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MOTHER'S EMPLOYMENT DEMANDS, WORK-FAMILY CONFLICT, AND ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT*

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Abstract

This study revisited the old research question of whether or not maternal employment would adversely affect children's development. We reframed the question by asking *how* a mother's temporal employment demands might be linked to child development. We used longitudinal data from a sample of 340 white, lower- to middle-class, dual-earner families living in the rural Midwest of the United States. The data were obtained from questionnaires and videotaped observations, and were informed by the mother, the father, the adolescent child, and a trained observer. As predicted, we found a strong relationship between a mother's temporal employment demands and work-family conflict, which was significantly associated with her emotional distress. A husband's egalitarian gender ideology was found to reduce the mother's emotional distress. Maternal distress was then negatively associated with nurturant and involved parenting, which in turn predicted a reduction in the adolescent child's emotional and behavioral problems over time.

Keywords

child development; gender ideology; maternal employment; nurturant and involved parenting; temporal employment demands; work-family conflict

INTRODUCION

Scholars seem to have moved on beyond the period that used to associate maternal employment with children's maladjustment, and rarely question any negative consequences of maternal employment for children. The rapid movement of women into the labor force in the United States appears to have been accomplished without hurting children (Bianchi, 2000). Maternal employment itself appears to have no systematic negative effects on children's achievement (Hoffman, 1989), but James Coleman (1988) argued that labor force participation would limit opportunities for families to build social capital by reducing the amount of time parents and

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children spend together. Although a study found that opportunity for and quality of interpersonal interaction within the family determines the amount of social capital within the family (Israel, Beaulieu, and Hartless, 2001), Coleman's concern has received limited empirical support so far (see Parcel and Menaghan, 1993; Parcel and Menaghan, 1994; Smith, Beaulieu, and Seraphine, 1995). The present study attempts to add to the literature on maternal employment by focusing on the processes, contexts and scenarios that present challenges for working mothers' parenting.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Schor (1991) claims that American workers now spend more hours on paid work, but what has increased may be the proportion of workers experiencing work-family conflicts, rather than the number of work hours (Jacobs and Gerson, 2001). More than three-quarters of married women with adolescent children in the United States are now in the paid workforce, representing a substantial increase from a little over half in 1975 (Lerner, 1994). These women are now a more heterogeneous group than before, in terms of their backgrounds and experiences. What has not changed is the fact that they are still the primary caregivers in families (Hooymans and Gonyea, 1995), without much relief from husbands for household responsibilities (Hochschild, 1997; Schor, 1991). Research also suggests that mothers find it difficult to get the kinds of jobs that reduce stress and tension between job and family (Glass and Camarigg, 1992).

Not all work is alike, and the effect of mother's work on herself and her children will in part depend on what the work is like. Working parents who experience economic pressure can be at a further disadvantage as they may be unable to choose the kinds of jobs that do not interfere with their family lives. Workers are currently dealing with unemployment and job losses because of layoffs, and in this kind of environment, which describes the period of time during which the present study was conducted, a primary criterion for a mother's employment is likely to be the family's economic need, rather than her need for self-fulfillment. Her desire to work outside the home and the number of small children in the house, which normally affects maternal employment decisions, become less important than family need for additional income. This was especially true for the families in this study, all of whom lived in rural areas undergoing a significant downturn in the agricultural economy (Conger, Conger, Elder, Lorenz, Simons, and Whitbeck, 1992): The women in the families often were forced to work in low-wage jobs not of their own choosing and that significantly interfered with family life.

These women sometimes may need to work longer hours to make ends meet. Some of these jobs may demand working irregular hours, shift work, and other conditions that decrease the amount of time parents can spend for their family lives (Hofferth, 1995). A recent study shows that mothers with lower-prestige jobs tend to increase their use of a negative parenting style (Raver, 2003). Research also suggests that mothers' time spent at paid work is significantly associated with the amount of unsupervised time after school for children (Muller, 1995). It is not that maternal employment itself poses as a risk for children, rather, we suspect that parents' long, irregular work hours may reduce opportunities for their adequate involvement in children's lives.

Studies on the effects of mothers' employment on parenting and children considered middle-class employed mothers only (Goldberg, Greenberger, and Nagel, 1996; MacEwen and Barling, 1991) or low-income single mothers (Jackson, 2003; Joshi, 2007; Murry, Brody, Brown, Wisenbaker, Cutrona, and Simons, 2002; Raver, 2003). Our study examines mothers and adolescent children in dual-earner, lower- to middle-class families. Our approach follows from Perry-Jenkins and Gillman's (2000) recommendation that researchers focus on explaining the processes through which parents' work experiences have consequences for parents' and

children's well-being. We seek to understand *how* mothers' non-standard work hours are linked to children's development through mothers' role-conflict between work and family in the two-parent, dual-worker families.

CONCEPTUAL MODEL

The conceptual model (Figure 1) explains how employment demands lead to change in the well-being of mothers and adolescents. A mother's employment demands are expected to predict greater work-family conflict for her (path a) because the number of weekly work hours and shift work are related with conflicting role demands (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Hughes, Galinsky, and Morris, 1992). Mothers with long work hours and/or irregular scheduling are likely to have less time and energy for non-work activities including family obligations.

We posit that when fathers ascribed to egalitarian views regarding the roles of men and women, these beliefs should reduce mothers' work-family conflicts through fathers' relatively equal contribution to household tasks and their support of the mothers' employment. Egalitarian husbands generally contribute to housework (Presser, 1994). Egalitarian husbands also are likely to support wives' employment, and to be more supportive. We therefore propose that the more egalitarian the husband's gender ideology is, the less the mother's work-family conflict will be (path b). We also hypothesized that the spouse's egalitarian beliefs would reduce the employed mother's emotional distress (path c). Studies have documented this connection between work-family conflict or role strains and psychological distress (Frone, Russell, and Cooper, 1992; Guelzow, Bird, and Koball, 1991; Matthews, Conger, and Wickrama, 1996; Paden and Buehler, 1995). We propose that mothers' employment demands increase their emotional distress through work-family conflict (path d).

Research demonstrates a direct link between role-strain and affective stress in major roles including the parental role (Guelzow, Bird, and Koball, 1991). A mother's efforts or energy for parenting may be reduced if overwhelmed by demands of employment conflicting with the roles of mother and wife (Goode, 1960). As in the model, a mother's high level of work-family conflict is predicted to decrease the quality of her parenting. With less psychological resources and less time at hand, a mother experiencing a high level of work-family conflict may be less nurturant toward her children and less involved with their lives (path e).

The model predicts that maternal distress will have an adverse influence on parenting. Research suggests that parental distress mediates the relationship between stressful life conditions and parental behaviors (Conger, McCarty, Yang, Lahey, and Kropp, 1984). Also following from earlier findings that parents' emotional problems will have an adverse influence on their parenting behaviors (e.g., Conger, Patterson, and Ge, 1995), we propose that mothers' emotional distress will disrupt parenting (path f).

Previous research indicates that parents' negative moods affect adolescent depression and problem behaviors through disrupted parenting (Conger et al., 1995; Ge, Conger, Lorenz, and Simons, 1994). Mothers experiencing increases in job stressors were found to express their affection toward their children less often as their psychological and physical well-being declined (Repetti and Wood, 1997). These disruptions in affection and involvement are important to note: Parenting that is high in supportiveness, monitoring, consistency in discipline and low in anger and hostility will reduce risk for both internalizing problems and externalizing behaviors (Conger et al., 1992). As shown in Figure 1, "nurturant-involved parenting" in our conceptual model describes this constellation of parenting behaviors. We propose to explain the effect of nurturant-involved parenting on change in adolescents' emotional distress and problem behavior (paths g and h, respectively). Additionally, we would like to find if the results differ for girls and boys by testing interaction effects between gender and the parenting variable in reducing adolescent's maladjustment (paths i and j). Not shown

in the model are other variables controlled in the analyses, including household income, household size (i.e., the number of people in the family), and the mother's and the father's education.

METHODS

Sample

The sample consisted of 340 white families living in small rural North Central Iowa communities of the United States, the area severely affected by the farm crisis in the mid-1980s. Only dual-earner families were selected among the 451, 2-parent families, recruited for the Iowa Youth and Families Project (see Conger and Elder, 1994 for additional details about the study). Families were recruited from 34 public and private schools in 8 adjacent counties in Iowa, with the participation rate of 78%. Each couple had a child who was a 7th-grader (the focal child) in 1989, and therefore became a 10th-grader in 1992 when most were 15 or 16 years old. In 1992, the median age for mothers was 39, and the median age for fathers was 41. The parents generally received about 13 years of formal education. Mothers were working on jobs such as secretarial or office-related work, teacher, registered nurse, medical/dental support, or childcare provider whereas husbands' occupations included farmer, manager or administrator, sales representative, skilled and unskilled factory worker, truck driver, and teacher. Most of the families had 4 or 5 members. In 1992 the median per capita family income was \$8,000.

Measures

Each family member completed a set of questionnaires, and family members were videotaped while participating in structured interaction tasks. Trained observers evaluated the videotapes, using the Iowa Family Interaction Rating Scales (Melby et al., 1993).

Mother's employment demands—Mothers reported in 1991 how many hours per week they usually worked in a normal week at each job they held. The number of work hours per week for mothers' first and second jobs were combined (Median = 40 hours), and those who worked more than 40 hours per week were assigned 2, and those who worked less were assigned 1. We assigned 0 to mothers who normally worked during the day on their first and second jobs, and 1 to those who did not work regularly during the day (i.e., they worked evening shift, night shift, or on an irregular schedule) on at least 1 job, and 2 to those who worked irregular hours on both their first and second jobs. We standardized each of the two measures and combined them to create a composite index.

Mother's emotional distress—Depression, anxiety, and hostility sub-scales from the Symptom Check List-90-Revised (Derogatis, 1983) measured mothers' emotional distress based on their self-reports in 1991. Each respondent was asked to indicate how much discomfort a particular problem has caused her during the past week including that day (1 = not at all; 5 = extremely). The measure for depression consisted of 13 questionnaire items ($\alpha = .90$); anxiety was measured with 10 items ($\alpha = .83$); and the hostility measure included 6 items ($\alpha = .70$). Scores in each sub-scale were standardized before being combined to create an overall index ($\alpha = .86$).

Father's egalitarian gender ideology—A 12-item index adopted from the Index of Sex-Role Orientation (Dreyer, Woods, and James, 1981) measured how egalitarian spouses were in 1991. They were asked "How much do you agree or disagree with each of the following statements?" on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly agree; 5 = strongly disagree). One statement reads "A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who doesn't work." The responses were summed to create a composite index ($\alpha = .84$).

Mother's work-family conflict—Each respondent was asked in 1991 how often the demands of her work interfered with her family life (1 = often; 4 = never), and the responses were reverse-coded. This single-item measure has high face-validity and has demonstrated predictive validity in earlier research (Matthews et al., 1996).

Mother's nurturant-involved parenting—Parenting styles were evaluated based on observers' reports in 1991. The measure was constructed with information from the videotaped interactions. Observers rated each behavioral characteristic on a 9-point scale from low to high. A total of 11 items related to child management or involvement as well as to the nurturant or affective component of parenting ($\alpha = .73$).

Change in the adolescent's emotional distress—The scales used for mothers' emotional distress also assessed adolescent children's emotional distress. Target adolescents' self-reports in 1989 and 1992 were used to measure how much they changed. Alphas were .86 and .88 for the depression sub-scale and .82 and .85 for the anxiety sub-scale in 1989 and 1992, respectively. The hostility sub-scale had the reliabilities of .82 and .86 in 1989 and 1992, respectively. Scores of each sub-scale were standardized before being combined to produce a composite index for adolescents' emotional distress, with alphas of .86 and .75, respectively. The 1989 scores were subtracted from the 1992 scores to measure the amount of change in the target child's distress level over the years.

Change in the adolescent's problem behavior—Adolescents' self-reports on their problem behavior delinquency (23 items) and substance use (13 items) were obtained in 1989 and in 1992. Adolescents were asked if they had done any of the things listed during the past 12 months (1 = never; 2 = once; 3 = 2 – 3 times; 4 = 4 – 5 times; and 5 = 6 or more times). Items included delinquencies such as “Driven a car when drunk” and “Sold illegal drugs such as pot, grass, hash, LSD, cocaine, or other drugs.” Adolescents were also asked how often they had engaged in behaviors such as smoking “cigarettes, cigars, or a pipe,” drinking “beer,” and drinking “hard liquor” (1 = never; 2 = 1 or 2 times in the past year; 3 = 3 to 11 times in the past year; 4 = about 1 – 3 times per month; 5 = about 1 – 2 times per week; and 6 = about 3 or more times per week). The delinquency scale had alphas of .85 in 1989 and .80 in 1992, and the substance-use scale had alphas of .82 and .86, respectively. The scales were standardized and summed to create a single measure of problem behavior. The reliabilities of the comprehensive measure of problem behaviors were .81 in 1989 and .74 in 1992. The 1989 scores were subtracted from the 1992 scores to determine how much the target children's level of problem behaviors changed over time.

Adolescent's gender—Female children were assigned 0 while male children were assigned 1. Included in the analysis were 178 female children and 162 male children.

Control variables—Entered as controls were 1) family income, 2) family size, 3) father's education in years, and 4) mother's education in years as reported in 1991. The family-income measure represents per capita income which is the sum of all income sources divided by household size. Family size represents the number of people in the same household. Parents' formal education was measured by the number of years of completed schooling.

RESULTS

Several of the statistically significant correlations provided preliminary support for hypothesized relationships. Mother's employment demands were positively correlated with work-family conflict, which was significantly correlated with mother's emotional distress. Mother's nurturant-involved parenting was negatively related to change in adolescent's emotional distress and problem behavior.

Regression Analyses

Table 1 provides standardized regression coefficients evaluating each component of the proposed model (Figure 1). The data supported most of our hypotheses. Mother's employment demands as represented by non-standard work hours are significantly associated with work-family conflict (path a). Father's egalitarian gender ideology is inversely related with mother's distress (path c), and mother's work-family conflict is positively associated with the level of her distress (path d). The results were also consistent with the hypothesized relationship between mother's distress and nurturant-involved parenting (path f). Mother's emotional distress was found to mediate between work-family conflict and nurturant-involved parenting. The data also supported the predicted changes in adolescent's emotional distress and problem behavior. Mother's nurturant-involved parenting was significantly related to change in adolescent's distress (path g), suggesting that a mother's positive parenting practices are likely to lessen adolescent's emotional distress over time. Mother's nurturant and involved parenting also predicted a decrease in adolescent's problem behavior over time (path h).

Interestingly, mother's work-family conflict was negatively associated with change in adolescent's emotional distress, suggesting that the greater amount of work-family conflict reported by mothers predicts a decrease in their children's emotional distress over time. Another unexpected, puzzling finding is that mother's employment demands were negatively associated with change in adolescents' problem behavior. That is, a mother's greater work demands are linked to a reduction in her child's problem behavior over time.

Because of multicollinearity problems, we could not run a regression model with the interaction term created with adolescent's gender and mother's nurturant-involved parenting. We therefore tested the main effect of adolescent's gender on change in emotional distress and found no significant effect (path i). Adolescent's gender was, however, significantly associated with change in problem behavior (path j), suggesting that male adolescents are more likely to report a reduction in the amount of problem behaviors over time than female adolescents, holding other factors constant.

DISCUSSION

To identify connections between mothers' temporal employment conditions and their adolescent children's development, the present investigation focused on lower- to middle-class, dual-earner families who were living in rural areas while undergoing some tough economic transitions. Our finding concerning the relationship between mother's employment demands and work-family conflict is consistent with previous research results, which dealt with working couples and were not specific to employed mothers. Also as expected, mother's work-family conflict mediated between employment demands and emotional distress, validating earlier findings about role-conflict and psychological well-being. Mothers working long hours with non-day or irregular work-schedules are most likely to experience greater emotional distress because those work conditions are likely to interfere with family responsibilities including parenting duties. In this process, however, maternal distress is likely to decrease if a father holds egalitarian gender beliefs. Our findings show that mothers' emotional health is likely to determine how nurturant and involved they would be with their children.

Unlike our prediction, mother's work-family conflict was not directly associated with nurturant-involved parenting. We speculate that employed mothers may adopt various strategies to manage conflicts so that their parental role is not adversely affected by their market role. The greater work-family conflict may also mobilize the support of the other parent and other relatives. Given the role of mother's educational achievement in lessening work-family conflict in our sample, mothers who are more resourceful may even mobilize formal support

or make needed adjustments in their time management to ensure that their parental role is fulfilled.

The findings from the present study provide general support for and some refinement of Coleman's (1988) argument in that maternal employment itself does not pose greater risk for children. Rather, employed mothers are at risk for being less nurturant and involved in their parenting behaviors *if* their time and energy are depleted due to the combination of severe work demands, emotional problems, and conflicting demands of work and family, without social support such as that from an egalitarian spouse. And, importantly, our findings confirm that lower levels of this effective parenting style mean increased risk for adolescent distress and behavioral problems across time.

Our unexpected findings regarding the beneficial effects of mother's employment demands and work-family conflict on adolescent children's adjustments are worth further investigation. Mothers with difficult work hours may strategize more effectively so that their adolescent children's behaviors can be better monitored. According to a study conducted in Australia, employed mothers of pre-school children adjusted their activities in such a way that they could fulfill childcare earlier or later in the day while devoting less time than non-employed mothers for housework and self-care (Craig, 2007). It is plausible that employed mothers with nonstandard work hours and/or schedules in our sample were making scheduling or activity adjustments that more than compensated for the time spent for market work. Also, as alluded before, mothers' greater role conflict may lead to the mobilization of other adults' involvement (perhaps by fathers or other relatives) in the lives of their adolescent children, who may be better adjusted emotionally as a result. These speculations, however, need verification because low-income mothers' nonstandard work schedules were found to be associated with the negative behaviors of their children aged 2 to 4 years in a study conducted in the United States (Joshi, 2007).

It should be noted that the characteristics of our sample limit the generalizability of the present findings. Replication using non-white and urban samples is recommended for future research. The conceptual model may improve with an inclusion of other significant sources of vulnerability and resilience for mothers and children within the contexts of family and community. It would also prove more fruitful to include fathers' employment and parenting variables. Notwithstanding, the measures and design of the present study have several attributes that increase confidence in the findings. We used the longitudinal data obtained from both questionnaires and videotaped observations, and from four different informants (i.e., the mother, the father, the adolescent child, and a trained observer) to minimize the problem of shared method-variance, which can bias statistical results. Considering that different informants and methods were used to evaluate these constructs in the model, the estimates of statistically significant effects can be interpreted as conservative.

More important, this study revealed that the temporal demands of employment and competing demands in family serve as potential sources of challenges for middle-aged women with children, particularly in the context of difficult economic times such as the present time. The present findings point to a need for family policy initiatives that address the issues of work-family conflict and emotional distress experienced by employed mothers in lower- to middle-class, dual-earner families.

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Biographies

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Rand D. Conger is a distinguished professor of human development, family studies, and psychology at the University of California – Davis. Dr. Conger's research has underscored the importance of economic and related stressors for family and individual development. The significance of his scholarly activities has been recognized through several awards from professional organizations including the National Association for Rural Mental Health, the National Council on Family Relations, the Family Sociology Section of the American Sociological Association, the International Association for Relationship Research, the Rural Sociological Society and by election to the status of Fellow in the American Psychological Association and the National Council on Family Relations.

Glen H. Elder, Jr., Research Professor of Sociology and Psychology at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill, is a prominent figure in the development of life course theory, methods, and research. His books (authored, co-authored, edited) include *Children of the Great Depression* (1974; 1999, expanded, anniversary edition), *Children in Time and Place: Developmental and Historical Insights* (1993), *Children of the Land* (2000), and *The Craft of Life Course Research* (2009).

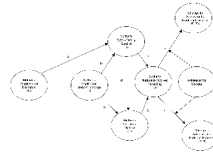


Figure 1.
THE CONCEPTUAL MODEL WITH CONTROLS FOR FAMILY INCOME, FAMILY SIZE, MOTHER'S EDUCATION, AND FATHER'S EDUCATION

Table 1
STANDARDIZED REGRESSION COEFFICIENTS AND T-VALUES FOR THE ORDINARY LEAST SQUARED REGRESSIONS

Independent variables	Dependent variables				
	Mother's work-family conflict (t-values)	Mother's emotional distress (t-values)	Mother's nurturant-involved parenting (t-values)	Change in adolescent's emotional distress (t-values)	Change in adolescent's problem behavior (t-values)
Family income (per capita)	-.00 (-.05)	-.03 (-.49)	.05 (.81)	.06 (.96)	-.06 (-1.10)
Family size	.06 (1.09)	-.03 (-.50)	.09 (1.69)	.08 (1.35)	.00 (.05)
Mother's education	-.16** (-2.73)	.00 (.00)	.19** (3.13)	.01 (.17)	-.04 (-.57)
Father's education	-.14* (-2.40)	-.04 (-.67)	-.02 (-.38)	.08 (1.19)	.07 (1.15)
Mother's employment demands	.37*** (7.31)	-.07 (-1.17)	-.02 (-.38)	.00 (.06)	-.14* (-2.28)
Father's egalitarian gender ideology	-.06 (-1.12)	-.14* (-2.57)	-.07 (-1.20)	-.09 (-1.54)	-.06 (-.98)
Mother's work-family conflict	-	.30*** (5.22)	-.10 (-1.55)	-.14* (-2.13)	-.05 (-.75)
Mother's emotional distress	-	-	-.13* (-2.33)	-.05 (-.81)	.04 (.65)
Mother's nurturant-involved parenting	-	-	-	-.17** (-2.94)	-.16** (-2.78)
Adolescent's gender	-	-	-	-.08 (-1.47)	-.14* (-2.51)
Adjusted R ²	.17***	.09***	.07***	.03*	.05**

* p < .05.

** p < .01.

*** p < .001.