wife* who combines multiple roles resulted in negative self-evaluations as husbands and fathers and negative feelings of inadequacy, sadness, remorse, and guilt for a subgroup of men (see Ross, Mirowsky, and Huber 1983). The examples discussed here suggest that the groups and individuals these men selected as

their frame of reference may have contributed to their negative self-appraisals and emotions. In a climate in which men's and women's social roles are ostensibly undergoing redefinition and change, men (like women) appear to engage social comparisons with other people of the *same* sex. When evaluating themselves as fathers, husbands, and providers, this particular group of men compared themselves to their own fathers, male peers, and/or childhood role models who they perceived as more successful in work *and* family role domains. By choosing as their reference group an earlier generation of traditional single-wage earner husbands, social comparisons led to perceptions of their own inadequacy as fathers, husbands, and providers because they did not live up to the standard of their reference group. As in the case of the women, it appeared that these men's reference group served both as a standard for social comparisons as well as a source of norms regarding appropriate family role behavior for males. In addition to experiencing negative feelings of inadequacy, these men also felt guilty toward their children and wives because they were not able to live up to the "breadwinner" ideal which was embodied by their reference group.

Given the importance of family role identities for men's and women's self-conceptions, it is understandable why having an employed wife is both stressful and distressing for some husbands (Kessler and McRae 1982; Rosenfield 1980). To the extent that family role-identities (including the breadwinner identity) are important sources of self-definition for men, it is reasonable to assume that unfavorable self-evaluations as fathers, husbands, and breadwinners have negative consequences for their psychological well-being. In a parallel manner to the women discussed earlier, negative self-evaluations and a configuration of negative emotions (including feelings of inadequacy, sadness, remorse, and guilt) in these salient role domains—which, in part, reflect the groups and individuals these men select as their frame of reference—decrease their feelings of self-worth, which in turn, may contribute to their high symptom levels and poor mental health relative to other more "successful" husbands.

DISCUSSION: THE IMPORTANCE OF REFERENCE GROUPS AND SELF-EVALUATIONS FOR THEORY AND RESEARCH ON THE MENTAL HEALTH CONSEQUENCES OF MULTIPLE ROLES

Reference groups, and the social comparisons based on such groups, are important sources of information about the self. In order to interpret whether their role performances represent successes or failures, individuals routinely engage in social comparisons with either a group or an individual. In addition to providing comparative information, reference groups are also a source of

normative information, since it is through these groups that individuals ascertain norms governing role-related behavior. Reference groups appear to be particularly important sources of comparative and normative information when objective standards and clear norms for role behavior are unavailable. Previous work on this topic indicates that because reference groups provide self-relevant information, the choice of a reference group has consequences for self-evaluations as well as feelings of inadequacy or self-worth. However, while several sociological theories have highlighted the contributions of reference groups to a broad range of social psychological phenomena (including the formation and maintenance of the self-concept), theories about the mental health effects of social roles have not considered the potential importance of social comparisons in the stress process.

In this paper, I have argued that reference groups, and the self-evaluations based on these groups, may be implicated in gender differences in mental health. Drawing on earlier conceptual and empirical work on reference group behavior, I suggested that the groups and individuals men and women select as their frame of reference provide further insight into why the psychological benefits of employment (and multiple role occupancy) are fewer for women relative to men. On the basis of previous theory and research on reference groups, social comparisons, the self-concept, and mental health (as well as insights from identity theory), it seemed reasonable to expect that favorable social comparisons result in positive self-evaluations, positive feelings of self-worth, as well as emotional well-being, especially if the role performance being evaluated is in a psychologically salient role domain. Conversely, unfavorable social comparisons should result in negative self-evaluations and negative feelings of inadequacy that are troublesome for mental health, particularly if the role-identity being evaluated is central to the individuals self-concept. To the extent that recent social change in men's and women's social roles and role configurations has produced ambiguity in the standards and norms for gender specific role behavior—at the same time that family roles have continued to be highly important sources of self-definition for both males and females—an examination of the groups men and women employ as their frame of reference may help us understand why combining work and family roles is both more stressful and distressing for women than for men.

To illustrate the potential importance of reference groups and social comparisons for men's and women's self-evaluations and emotional experience, I provided a few examples of reference group behavior from a qualitative study of gender differences in the emotional effects of multiple role involvements. Although I did not originally intend to examine men's and women's reference groups, data from in-depth interviews with employed married parents revealed that differences between men's and women's evaluations of themselves as

spouses and parents, and their feelings about combining work and family roles, were associated with the different groups they employed as their frame of reference. It is likely that differences between men's and women's evaluations of themselves as spouses and parents, and their feelings about combining work and family roles, are precipitating factors in the production of gender differences in psychological symptoms such as depression, anxiety, somatization, and distress.

On the basis of these examples, it was evident that when evaluating themselves as spouses and parents, employed married mothers tended to compare themselves to their own mothers, or other nonemployed wives, who were more involved than they were in family life. Social comparisons were associated with negative self-evaluations (as wives and mothers) and negative feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt for employed mothers because their role behavior fell short of the standard of their reference group. In contrast, when assessing themselves as spouses and parents, employed married fathers tended to compare themselves to their own fathers, or employed male peers, who were less involved than they were in family life. Social comparisons were associated with positive self-evaluations (as husbands and fathers) and positive feelings of success, pride, self-satisfaction, and self-worth for employed husbands because their role behavior surpassed the standard of their reference group.

However, while multiple role occupancy resulted in positive self-evaluations and feelings of self-worth for most husbands, I also found that having an employed wife resulted in negative self-evaluations and feelings of inadequacy for a subgroup of men. When assessing themselves as husbands, fathers, and breadwinners, the men who preferred that their wives not be employed and whose wives also preferred not to be employed (but the wife was employed primarily for financial reasons) tended to compare themselves to their own fathers and other role models of single wage-earner husbands whose wives were able to stay at home with their children. Social comparisons were associated with negative self-evaluations (as husbands and fathers) and negative feelings of inadequacy and remorse for these men because their role behavior did not live up to the standard of their reference group.

These examples also suggested that the groups and individuals men and women employed as their frame of reference served not only as a standard of behavior, but also as a source of norms about gender specific role behavior and how they ought to act as spouses and parents. In addition to negative self-evaluations and feelings of inadequacy, social comparisons were associated with negative feelings of guilt for most women and for some men because their role behavior violated the norms and expectations of gender appropriate role behavior, which were embodied by their respective reference groups.[8] Not surprisingly, gender variation in self-evaluations, feelings of self-worth or

inadequacy, and positive as opposed to negative affective states, which were evident in this small sample, parallel distress differences between women and men (and among men) that are consistently reported in both community and national epidemiological studies (e.g., Kessler and McRae 1982; Menaghan 1989; Rosenfield 1980; Thoits 1986).

Given the small nonrepresentative sample and method of analysis, the findings and conclusions discussed in this paper are obviously only suggestive and tentative. In order to determine whether men's and women's evaluations of themselves as spouses and parents (and their feelings about combining work and family roles) are additional mediating variables in the gender-distress relationship, the ideas I have outlined would have to be subjected to rigorous "tests" with longitudinal quantitative data from men and women from a range of class, ethnic, and racial backgrounds. Moreover, due to data limitations, I was unable to examine the reference group selection process and, therefore, cannot rule out the alternative hypothesis that men and women select reference groups that sustain preexisting self-evaluations and feelings. Panel studies are necessary to examine the selection process and to determine the causal direction of the relationship between reference groups and self-evaluations. However, while my data did not allow me to explain *why* men and women selected these reference groups for social comparisons, by showing that employed married mothers' and fathers' reference groups consisted of *same sex* individuals, usually *family members* and/or *peers*, who themselves were spouses and parents, my findings are consistent with social comparison theory's claim that people choose referents who are, in some way, similar or close to themselves (Festinger 1954).

By providing further insight into the social psychological processes that may underlie distress differences between men and women who have the same role configuration and role situation, the examples presented earlier help identify some new questions for future surveys on gender, social roles, and mental health. For example, in addition to the need to develop varied measures of self-assessed role performance across different role domains, surveys should ask men and women to describe the feelings they experience from combining work and family obligations as well as their feelings about having an employed spouse. Surveys also should obtain information about the groups (and/or individuals) men and women employ for social comparisons, and if social comparisons result in positive or negative self-appraisals and feelings. To further elaborate the sources of gender differences in self-evaluations and emotional experience, surveys also should include questions that assess individuals' reflected appraisals. Although I have focused on reference groups and social comparisons, reflected appraisals are also an important source of evaluative information about the self. Therefore, in addition to the questions

mentioned previously, men and women should be asked how others (including their spouse, children, parents, friends, neighbors, coworkers, and employers) perceive them as spouses, parents, and workers. It is likely that theory and research on gender, social roles, and mental health would be enhanced by answers to these questions. However, whether the inclusion of these variables in statistical models would reduce gender differences in psychological symptoms is not resolvable at this time and awaits further research.

Beyond highlighting the relationships between reference groups, self-evaluations, and emotional experience among individuals who hold the same three roles of spouse, parent, and worker, the ideas discussed in this paper may also be useful for theory and research about the mental health consequences of social roles more generally. The findings reported in this study suggest that self, identity, and emotion processes are all implicated in the etiology of psychological well-being and emotional distress. Epidemiological studies that focus on social status differences in mental health would surely be enhanced by systematic attention to these underlying social psychological processes. Moreover, by linking the social distribution of well-being and distress to the social distribution of positive and negative self-evaluations and affect in the general population, such a research program also would enhance sociological theory and research on self, identity, and emotion.

Finally, by identifying the groups men and women employ for social comparisons, the findings discussed in this paper provide a window into why recent social change in men and women's roles has not reduced the gender gap in mental health among married persons. While the increase in women's employment has resulted in a convergence of the role configurations and role situations of males and females, the groups men and women select as the basis for self-evaluation nevertheless appear to consist of role models of traditional wives and husbands to which they were exposed in childhood. To the extent that men's and women's reference groups represent and embody standards and norms of traditional gendered family role behavior, it is not surprising that employment (and multiple role occupancy) result in feelings of inadequacy and distress for women, and feelings of self-worth and well-being for men. If the dual-earner family continues to be a predominant family form, we could perhaps expect that future cohorts of employed married parents will select reference groups consisting of males and females who are actively involved in *both* work *and* family life. With greater availability of alternative reference groups, we may in the future see a decline in current discrepancies between men and women in the psychological benefits of multiple role occupancy. In short, by identifying gender differences in reference groups, self-evaluations, and emotional experience among employed married parents, the ideas and findings discussed in this paper provide insight into one mechanism which

contributes to the persistence of gender differences in mental health among married persons.

APPENDIX

Selected Sociodemographic Characteristics
of the Follow-Up Sample by Gender

	Follow-Up Sample		
	Total (N = 40)	Male (N = 20)	Female (N = 20)
Characteristics			
Age, Mean Years	38.0	40.0	36.0
25-34	35.0%	25.0%	45.0%
35-44	42.5%	45.0%	40.0%
45-54	20.0%	25.0%	15.0%
55-64	2.5%	5.0%	0%
Race			
White	100%	100%	100%
Black	0%	0%	0%
Other	0%	0%	0%
Education			
Less Than High School	0%	0%	0%
High School Graduate	25.0%	25.0%	25.0%
Some College	45.0%	45.0%	45.0%
College Graduate	15.0%	15.0%	15.0%
Graduate Degree	15.0%	15.0%	15.0%
Household Income			
Under $12,000	0%	0%	0%
$12,000-19,999	0%	0%	0%
$20,000-31,999	7.5%	5.0%	10.0%
$32,000-39,999	15.0%	15.0%	15.0%
$40,000-51,999	40.0%	40.0%	40.0%
$52,000-59,999	15.0%	10.0%	20.0%
$60,000-71,999	10.0%	10.0%	10.0%
$72,000 or more	12.5%	20.0%	5.0%
Children < 18 years Residing in the Household, Mean No.	2.0	2.1	1.9
Employment			
Employed 35hrs +/wk	100%	100%	100%
Spouse Employed 35hrs +/wk	100%	100%	100%

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NOTES

1. Shibutani (1955) noted that while the concept of the reference group provides additional refinements to some tenets of symbolic interactionism, the processes involved in reference group behavior are not fundamentally different from the socialization process previously discussed by symbolic interactionists such as Mead (1934). From a symbolic interactionist perspective, one can think of reference *groups* and reference *individuals* as "particular others" whose perspectives are considered in the role-taking process.

2. In addition to having consequences for individuals, reference groups also have consequences for processes involving group formation and maintenance. However, because this paper is concerned with the effects of social comparisons for *self* and *emotion* processes, I have not included a discussion of the implications of reference group behavior for group processes.

3. See Tesser, Millar, and Moore (1988) for an example of psychological research that examines the consequences of social comparisons for self-evaluations of performances on "self-relevant" tasks.

4. While Hyman (1942) is credited for having first introduced the term "reference group," as noted previously, early symbolic interactionists such as Mead (1934) had previously acknowledged the importance of reference groups for self-development.

5. Psychological symptoms assessed in epidemiological studies are typically measured by standard screening scales such as the Center for Epidemiological Studies' Depression Scale (CES-D) and the SCL-90 (Derogatis and Cleary 1977). These screening scales are comprised of items which were identified by the presenting complaints of patients receiving psychiatric treatment. When combined, these items measure psychological symptoms such as depression, anxiety, somatization, and distress. These scales have been shown to have high construct validity and high internal consistency in general population surveys. While not measures of psychiatric disorder per se, scores on these measures are interpreted as reasonably good indicators of experienced psychological distress. In this paper, I use the terms psychological well-being, distress, mental health, and emotional functioning interchangeably; consistent with their usage in the mental health literature, I use these terms to refer to individuals' *psychological state*. The term "stress" is used to refer to a *state of arousal* resulting from demands from the environment that are perceived by the individual as taxing. Sociological stress researchers generally regard "stress" as a mediating variable in the relationship between social circumstances (e.g., social roles or multiple role occupancy) and psychological outcomes such as depressive symptomatology (see Aneshensel [1992] for a recent review of theory and research on social stress).

6. Although this respondent no longer felt guilty holding a job now that her children were older, other women who had older children experienced negative feelings from combining work and parenthood.

7.   All names in quotes are pseudonyms. The following notations are used in examples from transcripts: [ ] words in brackets refer to an inaudible response which I surmised based on interview notes and/or the context of the conversation and...refers to a response that trails off and was not completed by the speaker.

8.   Although my research suggests that men and women employ different reference groups for social comparisons and self-evaluations, men's and women's reference groups nevertheless appear to have three things in common; they are comprised of *same sex* persons, usually *childhood role models* of spouses and parents, who represent *traditional* family role obligations of males and females.

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