



## Conversations with the Experts

### Working Couples in the Sandwich Generation



Margaret B. Neal

**Bio:** Margaret Neal is a gerontologist whose primary research interest concerns caregiving (e.g., work and elder care, sandwiched-generation caregivers, long-distance caregiving, informal caregiving to persons with Alzheimer's disease), and how the private and public sectors can assist informal caregivers. She is interested, as well, in global aging and is Co-Principal Investigator of the Northwest Health Foundation-funded project, "Arthritis among Hispanics in Oregon: Developing Community Solutions." Additional interests include adaptation to retirement and the measurement of quality of care. She uses both quantitative and qualitative methods in her research and recently completed a chapter on mixed methods research in the *Handbook on Work and Family* (Lawrence Erlbaum, 2006) with Dr. Leslie Hammer and Dr. David Morgan. She has received several grants and written numerous articles, book chapters, and books related to work and caregiving (e.g., *Balancing Work and Caregiving for Children, Adults, and Elders*, Sage, 1993; *Work and Caring for the Elderly: International Perspectives* (edited with Viola Lechner), Taylor & Francis, 1999; and *Working Couples Caring for Children and Aging Parents: Effects on Work and Well-Being* (with Prof. Leslie Hammer (psychology), Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, in press). For five years she directed the Portland State University Survey Research Laboratory. Dr. Neal teaches in the areas of social gerontology and survey research methods, including the graduate courses, "Perspectives on Aging," "Global Health and Aging: Focus on Nicaragua," and "Data Collection." She is on the Board of Directors and is the immediate past-president of the Oregon Gerontological Association, and is a member of the Executive Council of the Association for Gerontology in Higher Education.



Leslie B. Hammer

**Bio:** Leslie Hammer is a Professor in the Department of Psychology, Portland State University. Dr. Hammer is the Director of a new Occupational Health Psychology graduate training program at Portland State University that is funded through a Training Program Grant from the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health. She recently concluded a national, longitudinal study of dual-earner couples in the sandwiched generation funded by the Alfred P. Sloan foundation. This research examined the various work and family stressors related to such work and well-being indicators as life satisfaction, depression, work-family conflict, positive work-family spillover, absenteeism and turnover intentions. This project involved the collection of both qualitative and quantitative data and has been noted in such lay outlets as Time Magazine and the Chicago Tribune, as well as presented at conferences and published in academic journals. Dr. Hammer, along with her colleague Dr. Margaret Neal, is currently writing a book based on this national study. Dr. Hammer also serves on the founding editorial board of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network's On-Line Work and Family Encyclopedia.

Dr. Hammer's research has focused on the difficulties in coordinating the demands of work and family that stem from factors within individuals and their close relationships, as well as factors in the work organization. More recently, she has also begun to examine the concept of work-family positive spillover, including both work and well-being outcomes. Dr. Hammer's research has also examined ways in which organizations can help reduce work-family stress and improve positive spillover by implementing "family-friendly" programs and policies such as alternative work schedules, leave programs, dependent care programs, and employee assistance programs. Finally, her studies on work and

family crossover effects have demonstrated the importance of considering the dyad as the unit of analysis in work-family research. Dr. Hammer has written articles, book chapters, and a book (*Working Couples Caring for Children and Aging Parents: Effects on Work and Well-Being*, with M. Neal) on the difficulties in managing work and family demands, and has given numerous presentations in the area of work and family at international, national, and regional conferences. Classes she teaches at both the graduate and undergraduate levels include Work and Family, Occupational Health Psychology, and Organizational Psychology. She also supervises a number of graduate student theses and dissertations.

Dr. Hammer has two children, Joshua, 8 and Benji, 5. She was raised in Maryland and has lived in Oregon for the last 15 years. She has been married to her husband Lee for 10 years. Lee works as a restaurant owner/operations manager.

### **An Interview with Margaret B. Neal and Leslie B. Hammer**

By Karen Corday and Judi Casey

**Corday:** Please give an overview of the study on which your new book, *Working Couples Caring for Children and Aging Parents*, is based.

**Neal:** In this study, we focused on individuals who are caring for both children and elderly parents. There has been research focused on people caring for one of these groups and working outside of the home, and a few studies have looked at workers with multiple family responsibilities, but not many. We wanted to look specifically at working and caregiving responsibilities from the perspective of dual earner couples in which both members of the couple works and cares for children and aging parents, all at the same time.

**Hammer:** In terms of our methodology, we started with local focus groups. We asked participants, "What kinds of coping strategies do you use to manage your work and multiple caregiving responsibilities?" We really wanted to craft questions for our mailed survey that would make sense to people. These focus groups helped us to create the survey instrument. We started out making telephone calls on a random digit dial basis, but this method was prohibitively expensive. Instead, for our national survey sample we purchased a list of households with an adult aged thirty or older, because previous work revealed that people who have these dual responsibilities tend to be in their early forties. We then began making phone calls to the list of people in all of the lower 48 states.

**Casey:** What were the criteria for the focus group and the survey?

**Neal:** The couples had to: (1.) have a child aged eighteen or younger living in the house at least three days a week, (2.) be caring for an aging parent, step-parent or parent-in-law, and (3.) be providing a minimum of three hours of elder care per week. One or both members of the couple could be responsible for this care. Another criterion was that both members of the couple had to work; one had to work full time, or 35 hours a week or more, and one had to work at least half time, or twenty hours a week or more. Both members of the couple had to participate in the survey, as we were interested in crossover effects among spouses. Finally, as stipulated by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, we focused on middle- and upper-income families, as most of the previous research had focused on low-income families. We set the income criterion quite low to avoid excluding people. The minimum gross household income was \$40,000 per year, which was actually quite close to the median in 1997, when we began the study.

**Corday:** How did you recruit your subjects?

**Neal:** After the focus groups and the instrument design, we made over 37,000 phone calls to over 8,000 phone numbers across the nation to recruit study participants. Once we identified couples, we mailed them the survey for completion. They received twenty dollars each as a token of appreciation when we received a completed survey from both members of the couple. One year later we re-surveyed the same couples. Our sample for the first survey was 309 couples; we did not exclude same-sex couples from the research, but none were in our sample. One year later, we got a 75% response rate; 234 couples returned the second survey. We then had another set of focus groups with couples to review the findings from the survey, and we conducted telephone interviews with individuals who had experienced the most change in the year between the surveys. This could

have been positive or negative change; it was approximately equally split. Those data have yet to be fully analyzed.

**Corday:** How would you describe the typical sandwiched couple that participated in the study?

**Neal:** We developed a profile based on mean values. In our study, the typical sandwiched couple consists of a 44-year-old man and a 42-year-old woman who have been married for eighteen years. The husband works about 49 hours a week, and the wife works about 38 hours per week. They have two children in the household and are helping two aging parents. In some cases, the two aging parents are a couple themselves, in other situations they are not. The median household income was \$62,500 [in 1997.] The help provided to aging parents is primarily instrumental as opposed to personal care. This includes activities such as help with transportation, shopping, making care decisions, housekeeping, and managing money. The husband and wife each spend the equivalent of one work day or more per week caring for their parents. Wives spend an average of 9.8 hours per week, husbands spend an average of 7.5 hours.

**Casey:** The mean is nowhere near the minimum of three hours per week!

**Hammer:** That's right. Another piece of interesting information is that when we were doing our screening interviews, we'd ask if the couples were involved in caring for their parents, and at first, many people immediately said no. When we went on to describe parent care as checking in with their mother in Florida and talking to her three hours per week or emotionally supporting her while she figures out her finances, many of them would then say "Yes, I do that." The term "caregiver" can confuse people, so we used the phrase "helping out."

**Corday:** What effect does caring for both children and aging parents have on a person's well-being?

**Hammer:** We found higher levels of depression among the caretakers than in the general population. We used the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale to measure depressive symptoms, and the rates were higher than the national average. We saw some negative effects on depression and outcomes such as life satisfaction. In terms of couples, there were crossover effects. When one half of a couple experienced decreased well-being, this impacted their partner's well-being. When one partner used coping strategies that resulted in higher well-being, such as increasing emotional resources, emotional coping and prioritization, this had a positive effect on their spouse. Likewise, when one partner used coping strategies causing detriments in well-being, such as behavioral methods related to social withdrawal, this had a negative effect on their partner.

**Neal:** I want to emphasize the importance of role quality. To be consistent with Rosalind Barnett's work, we made sure that we talked to people not just about their objective role characteristics such as how many parents they cared for, how many kids they have, and how many hours they worked per week, but also role quality issues. Some of the objective characteristics did have an impact on people's work and well-being outcomes, but the importance of role quality accounted for a significant amount of variance above the other characteristics. The role that jumped out the most was spousal role quality. This was surprising; we expected one of the two caregiving roles to have more of an effect. However, people do rely very heavily on their spouse for support during the caregiving process. If they're getting along with their spouse and there are more rewards in the relationship than concerns or stressors, this has a positive impact on well-being. The opposite is the case if the spousal relationship is problematic.

Another important aspect of our study is our examination of the benefits of combining caregiving and work. Few other studies have looked at positive spillover between family and work. Overall, people reported higher rates of positive spillover than negative spillover. Work-family stress can actually be offset by some of the benefits of combining work and family.

**Hammer:** We also collected a second wave of data, which was not covered in our book, but we wrote about this longitudinal data in other papers. Some specific results related to the beneficial effects of combining work and family include our finding that positive spillover between family and work is related to lower levels of depression over time, not just for an individual, but for the individual's spouse. We also studied the reciprocal relationship between the elder parent and the adult child. In this relationship, the aging parents were often able to help out with tasks such as child care and housework. In these cases, the emotional relationship between the aging parent and the adult child benefited them both. We think it's important to not only focus on just the stress and negativity of these situations; there are a lot of benefits to providing care to multiple family members.

**Neal:** Studies in the gerontological literature do not tend to focus on the extent that many aging parents help out as well as receive help. The tendency has been to focus on the care being given to the elder, as opposed to what the elder gives back. The aging parents in our study were giving as well as receiving help.

**Corday:** What are the effects of having multiple care responsibilities on job performance and satisfaction?

**Hammer:** We examined both objective as well as subjective characteristics of these roles. Objective roles included hours worked, number of children, and hours of parent care provided. Subjective roles included role quality variables. Role quality tended to account for more variance in work outcomes than did the objective characteristics. Primarily, job role quality and parent care role quality were related to job satisfaction. Job role quality refers to perceptions about the amount of control and autonomy one has at his or her job; the more autonomy experienced, the higher the level of satisfaction reported. Likewise, the more rewards experienced from the exchanges with their parents beyond the concerns and stressors, the higher the level of job satisfaction. Both of these roles were more important to job satisfaction than the child care roles, which is interesting and suggests that organizations need to pay more attention to the elder care issues and concerns of their employees. We also found that there were differences between wives and husbands; wives reported higher levels of work absenteeism due to family care responsibilities, tended to make more work accommodations to more easily care for family members, and reported lower performance on the job than husbands.

**Neal:** We shouldn't minimize the effects of objective work role characteristics; we did find that working more hours resulted in more work-family conflict, greater life satisfaction for men, and poorer work performance for men, interestingly. Having access to flexible work schedules resulted in less work-family conflict for men and more overall absence for both. This latter finding is consistent with an earlier study of mine that found that people who participated in a seminar series on work-family issues subsequently ended up missing more work. This was because they found out about options of which they had not been aware, and those options were only available during work hours. Similarly, if you have flexibility in your work schedule, you're probably going to take more time off from work for family responsibilities. However, time and again participants revealed that while they may miss work during the typical work day, they make up the time later on. Flexibility does not lead to lost work hours, and it probably leads to increased loyalty.

**Casey:** And maybe, ultimately, better performance because when workers are at work, they are focused on what they need to do.

**Neal:** Exactly.

**Corday:** Could you describe your model of work and family coping strategies for sandwiched couples?

**Hammer:** One of our objectives was to develop a measure of coping strategies for work and family, specifically for people in the sandwiched generation. We developed a model in which we identified ways that workers can decrease demands and increase their resources. It's a six-celled model; we looked at decreasing the demands and increasing the resources in three areas—behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively. [See the Graphic for an illustration of the model.] Decreasing demands behaviorally may entail stopping or limiting activities, such as social activities. We found that this was not a positive step; this withdrawal led to decreased well-being. It's a natural tendency for people who are overwhelmed with work and family responsibilities, but one of the lessons learned is that people need social relationships, and letting them go makes coping more difficult.

**Neal:** Along those same lines, another example of decreasing social involvement is to not spend time with their spouses. That, too, resulted in less well-being. Those who did their best to maintain or enhance their relationship with their spouse were much happier and better off.

**Casey:** Did the couples who worked different shifts to try and cover the caregiving responsibilities have lower outcomes?

**Hammer:** We didn't get a chance to look specifically at that issue with the quantitative data, but judging from the qualitative data from the focus groups, many couples struggled with this arrangement. When we followed up, at least one of the couples had divorced. Another couple described how they literally saw each other for five minutes a day, and this really wrecked havoc on their relationship.

**Neal:** In terms of a coping strategy, spending less time with one's partner led to workers having much more depression and less life satisfaction.

**Hammer:** As for the rest of the model, the other components proved beneficial. If a worker decreased demands emotionally by expecting less from him or herself and accepting that no one can “do it all,” this was helpful. Increasing emotional resources by seeking out and receiving emotional support was also beneficial. Trying to find humor in the situation was another good strategy. In terms of cognitive coping strategies, decreasing demands by prioritizing activities was helpful to individuals, as was increasing resources by scheduling activities and having future goals.

**Neal:** We make recommendations for sandwiched couples in the book, based on our findings. We suggest that couples plan time for each other and for their personal needs, obtain practical support for their caretaking duties by using available work support programs as well as help from family members, and that they take advantage of technology such as cell phones and voice mail, choose jobs with high levels of flexibility, and seek emotional support. Other recommendations are to plan ahead and be prepared for emergencies, decrease demands by stopping less important activities, reevaluate life and family priorities, simplify lifestyles, and reduce personal expectations. It’s also important to ease stress by maintaining a sense of humor or relying on religious or spiritual beliefs. Finally, avoid the temptation to take on additional responsibilities when making use of dependent care supports and alternative work schedules.

**Hammer:** There’s more research needed on this subject, but we did find, especially with women, that some people experience higher levels of work-family conflict when they make use of flexible schedules. Our interpretation was that probably they were using this flexibility to do more work and family tasks. Work-family research supports this theory; there are sometimes unclear results when looking at the effects of formal workplace policies on families. The impact of more informal work-family support and culture is stronger on individual well-being and work outcomes. Many researchers in the field are focusing on how to develop this informal support; it’s especially important for the smaller businesses in this country, as many of them do not offer formal supports.

**Corday:** What advice did the surveyed couples have for other sandwiched couples?

**Neal:** Some of what we just talked about was consistent with the advice people provided, but sometimes people gave advice that our findings suggest is counter-indicated. Sometimes people would say “Buck up! Do it all anyway!” or “Work a different shift than your spouse!” Some of the advice that people gave just didn’t correspond with our findings about which strategies actually enhanced well-being and work outcomes.

**Casey:** I was really intrigued by your comment about flexibility and the formal versus informal work-family supports. Are you suggesting that researchers take a closer look at that particular dynamic?

**Hammer:** Yes, and there are researchers who are studying this, such as Tammy Allen, Cynthia Thompson, and some of the work of Ellen Kossek. People are starting to delve more into informal supports. For example, Ellen Kossek and I actually have a National Institutes of Health, Work, Family, and Health Network NIOSH grant to look at better understanding supervisor support for work and family. There’s little research that has focused on the aging workforce and what these workers need for work and family support. That topic is about to hit everyone really hard—the first Boomers turn sixty this year! Organizations are just now starting to pay attention to elder care and parent care responsibilities within their workforce and provide support for this need. Our research indicates that these supports may be more important than providing support for child care, based on workforce demographics.

**Neal:** In terms of future research from a methodological standpoint, our study was longitudinal in that we collected two separate waves of data. The book has one chapter focusing on the changes that occurred over the one year period. We found that the relationships between work and family are extremely dynamic; situations can change dramatically over the course of a year. Future research should try to gather longitudinal data at more than two points. What remains unclear is the appropriate time interval between the data gathering points. Our interval was a year, and we found lots of changes, but we also know that there were changes that occurred in shorter intervals that we didn’t capture by looking at the quantitative data alone. For example, we learned from written comments that one couple separated but then got back together between the two interviews; we weren’t able to capture this event that occurred within a shorter time frame. We do know that more than one time point for data collection is important, and preferably more than two.

**Hammer:** There is the focus on daily changes; using daily diary methods captures a whole different aspect of these dynamics. Thinking about these issues across the whole life course is critical. Older workers also have work-family responsibilities and demands, and we know very little about their experiences.

**Neal:** Our study also indicated the importance of gathering data from both members of the couple and indeed, ideally in the future, researchers will survey the couples' children as well as the aging parents and include more of the family unit. We found that there is crossover between couples in terms of experiences at work and home. If we expand on that idea, we want to include more members of the family system. Ann Crouter is doing this type of work, but very few other researchers are including children in their studies of work and family, and even fewer are including aging parents.

**Hammer:** It would also be beneficial to expand the research into the work realm and survey not only children and aging parents, but also co-workers and supervisors.

**Corday:** You mentioned more awareness of the need for support when it comes to elder care as well as the needs of older workers. How else can workplace practitioners support their employees dealing with child and elder care?

**Neal:** We also suggest providing autonomy, control, and increasing informal work flexibility. Employers should be flexible with the types of supports they provide, depending on the employee's life stage. Workplaces need to develop a culture in which supervisors are more sensitive to work and family issues and are able to provide flexibility in scheduling and time off for unexpected family care responsibilities. Of course, we have to keep in mind that there's a dual agenda—the supports must be beneficial, or at least not detrimental, to the company as well. We believe that paying attention to work and family issues can be beneficial for both individuals and companies. We developed a work-family sourcebook for employers that is focused on ways to support employees with child and elder care needs. We outline reasons why employers should be concerned with the family care responsibilities of their employees as well as ways that they can respond. We also provide a sample needs assessment that can be used by a company. The employers' sourcebook can be downloaded from our project website at <http://www.sandwich.pdx.edu>. [See also this issue's Additional Resources.]

**Corday:** What can policy makers do for their sandwiched constituents?

**Neal:** One of the chapters in the book focuses on policies in countries outside the United States. From a comparative standpoint, the United States scores poorly among developed countries and even some developing countries in terms of supports provided to working families in two respects: health care and paid family leave. A number of other countries have universal health care, paid family leave, and universal child care. We need to look at what these countries have done and develop a system in the United States that supports working families. In terms of what states can do, California has a paid family leave law; other states should work to implement a similar law. We know that even though people reported taking unpaid leave from work to manage family responsibilities, this was not a choice they made happily, and it had negative impacts on their family's well-being. Paid sick leave that can be used not just for oneself but to care for children or parents would help as well.

**Corday:** Is there anything else?

**Hammer:** I wanted to mention our prevalence estimates; this is an important aspect of the study, since we weren't able to draw on a national sample. A key finding of the study is that between nine and thirteen percent of American households that have a telephone and include one or more people between the ages of thirty and sixty are composed of dual-earner, sandwiched-generation couples.

**Casey:** Was that a surprise to you?

**Neal:** Not really, but we think it will be to many readers. It's obviously not the majority of working couples, but clearly it's a significant enough number that we can't afford to ignore the needs of these couples.

*Working Couples Caring for Children and Aging Parents: Effects on Work and Well-Being* is available from Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, <http://www.erlbaum.com>.

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## A Model of Work-Family Coping Strategies for Sandwiched Couples

	Decrease Demands	Increase Resources
Behavioral	Decreasing Activities (e.g., stopping or limiting activities)	Increasing Instrumental Resources (e.g., increasing flexibility in scheduling, hiring assistance)
Emotional	Decreasing Expectations (e.g., reducing personal expectations)	Increasing Emotional Resources (e.g., receiving emotional support)
Cognitive	Prioritizing (e.g., prioritizing activities)	Planning (e.g., stopping or limiting activities, future goals)

**Source:** Neal, M.B. & Hammer, L.B. (2006). *Working couples caring for children and aging parents: Effects on work and well-being*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates

### Additional Resources Related to Working Couples in the Sandwich Generation

**360 Degrees of Financial Literacy: The Sandwich Generation:** The American Institute of Certified Public Accountants has developed a “financial literacy toolkit” for people caring for children and aging parents at the same time. Includes several articles, budgeting advice, and a PowerPoint presentation.

- To access the site, click here: [http://www.aicpa.org/financialliteracy/sandwich\\_generation.asp](http://www.aicpa.org/financialliteracy/sandwich_generation.asp).

**In the Middle: A Report on Multicultural Boomers Coping with Family and Aging Issues:** This report from AARP reports on a 2001 survey of 2,352 Americans aged 45-55. It discusses prevalent attitudes towards child and elder care and coping methods for dealing with caregiving responsibilities.

- To access the report, click here: [http://assets.aarp.org/rgcenter/il/in\\_the\\_middle.pdf](http://assets.aarp.org/rgcenter/il/in_the_middle.pdf).

**The Sandwich Generation:** An eleven-minute long documentary film by Julie Winkotaur and Ed Kashi, a married couple that uprooted their business and two children and moved 3,000 miles across the U.S. to care for Julie’s father, Herbie. Includes a transcript of the film.

- To access the film and transcript, click here: <http://mediastorm.org/0009.htm>.

**The Sandwich Generation: 1999-2006:** A complete archive of writer/lecturer Carol Abaya’s weekly syndicated column, “The Sandwich Generation,” which offers advice and answers questions, primarily on caring for aging parents.

- To access the site, click here: <http://globesyndicate.com/sand06.html>.

***Supporting Employers with Child and Elder Care Needs:*** A sourcebook by Margaret Neal and Leslie Hammer intended for employers with employees who care for both children and elders. Includes the business case for supports, an explanation of the sandwiched generation and practical advice.

- To access the sourcebook, click here: <http://www.sandwich.pdx.edu/Sourcebook.pdf>.

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