

Working Paper Series

Children's Perception of Their Parents' Work

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ABSTRACT

Interviews with 25 middle class Caucasian children suggest children are knowledgeable about parents' work, aware of some inequity in household management, yet plan to be working parents.

The traditional model of the American family in which the male is the breadwinner and the female is the stay-at-home mom and housewife is an uncommon phenomenon today. Women are entering the workforce in record numbers. While some women take breaks from employment while their children are young, many more are remaining in the workforce in both part-time and full-time positions (Frankel and McCarty, 1993). Over two thirds of married women in the workforce have young children (Gerson, 1998). What these changes in working have meant for families has been the focus of considerable research in recent years. Studies by Hoffman (1985), Lerner and Galambos (1988), Scarr, Phillips, & McCartney, 1989, and Etaugh (1993) have examined the effects of maternal employment on children. Other authors have explored the effects of multiple roles on women's mental and physical health (Barnett and Baruch, 1985; LaCroix and Haynes, 1987). Researchers have also investigated how dual earner couples manage family and home duties (Hochschild, 1989; Mederer, 1993; Perkins and DeMeis, 1996). Recent research has also examined how men's work and family roles have shifted as women's workforce participation has increased (Pleck, 1987; Daly, 1993; Lamb, 1997).

At present there is available some information about how the adults in working families adjust to the often competing demands of work and family and of the calculus involved for those who choose to work and to parent. However, very little is known about children's perceptions of their parents' work or about children's experience of their parents' attempts to manage work and family.

Goldstein and Oldham (1979) asked children as young as first grade to describe their parents' work. Overall, children had a general awareness of their parents' jobs and most defined work as a way of making money. A later study by Piotrkowski and Stark (1987) involved interviews with a small number of children, most of whom had more familiarity with their mothers' jobs than with their fathers' jobs. Children in this study also answered questions about their parents' job satisfaction and those ratings were found to correlate with parental ratings of job satisfaction. Abramovitch and Johnson (1992) interviewed a large sample of 3rd and 4th grade children. The authors found that overall, children were very well informed about what their parents did for work, when they did it, and where they did it. No significant differences were found between their knowledge of what their mothers did and what their fathers did for work. And, supporting the findings of previous research, children most often said that their parents worked to earn money. Children reported that their parents generally enjoyed their jobs, and again, parents' work satisfaction ratings correlated highly with their children's estimates.

The current research, exploratory in nature, attempted to discover some of the ways in which children perceive their parents' work. For example, are there differences in the ways in which children perceive their fathers' and their mothers' jobs? Are fathers' jobs perceived to be more important or central to family functioning? Further, it sought to explore children's perceptions of their parents' efforts to manage work and family duties.

This research also attempted to assess children's ideas about where the impact of parents' work is being felt the most. Finally, it attempted to determine what children in the sample might expect to choose for their own futures with regard to work and family.

METHOD

Overview

The study described in this paper is part of a larger, exploratory study aimed at understanding children's perceptions of their parents' work and of their work and family balance. The study included structured interviews with children and lengthy questionnaires that most parents completed. Reported here are data from structured interviews with children from 25 families, most from the New England region who volunteered after having been contacted through schools and after-school programs. The subject pool was further expanded through the use of snowball sampling (Smith, 1991). Based on the results of a small pilot study, it was decided that children would be included in the sample if they were at least 9 years of age, if both parents worked outside of the home - each for at least 20 hours per week, and if both parents lived in the home.

Procedure

Children were interviewed at their homes or schools in spaces provided by their parents or school administrators. Interview questions included some rating scales and forced-choice items, although the bulk of the questions were open-ended. Questions focused on what the children's parents do for work, what their schedules are like, and why their parents work. In addition, questions addressed how their families manage household chores, what their parents need more time for, and what work and family plans they have for themselves when they are adults. Interviews lasted about 30 minutes. Parents were asked to complete their questionnaires

individually and to return them by mail. Where possible, children's responses were compared to parents' responses to determine the level of agreement. Nineteen sets of parents returned questionnaires.

Sample

Twelve boys and 13 girls from 25 families participated in the study. The age range of children participating was nine to 14 years with a mean age of 11.4 years. Thirteen of the subjects were oldest children while nine were youngest children. Two children were middle children and one was an only child. All participants were Caucasian and middle class.

Fourteen of the mothers in the sample worked part-time and eleven worked full-time. Eighteen of the mothers worked at professional jobs, five at clerical and sales jobs, and two mothers worked in service jobs. All but one of the fathers in the sample worked full-time. Fourteen of the fathers in the sample worked at professional jobs, six worked at skilled labor, and five worked at sales jobs.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Children's Knowledge of Their Parents' Jobs and Schedules

Children were asked to describe what their parents did for a living and what their parents' work schedules were like. Children's descriptions of their parents' jobs were judged as clear if they contained the job title or a reasonably detailed description of their parents' work. Children who did not know what their parent did or whose description was extremely vague were judged unclear. Children's description of their parents' schedules were judged as clear if they described their parents' hours of employment or if they were able to give a general sense of the schedule, e.g., "My dad drives me to school and then he goes to work. He comes home for

dinner at 6.” Children’s descriptions of their parents’ schedules were judged as unclear if they did not include specific hours, did not have a general sense of the schedule, or if they did not know the parents’ schedules at all. Children’s responses to each of these questions were also compared to information provided by their parents.

Similar to the results of other studies, children were clearer about their mothers’ jobs (96%) than they were about their fathers’ jobs (80%). When it came to their parents’ schedules however, more of the children were clear about their fathers’ schedules (84%) than they were about their mothers’ schedules (76%). It would seem that although children may not always be sure about what their fathers do at work, they are fairly sure about when they leave for work and when they come home. Firmer ideas about schedules may be reinforced by family routines which are built around them, for example, the scheduling of dinner for when dads gets home. Historically, women’s employment has also been more flexible, having to allow for easier exit and reentry around childbirth, and more flexible (often part-time) hours to accommodate family needs. The fact that slightly more than half of the mothers in the sample were employed part-time may account for the finding that children were less clear about their schedules.

Children’s Perceptions of Their Parents’ Job Enjoyment and Reasons For Working

Children were asked to rate each parent’s job enjoyment on a 3-point scale where a rating of 1 would mean that the parent does not enjoy the job at all, and a rating of 3 would mean that the parent enjoys the job very much. The mean perceived job enjoyment for mothers was 2.5 and for fathers it was 2.6, indicating that parents in general enjoyed their jobs quite a bit.

Another question of interest was whether children see their parents as equally committed to the provider role at least in terms of their reasons for working. Do they see differences between

their mothers' and fathers' reasons for working and do they think their parents' reasons for working are different from *most* parents' reasons for working?

Although there were some differences in the ways in which children perceived their mothers' and fathers' reasons for working, small cell sizes did not permit significance testing of those differences. Most often, children said that their mothers worked to earn money and fewer of them were seen as working because they like their jobs. For the most part, children said that their mothers worked to pay the mortgage, and to buy food and clothes for the family. Mothers' incomes were not associated with "extras" or used for frivolous things but were seen as central to the family's functioning. Although money and support of the family were most commonly reported as reasons for fathers' working, fathers were reported somewhat more often than mothers to work for the enjoyment.

It is interesting to note that when children were asked why they thought *most* parents work, they were much less likely to say that parents work because they like working. In other words, children were much more likely to say that their own parents work because they like it than they were to say that other parents work for that reason. Seven children said that their mothers work because they like working, while three said that most mothers work because they like working. Similarly, nine children said that their fathers work because they like working, while only four said that most fathers work because they like working. Do these differences arise because children have more access to their own parents' opinions and job attitudes, which are clearly positive? Or, do they experience their own parents as working more than other parents and view this as their parents' choice or preference? The present data do not allow for either conclusion, although this would be a potentially fruitful avenue for future research.

Household Management

Several interview questions focused on the children's perceptions of how the household chores were managed. They were asked to indicate who did most of the cleaning, laundry, grocery shopping, outside chores, and driving of children to school or after school activities.

Children reported that their mothers did the bulk of the housework including cleaning, laundry, and shopping, and that they were most likely to drive children to school and to after school activities. Dads, on the other hand, were more likely to do the bulk of the outside chores like yard work. Where parental data were available for comparison, children's observations were essentially confirmed.

Perhaps the most instructive aspect of children's responses to questions about who does what around the house was the nonverbal communication that accompanied their answers. As each child reported that his or her mother did the bulk of the household cleaning, laundry, shopping, and driving, a nonverbal acknowledgment of the inequity of the situation emerged. Some children rolled their eyes, some sighed, and some giggled nervously as they reported the typical patterns of housework. Some raised their hands, palms up, as if to say: "I don't understand why this is." Interview questions did not focus directly on children's opinions or judgments about household management, but clearly, children's perceptions of equity in relationships would be an interesting and important topic to pursue.

Children's Views of the Time Crunch

How do children view their parents' juggling of work and family matters and where do they perceive the time shortfall to be occurring if at all? Children were asked to consider each parent's day and to say whether that parent needed more time in the day for work activities or

for home activities. Children were also asked *how* they knew that parents needed more time for such activities.

Most children felt that it was at home that parents required more time. When children were asked *how* they knew these things, some children reported that their mothers tell them that they need more time to clean or do household chores. Other children relied on what they called “obvious” signs, for example, the chores are not done, Mom is late for everything, or when she *is* home she is very busy, or, she is too tired to do the chores.

Some of those children who reported that their mothers needed more time for work activities said that their moms complain about not getting their work done, or they say that they need more time to read or to write reports. Several children whose parents were teachers said that they knew their parents needed more time for work because they come home with huge piles of papers to correct.

Speaking about their fathers, most children said that their dads already spent a lot of time at work so what children thought they needed most was time for home activities.

In terms of how they knew this, some said that their dads tell them that they don’t have enough time to do projects at home, but most knew this by how their fathers acted. Of the subjects who said that their dads needed more time for work activities, most knew this by observing their dads. For example, they said that “He is always late for dinner”, “He has lots of papers in his car”, or “He is always on the computer doing charts for work”.

In addition to asking what parents need more time for, children were asked what they thought their parents wanted more time to do. Results were similar for both parents.

According to their children, most parents want more time for family, chores, and relaxing. It is

interesting to note that children mentioned twice as many specific relaxation activities that their dads wanted time for while more often, their moms were described simply as wanting “time to relax”. That children would have more specific notions about their fathers’ leisure activities than they would about their mothers’ might be expected given the research to date on gender disparities in the experience of leisure time. Studies suggest that men have more leisure time than women (Coverman and Sheley, 1986; Shaw, 1992) and that men feel more entitled to take time for leisure than do women (Henderson and Dialeschki, 1991).

What Children Plan For Themselves

Given what children experience in their own homes with regard to work and family, what do they plan for themselves as adults? Children were asked whether they planned to have families when they were older and whether they planned to work outside of the home in either part- or full-time positions. Twenty-three of the children (92%) said that they plan to have a family of their own some day. Of those, 22 said that they plan to work outside of the home. Thirteen children said that they plan to work full-time and nine said that they would like to work part-time. Although the difference was not significant, more girls than boys said that they plan to work full-time when they grow up. This is an interesting trend given what children experience in their homes. Apparently, their exposure to what Hochschild (1989) labels the “second shift” does not discourage them from wanting both work and family. One reason for this may be the high level of job enjoyment children perceive among their mothers and fathers, although their plans to work were significantly correlated with mothers’ perceived job enjoyment ($r = .43, n = 25, p < .01$) but not with fathers’ perceived job enjoyment ($r = .26, n = 25, p > .10$). Parents who were full-time workers were perceived as enjoying their work more than part-time

workers ($t = 9.799$, $df = 24$, $p < .001$), a finding which may be a function of greater career involvement for full-time workers in the sample.

CONCLUSION

Children in the sample were fairly well informed about what their parents do for work and when they do it. Judging by responses about their parents' reasons for working, it would appear that children do not perceive their mothers' jobs to be any less important or central to family functioning than their fathers' jobs. Most children felt that their parents needed more time for things at home rather than at work, and they thought that their parents wanted more time for family, chores, and relaxing. Most saw their mothers doing the bulk of the household chores and appeared to be somewhat uncomfortable about that. However, it did not prevent most of them from wanting to have a family and to have employment outside of the home, most at full-time jobs. It may be that parents' perceived job enjoyment, particularly mothers' perceived job enjoyment, mitigates the "second shift" experience. A common feature of these interviews with children was the matter of fact way in which children approached discussion of their parents' work and of the adjustments in the home which their work schedules necessitated. Given the historical controversy surrounding maternal employment in particular, and the more or less constant focus on guilt in both the popular as well as the professional literature, it is instructive that these children's views about combining work and family are so positive.

The present study was exploratory in nature; as such it raises as many questions as it answers. For example, what and when do parents communicate to their children about their work? What are some of the major factors that shape children's perceptions of equity in adult relationships? Will these children continue the patterns and adopt work/family strategies similar to those of their parents?

Chances are that children's own home environments will be the most powerful agents in shaping their attitudes and behaviors. But what steps might the community take to increase the likelihood of more equitable patterns emerging for the future? Locating open discussion of these issues in school curricula, religious education programs, and in community programs like scouting may be beneficial. If we assume that the children themselves can find at least some of the answers needed, then we can empower their search by building these issues into their studies early in their education. Acknowledging the importance and complexity of work and family issues early on may promote more thoughtful, equitable responses later.

The present study was limited in that its sample was small and homogeneous. Future research would benefit from a more diverse sample, tapping a wider cultural, racial, and socio-economic group as well as a more diverse sample with regard to types of parental employment.

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