EMPLOYMENT, ROLE STRAIN, AND SINGLE BLACK MOTHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF YOUNG CHILDREN

Dissertation Title
Preferences for Employment and Perceived Well-Being among Black Single Employed Mothers of Preschool-Aged children

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RESEARCH PROBLEM

A central provision of the Family Support Act of 1988 requires single mothers with preschool children over the age of 3 to enter the labor force or prepare to do so in return for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). While it is true that employment by mothers has become the norm and much research has been done on the impact of maternal employment on women and children, most of the existing research is focused on middle-class white wives and their families (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1982). Researchers to date have paid scant attention to the consequences of employment for single mothers and their children, particularly those who are black and poor. There is question, therefore, about conditions under which employment by poor, single, black mothers might result in positive outcomes for both the mothers and their young children.

In this summary, I describe my dissertation study which investigated the relationship between employment preferences and role strain, emotional well-being, and mothers' perceptions of their 3- and 4-year-old children in a sample of single, black, employed mothers with low income who had formerly received AFDC.

BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Combining work and family roles has been associated with both deleterious and salutary effects for women. Some theorists have assumed that multiple roles result in role strain and psychological distress (Goode, 1960), while others have argued that multiple roles enhance well-being by offering multiple opportunities for increased status and privileges, particularly when people are committed to the roles they occupy (Marks, 1977; Sieber, 1974). Although the evidence is mixed, in general, research findings link consistency between actual and preferred employment status with positive outcomes for women and children (Farel, 1980; Hock et al., 1980; Ross et al., 1983). There is also compelling evidence suggesting that maternal employment has positive effects for girls but negative ones for boys and these effects vary by the mother's education and whether she is employed part or full time (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1982; Zaslow & Hayes, 1986, for example).

As noted earlier, poor single black mothers with young children have been largely excluded from research on the impact of maternal employment. Thus, the present study addressed three questions: (1) Do mothers who prefer employment experience less role strain than their counterparts who prefer to stay home? (2) Are mothers who prefer employment better off on indicators of emotional well-being than their counterparts who prefer to stay home? (3) Do mothers who prefer employment perceive their children more positively than their counterparts who prefer to stay home? It was expected that preference for employment would predict less role strain, better emotional well-being, and more positive perceptions of children. The further expectation was that a portion of the variance in strain, well-being, and perceptions would be explained by the mothers' educational attainment and weekly working hours, as well as the sex of the child.
METHOD AND RESULTS

Sample. Respondents were solicited for this study from the population of 142 employed, single, black mothers with a 3- or 4-year-old child who were former recipients of AFDC and who received subsidized child care from the county welfare agency in a southern Ohio city in the fall of 1989. Present low-income status was assured by their qualification for subsidized child care. Prospective respondents were initially contacted by letter and a week later by telephone. The letters described the study. In subsequent telephone contacts, face-to-face appointments were scheduled during which respondents completed a self-administered questionnaire. The final sample of 111 mothers represented a response rate of 78 percent. Respondents were paid $10. A demographic profile of the sample follows.

The mean age of mothers was 27 years. The majority had at least a high school diploma, and most (53%) had some education beyond high school. Only one respondent had a bachelor’s degree. On average, the mothers worked 41 hours a week and had two children. Approximately 56 percent of the focal 3- and 4-year-old children were boys, and 44 percent were girls. Of the 111 mothers, 61 percent (N = 68) indicated a preference for employment, and 39 percent (N = 43) indicated a preference for staying home.

Measures. Dependent variables included five measures of strain, well-being, and perceptions of children. Role strain was measured by a 19-item, Likert-like scale which tapped general feelings of distress and concern about fulfilling both work and family roles. Well-being was assessed by scores for overall life satisfaction and symptoms of depression, measured by a single-item (ladder) scale and the 20-item Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression (CES-D) scale, respectively. Two scales assessed positive and negative perceptions of children. An 18-item Positive Behaviors scale and a 28-item Behavior Problems scale were used for these purposes. Independent variables were the preference for working or for staying home, average number of weekly working hours, educational attainment, and sex of child. These variables and measures are explicated elsewhere (Jackson, 1992; 1993).

Data Analyses. Three analytical strategies were employed in this study. One-tailed t-tests were used to assess whether mothers who preferred employment and mothers who preferred to stay home differed significantly on the measures of strain, well-being, and views of children at the .05 level or better. Correlational and multiple regression analyses assessed relations among the variables of interest for the sample as a whole. Again, the .05 or better level of significance was employed. The discussion that follows presents a summary of the results.

Results. Findings revealed that mothers who preferred employment reported significantly less role strain than their counterparts who preferred to stay home. The results were mixed with respect to emotional well-being, as indicated by scores on measures of overall life satisfaction and depressive symptomatology. Mothers who preferred employment were more satisfied with their lives, but no less depressed, than
mothers who preferred to stay home. The total sample reported high levels of depressive symptomatology. Regarding the latter, the multiple regression of depression symptoms revealed that having no education beyond high school and a boy child were stronger predictors of depressive symptoms than was preference.

Likewise, mothers' education and sex of child, not consistency between actual and preferred employment status, predicted perceptions of children: The more education mothers had, the more positively they perceived their children. Conversely, having attained no education beyond high school predicted negative descriptions of children, and boys were perceived significantly more negatively than girls.

In sum, on the major variables investigated in this study, having no education beyond high school and a preschool boy predicted the least favorable outcomes, including increased role strain, increased depressive symptomatology, the least favorable perceptions of children, and (excluding educational attainment) lower ratings of overall life satisfaction. Contrary to expectations, weekly working hours (range was 20 to 90 hours a week) were unrelated to strain, depression symptoms, and perceptions of children. Surprisingly, the more hours mothers worked, particularly when they preferred employment, the more satisfied they were with their lives.

UTILITY

While cross-sectional data limit causal inferences, the findings of this study are generally consistent with the "expansion" or salutary effects view of multiple role occupancy (Marks, 1977; Sieber, 1974; Thoits, 1983), which posits, in essence, that people find the time and energy to do the things they want to do, and often feel "more energetic" after having done them. However, it is not clear how to interpret the finding that boys predicted more negative outcomes for the mothers in this study. Previous studies have found that working wives with preschool-aged children experience more conflicts between the demands of work and family roles (Gove & Geerken, 1977), and seem especially affected by the strains of childrearing, particularly when low income is also a factor (Cleary & Mechanic, 1983; Pearlin, 1975). The present findings suggest that boys may be more demanding of time and energy in the family role (Bronfenbrenner et al., 1984), and may, indeed, be more difficult to parent for single black women balancing work and family roles in poverty, particularly when low education is also a factor (Jackson, 1993). Thus, policies and programs that strengthen and support the efforts of these mothers to parent their children, particularly young sons, in less strainful circumstances might prevent later problems. Moreover, the importance of education beyond high school in predicting positive outcomes in this study suggests that current policy initiatives focused primarily on nonemployed AFDC recipients who have dropped out of high school should be expanded to strongly support educational opportunities beyond high school, including college. Finally, that mothers in this study were working long hours at jobs that failed to bring them out of poverty suggests the need for policies that make the attenuation of poverty, rather than welfare dependency per se, a national priority, particularly among single mothers attempting to support families on one income.
LIST OF REFERENCES


