Published in final edited form as:
Health Care Women Int. 2000 March ; 21(2): 125–136.

FACTORS INFLUENCING SINGLE MOTHER'S EMPLOYMENT STATUS

JoAnne M. Youngblut, PhD, FAAN,
Frances Payne Bolton School of Nursing, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Noreen R. Brady, MSN, RN,
Frances Payne Bolton School of Nursing, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Dorothy Brooten, PhD, FAAN, and
Frances Payne Bolton School of Nursing, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland, Ohio, USA

Debera J. Thomas, DNS, RN, CS, ANP
Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, Florida, USA

Abstract

Changes in the welfare system limit the length of time a person can receive welfare benefits, thus mandating employment for many current welfare recipients. Single mothers with young children who do not become employed will lose financial support for housing, food, clothing, and health care and place their own and their children's health and safety at risk. The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore women's experiences of being unemployed and to examine the barriers to employment perceived by single mothers who expressed a desire to be employed. Nine mothers were recruited from a larger sample of single mothers who had participated in a quantitative study about employment conducted 1 to 2 years earlier. Using focus group interviews, mothers were asked what it was like to be a single mother, and then what barriers to their employment they perceived. Two dimensions were identified from the mothers' statements. The first, a sense of obligation, included themes of "being there" for their own and their child's benefit and doing what it takes to optimize the child's growth and development. The second, negotiating the obstacles, referred to problems regarding child care, lack of involvement of the child's father, and lack of support from relatives and friends for the mother's efforts toward securing employment. These findings have important implications for welfare reform, namely, that efforts aimed at moving nonemployed single mothers into the workforce will fail if these factors are not considered.

INTRODUCTION

Welfare reform has focused attention on single mothers receiving welfare rather than entering the workforce. Although specific provisions differ by state, many women on welfare and their children are now faced with losing their only source of financial support and health care coverage. That is, single mothers who do not become employed within the specified time period

Address correspondence to JoAnne M. Youngblut, PhD, FAAN, Frances Payne Bolton School of Nursing, Case Western Reserve University, 10900 Euclid Ave., Cleveland, OH 44106-4904, USA. jmy3@po.cwru.edu.

will no longer receive financial support from the government for housing, food, clothing, and health care. Thus, without employment or welfare benefits, the health, safety, and well-being of single mothers and their children are at risk. Media stereotyping has suggested that single mothers engage in behaviors to avoid employment; however, a recent study found that many single mothers prefer to be employed (Youngblut, Singer, Madigan, Swegart, & Rodgers, 1977) but have difficulty doing so. Although there have been qualitative studies of employment issues with married mothers with young children, similar studies of single mothers have not been reported. In addition, there are few quantitative studies of factors related to employment of single mothers. The purpose of this study was to explore women's experiences of being unemployed and to examine the barriers to employment perceived by single mothers who expressed a desire to be employed.

Factors that have been related to employment of single mothers include education, marital status, race, number and ages of children, and attitudes about employment. Employed single mothers have more education (Mauldin & Meeks, 1990; Youngblut et al., 1997) and are more likely to be separated, widowed, or divorced rather than never married (Youngblut et al., 1997). Klerman and Leibowitz (1994) found that White single mothers were more likely to be employed than Black single mothers. Shapiro and Mott (1994) found a positive relationship between length of time single and length of time employed for White women, but not for African-American women.

The impact of children on employment of single mothers varies across studies. Investigators have found that employment of the mother was related to age of the oldest child (Chrissinger, 1980), but not to age of the youngest child (Mauldin & Meeks, 1990). Perhaps this is because older children can take care of the younger children when the mother is working away from home. Youngblut and colleagues (1997) found that employed single mothers had fewer children than nonemployed single mothers. Interestingly, having an infant or preschool child who was born prematurely was not related to the mother's past or current employment in single-parent (Youngblut et al., 1997) and two-parent (Youngblut, 1995) families. Gennaro (1996) found lower employment rates for low-income women with preterms than the national average, but did not compare them with the employment rates for low-income women with full-terms in the same geographical location.

Attitudes toward employment, especially for single mothers, also have been a focus of media stereotypes and national attention; however, the limited empirical evidence contradicts these stereotypes. Chrissinger (1980) found that single mothers had positive attitudes toward employment regardless of their degree of laborforce participation. More recently, in a sample of families with preterm and full-term preschoolers, Youngblut et al. (1997) found that employed single mothers held more positive attitudes about employment than nonemployed single mothers, a finding that is consistent with studies of attitudes held by married mothers with preterm infants (Youngblut, 1995; Youngblut, Loveland-Cherry, & Horan, 1990).

In summary, research has characterized single mothers who are likely to be employed based primarily on demographic factors. With changes in welfare regulations, many mothers are trying to make the transition from welfare to work. An additional challenge will be maintaining and sustaining employment until retirement age. Employment of single mothers is expected to result in greater financial resources, greater opportunities, and more desirable role models for their children, and an improved standard of living, all factors that affect the mental and physical health and well-being of the women and their children. This qualitative study was designed to identify factors related to employment status from the women's point of view.

METHODS

A sample of 9 women was selected from a larger quantitative study of single mothers with preterm and full-term preschoolers (Youngblut et al., 1997). Women's responses to questions about actual and desired employment status in that study were used to identify the pool of possible participants. Specifically, women who were single, not employed, and desiring either part-time or full-time employment when enrolled in the larger study were eligible to participate. The subsample of women for this study was selected to represent diversity in race and number of children. A total of 19 women were contacted, 15 agreed to participate, and 9 came to one of the three focus group sessions. There were 4 women in the first session, 3 in the second session, and 2 in the third session. Since the women in the third session echoed responses provided by women in the first two sessions and added no new themes, we decided theoretical saturation had been reached. Thus, the final sample consisted of these 9 women. Women gave informed consent for audio- and videotaping the focus group sessions. Audiotapes were transcribed verbatim; videotapes were used to verify the identification of the speaker. Women were paid $25 for their participation in the focus group session, and on-site child care was provided at no charge to the women.

Participants

Women ranged in age from 20 to 37, with a median age of 24 (M = 25.9, SD = 5.56). There were 5 white and 4 African-American women. Six women had completed high school. Although none of the women were employed or in school at the time of the original survey 1 or 2 years earlier, 2 women had recently become employed, and 1 was a student at a local community college. Five single women were living alone, 3 were single and living with family other than their children, and 1 was married but not living with her spouse. The length of time women had been single ranged from 3 to 10 years, with a median of 6 years (M = 6.1 years, SD = 2.10). Three women had one child and 6 had three or more children. Age of youngest child was less than 1 year old for 3 mothers, 1 to 3 years old for 2 mothers, 3 to 5 years old for 2 mothers, and 5 to 6 for 2 mothers. Two mothers had a preterm child, and 7 had a fullterm child. Mothers resided in a large urban community in the midwest.

Data Analysis

The Giorgi (1985) modification of the phenomenological method of data analysis was used to interpret the interview data. The initial analysis was done by reviewing the interview as soon as transcription was complete to get a sense of the whole experience for each focus group. Then the transcript was reviewed again for key phrases and significant statements. A summary of the emerging themes for each focus group was prepared, and similarities and differences between participants in each group and between groups were identified. These insights were integrated to form a description of the experience of being unemployed (either previously or currently) for these single mothers who previously expressed a desire to be employed.

Standards for Evaluation

Methodological rigor for this study was established using the criteria that Lincoln and Guba (1985) call *trustworthiness*. Credibility of the description of the experience of being a nonemployed single mother desiring employment was supported by audio- and videotaping the focus groups with verbatim transcription and by the presence of at least two researchers at each focus group. In order to establish dependability of the results, data were analyzed separately by two researchers, and the analyses compared for congruency. Both researchers independently identified common themes and concurred on the description of the experience. In order to enhance the trustworthiness of this study, the descriptions of the themes are supported by direct quotes from the participants.

RESULTS

The experience of unemployment for single mothers who expressed a desire to by employed was explored during focus group interviews. The question used to start the interview was, "What has it been like for you as a single parent?" If the discussion did not include factors related to employment, the group was asked what barriers to their obtaining employment they perceived. Emerging themes were clustered together under two broad dimensions: a sense of obligation and negotiating the obstacles.

A Sense of Obligation

All of the women expressed an overwhelming sense of obligation to their children and responsibility for providing a good home, food, and nice clothing. The mothers saw employment as the vehicle to providing for their families. They also felt that no one else could raise their children as well as they could, so that "being there" for their children was just as important, if not more important, than material things. One mother revealed, "When I come home from school it's a little rough, but I manage.… [I] fix them dinner 'cause I get home early. You know, getting them ready for the next day [is rough] but it's just something I have to do." Thus, as in studies of married mothers, single mothers expressed the need to weigh the benefits or need for employment with their concerns about their children's upbringing.

Single mothers put the obligations and responsibilities of motherhood before their own needs, but they articulated the strains of doing so on their mental and physical health. One participant stated,

> If I have homework, I have to wait until he goes to sleep at night to do it. Or cooking, when I, as soon as I get in, I have to cook. I have to wash on certain days. You know, where I will just tire or stress myself out. But at home, it's just … like I said, it's something that I will have to, you know, train my body to get used to. And I've been trying to do that.

A few mothers felt that their sense of obligation to themselves and their children was better served by being employed. They felt that they needed a stable income and environment to raise their children and to set a good example for them. One mother said,

> Well, I want to have a job and I want to work. Not just for the children, but for me. And to just be stable. You know, not to rely on [government] assistance every month when I could get paid every two weeks.… I don't want them doing what I'm, you know, what I've done—just sat at home. I don't want them to do that. I want them to get out and try to find a job, go to school, do the right thing. I don't want them to just sit at home.

Being There—Mothers believed that being there for their children both emotionally and physically was good for the children. One mother related,

> I feel it is a benefit being there for my daughter. I know that she is being taken care of. I know she is getting the love she needs and the support from me being home.… She seems healthier, emotionally, if I'm there to help her.

Mothers felt that being with their children had benefits for both the children and themselves. One mother said it this way:

> I get to see a lot of things that happen, like my kids or the baby start walking. If I was working, I would have missed that. And then, I have a daughter that has to go to [name of a special school]. A lot of people used to push on her so … I'm there for her because she needs me. And I sit down and do things.… I sit down and read to them and take

> them to the library, take them to the zoo, take them to the park, where I get to see a lot of things that they're doing and things that need to be corrected with them before they get older so they won't grow up in the wrong type of atmosphere.

As vocal as the mothers were about the importance of being there for their children, they were equally adamant about the consequences of not being there. The mothers believed that not being there could lead to all sorts of problems with their children as they grew up. Some were concerned about their family's safety. One mother stated, "If I'm not home for them, I mean, we can be chaos, total chaos at home, and I'd come home to even the house burning. [I] worry about this stuff." Other concerns implied the need to transmit the mothers' values to their children. Specifically, some mothers were concerned about their children learning things from others (babysitters or child care providers) that did not reflect the mother's perspective and values. One mother said,

> Sometimes when you're not there with your young children, they would learn a lot of things that they don't need to know about right now. 'Cause my son is 7 and he asks a lot of questions and if I wasn't there, I wouldn't be able to answer them for him.… You look at the way the world's going now and a lot of the kids' parents are not there for them and you see the mistakes that are being made.

Doing What It Takes—Participants in this study believed in doing whatever it takes to give their children what they need to grow and develop. For example, one mother was enrolled in a community college in an effort to become a better provider for her children, although the immediate needs of the children had to take precedence.

> I've been going to school and trying to save too, because I would like to graduate. I have all my prerequisites … but you know, the children are always first as far as I'm concerned. There are times where I've missed classes because of the kids … and it was difficult catching up.

Another way that mothers in this study managed to do what it takes to live on limited incomes was by living with extended family members, trading off the financial benefits with mental health or family disadvantages. One mother said, "Right now we're staying with relatives. It's like … got to get out of here and, you know, look for our own place. But that's a cost within itself. Housing is very, very expensive. It's like, how do you budget this into your pay?"

Negotiating the Obstacles

All of the participants in this study expressed the feeling that it was hard to be a single mother, because of having only themselves to rely on for financial and instrumental support. One mother put it this way.

> It's difficult. It's just difficult being a single parent. It's hard. You need five parents to raise one child. And I feel strongly about that. It is really hard when you have to do it all yourself.… The transition from being on ADC to working, it wasn't a hard transition, but a lot of things that I had to, you know, financially do myself now.

The Child Care Dilemma—Women in this study described many obstacles in their quest to being employed. As expected, the biggest one was child care. Child care was perceived as the most insurmountable obstacle in their journey into the workforce. The financial cost of day care was an important aspect of the issue. One mother said, "It [child care] is a big problem. His daycare alone is $210 a month and that's not a very expensive daycare. There's rent and food and clothes, too." Another mother's statement about cost:

> You know how much I have to pay for four kids for somebody to babysit? This poor girl told me, she said, "I'll babysit your kids, each one of 'em, $10 a day." You know, that's more than you get in minimum wages. Ain't no sense in you going to work.

An equally important issue about child care for mothers was their children's safety and well-being. Many mothers found it difficult to trust someone else taking care of their children. One mother related this to an experience she had as a child, "Just be careful who you leave your kids with. I was sexually molested when I was a child. It was a male babysitter.… I don't trust anybody with my kids."

Most participants agreed that child care issues were the biggest reason they could not work. They believed that affordable and convenient daycare, especially in the place they might work or go to school, would facilitate their working or increasing their education.

Lack of Support From Others—Lack of support was another obstacle to being employed for these women. Lack of financial support from the fathers of their children both increased their need for employment and prevented them from working, especially regarding paying for child care. However, mothers also said that the biggest issue was the lack of support by the children's fathers in spending time with or caring for the children. When fathers were not around to share the child care, the full responsibility fell to the mother, increasing her sense of overwhelming obligation. One mother said,

> To be perfectly honest, I think women are very capable of being [heads of families], you know, managing things. But like I said, it's very difficult when you are raising boys, with not having a father figure around.… They need a good male figure.

Another obstacle that many mothers experienced was lack of emotional and instrumental support from their friends and family members when they wanted to work or go back to school. Indeed, several mothers described this lack of support as an important impediment to their attempts to become employed, gain more education, or improve their job skills. The women implied that the possibility that they might improve their lot in life was threatening to their family members and friends. One woman said,

> Well, most people don't want you to work because some people is jealous. They don't want you to succeed. Well, you ain't going to accomplish nothing, just like they don't accomplish nothing. Well, you tell your friends you're thinking of getting a job to go to work and things are gonna change. They don't want to watch your kids 'cause they don't want you to move on.… If I go to a party, then [my sister] will watch my kids. They want you to stay on the same level they is. With nothing … don't want you to accomplish nothing.

DISCUSSION

The single mothers in this study expressed a desire to be employed but had to balance that desire with the overwhelming sense of obligation and responsibility often reported by single mothers to provide for their children's emotional and material needs (Sachs, Pietrukowicz, & Hall, 1997). Our single mothers felt they were "doing what it takes" to meet their children's needs; however, their definition of "what it takes" varied across women and sometimes was conflicting for an individual woman. One woman described balancing the demands of continuing her education with the needs of her children. Others talked about trading off financial benefits of living with extended family members with their own mental health and need for independence.

Being there for their children both physically and emotionally was an important consideration for the single mothers in this study. Some attributed their need to be there to concerns about

the child's physical safety. These are very real concerns for families receiving welfare benefits, considering the high rates of crime and violence in low-income neighborhoods (Smith & Jarjoura, 1989) and the negative psychological influences of crime and violence on children (Singer, Anglin, Song, & Lunghofer, 1995). Other mothers voiced concern about their child's emotional safety or well-being, feeling that the child was more comfortable, secure, and emotionally healthy when the mother was present. Still others described their need or desire to watch and enjoy their children's development, a need or desire frequently expressed by married mothers, and increasingly, by fathers also. All of these concerns reflect normal parenting concerns well documented in two-parent families, but often stereotyped as absent in single-parent families.

The single mothers in this study identified three major obstacles to their becoming employed or attending school. The first, child care issues, and perhaps the second, lack of involvement of the father in the care of the children, were expected. However, the third, lack of support and facilitation of the women's efforts toward becoming employed or improving employability by family and friends, was an unexpected finding.

Child care issues included affordability, availability, and safety. For most mothers, child care was too expensive in comparison to the amount of money they could earn on the job. Although some states, including Ohio, where this study was conducted, provide financial assistance for child care expenses incurred because of the mother's employment, none of the mothers in the sample mentioned aid from the state for child care. Thus, among welfare recipients, existence of this benefit known may not be widely known or understood. Efforts to make this benefit to single mothers of young children may increase the number of single mothers who are employed or actively seeking employment. In addition, enhancing women's education and job skills would make them eligible for higher paying jobs, diminishing the negative effect of the cost of child care.

For other mothers, child care was affordable but not available. Child care providers were either too far out of the way between work or school and home, or were not available during the hours of the day that the mothers needed them. Child care centers either opened too late in the morning or closed too early in the evening to allow the mothers to meet both work/school and child care center timeframes. In addition, quality child care for late evening or nighttime hours is difficult to obtain. One suggestion the mothers offered to remedy this situation was for employers or schools to provide child care on site. This action would certainly benefit two-parent families as well. Another creative solution might be to teach women in low-income neighborhoods to provide high-quality child care; this would not only make child care more convenient and available, but would provide jobs for women currently receiving welfare benefits.

An equally important issue about child care was finding a child care provider that the mothers trusted. As noted earlier, one mother confided that she had been molested by a babysitter when she was young, resulting in her current lack of trust of child care providers. Concern about the safety of children while in the care of others is not limited to single mothers; indeed, it also is an important issue for parents in two-parent families. However, the pervasive sense of distrust of others that Sachs et al. (1997) found among low-income women, often related to a history of psychological and/or physical abuse, may make this concern even more salient for low-income mothers.

The second obstacle to employment was the lack of involvement of fathers in their children's care; this was a source of disappointment and frustration for the mothers. Involvement of the father could decrease the mother's overwhelming sense of responsibility and perhaps facilitate her movement into the workforce by providing child care or transportation to or from the child care provider. However, in some cases, fathers may not be able to be involved, particularly if

they are incarcerated, live in another city or state, or are not aware that they have fathered children. In other cases, involvement of the father may no be desired, such as if there is severe conflict between the mother and the father or a history of substance abuse or physical abuse of the mother or child by the father (Perloff & Buckner, 1996). Since low-income families are more likely to experience domestic violence or parental incarceration (O'Campo, Gielen, Faden, Xue, Kass, & Wang, 1995), expecting the father's involvement in the child's care may not be realistic. However, the father's financial support of the family also would ease some of the mother's sense of overwhelming responsibility and obligation. Of course, financial support from the father might enable the mother to make use of other services or provide access to other resources that would make the transition to employment easier.

The most unexpected, and perhaps the most disturbing, obstacle mothers in this research described is the process of negative social support, and in some cases, active undermining by family and friends. Women who were trying to obtain employment, increase their education, or improve their employability skills received negative comments from family and friends about their efforts. In addition, some women found that family and friends would provide child care so the mother could attend recreational or entertainment functions, but would not tend the children when the mother needed these supports for work-related activities. Both of these experiences suggest that family and friends perceived the women's attempts at employment as a threat to the status quo or as an indication that they also should be pursuing employment or job training programs.

For women who are thinking about entering the workforce, this negative support may prevent them from acting on their intentions. For women who are trying to overcome the other obstacles to obtain or sustain employment, this active undermining could result in their giving up their efforts and staying on or returning to welfare. In either case, the negative feedback from family and friends is likely to cause considerable stress for the mother and her children. With current welfare reform initiatives, it also could produce negative outcomes for the health and well-being of the mother and children.

In summary, single mothers identify many of the same issues about their employment as married mothers do: wanting to be there for their children's achievement of developmental milestones and to transmit their own beliefs and values, concern about the children's emotional and physical well-being, availability and affordability of child care, and involvement of the father in the child's care. Two-parent families, however, have more resources with which to solve these issues. Single mothers must bear the entire burden unless aided by others. The expression of negative support and feelings of threat by family and friends increase the mother's burden and hinder her attempts to obtain necessary job skills or qualifications and to seek employment. Without the assistance of community or church groups, increased education and job training, and greater fiscal responsibility from fathers for the support of their children, single mothers may be unable to cope with the added conflict and stress from welfare reform mandates and find the personal energy needed to parent their children appropriately while overcoming the obstacles to employment.

Acknowledgments

This study was supported by a grant from the National Institute of Nursing Research (#R01 NR02707) and an administrative supplement from the Office of Research on Women's Health, National Institutes of Health.

References

Chrissinger MS. Factors affecting employment of welfare mothers. Social Work 1980;25:52–56.

Gennaro S. Leave and employment in families of preterm low birthweight infants. Image: Journal of Nursing Scholarship 1996;28:193–198.

Giorgi, A. Phenomenology and psychological research. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press; 1985.

Klerman JA, Leibowitz A. The work-employment distinction among new mothers. Journal of Human Resources 1994;29:277–303.

Lincoln, YS.; Guba, EG. Naturalistic inquiry. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage; 1985.

Mauldin T, Meeks CB. Time allocation of one- and two-parent mothers. Lifestyles: Family and Economic Issues 1990;11:53–69.

O'Campo P, Gielen AC, Faden RR, Xue X, Kass N, Wang MC. Violence by male partners against women during the childbearing years: A contextual analysis. American Journal of Public Health 1995;85:1092–1097. [PubMed: 7625502]

Perloff JN, Buckner JC. Fathers of children on welfare: Their impact on child well-being. American Journal of Orthopsychiatry 1996;66:557–571. [PubMed: 8911622]

Sachs B, Pietrukowicz M, Hall LA. Parenting attitudes and behaviors of low-income single mothers with young children. Journal of Pediatric Nursing 1997;12:67–73. [PubMed: 9103774]

Shapiro D, Mott FL. Long-term employment and earnings of women in relation to employment behavior surrounding the first birth. The Journal of Human Resources 1994;29:248–275.

Singer MI, Anglin TM, Song LY, Lunghofer L. Adolescents' exposure to violence and associated symptoms of psychological trauma. Journal of the American Medical Association 1995;273:477–482. [PubMed: 7837366]

Smith D, Jarjoura G. Household characteristics, neighborhood composition and victimization risk. Social Forces 1989;68:621–640.

Youngblut JM. Consistency between maternal employment attitudes and employment status. Research in Nursing and Health 1995;18:501–513. [PubMed: 7480851]

Youngblut JM, Loveland-Cherry CJ, Horan M. Factors related to maternal employment status following the premature birth of an infant. Nursing Research 1990;39:237–240. [PubMed: 2367205]

Youngblut JM, Singer LT, Madigan EA, Swegart LA, Rodgers WL. Mother, child, and family factors related to employment of single mothers with LBW preschoolers. Psychology of Women Quarterly 1997;21:247–263.