Maternal Employment and Child Outcomes (2001)

**Author:** Jacqueline Lerner, Boston College- Lynch School of Education

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**Basic Concepts & Definitions**

Maternal employment refers to the labor force affiliation of mothers with children 0-18 years. The term, "maternal employment" includes a wide variety of labor force participation patterns, from full-time work to part-time work, and including contract work as well as working out of the home. It is important to recognize that mother's work situation can change across her child's developing years (e.g., changing from full-time to part-time during specific years).

Child outcomes include a variety of indicators, including social and emotional adjustment, intellectual development, and school performance.

Although the term, maternal employment, suggests a focus on the mother and her labor force affiliation, the experience of maternal employment is embedded in a family system. Therefore, when considering child outcomes, it is often critical to examine other issues that pertain to the family system, such as paternal work (see Williams & Radin, 1993), because these factors may influence the development of children.

**Importance of Topic to Work-Family Studies**

Many early studies on the work-family interface were aimed at evaluating both the effects of maternal employment on children and families as well as the effects of family factors on work. Research on work-family spillover began to document the variables that contribute to work productivity as well as to family functioning (see Perry-Jenkins, Repetti & Crouter, 2000)

Current research about the work/life experiences of employed mothers both reflects and is defined by the evolution of theory and empirical studies regarding the impact of maternal employment on child development and well-being.
State of the Body of Knowledge

During the 1960s and 1970s, when there was an increase in the percentage of middle-income women who entered the workforce, researchers tended to design studies that measured the direct effects of maternal employment on the experiences and development of their children. These studies reflected assumptions that there must be some negative impacts of mothers being at work. At that time, there was significant inconsistency in the findings of studies.

Two researchers, Marion Radke-Yarrow (1962) and Lois Hoffman (1979) provided syntheses of the field and began to focus the research agenda on areas where there were inconsistencies in the findings. Scholars started to place the experiences of working mothers and their children in different social contexts. As indicated by the following figure, researchers began to appreciate and document the complex work-family relationships in different social contexts.

Compared to the research conducted two or three decades ago, the designs of today's studies tend to be more complicated because they are developed to gather information about factors that might mediate the relationships between maternal employment and child outcomes. For example, some have documented the fact that child outcomes are related to women's satisfaction with their decision to work and the quality of their employment situation (see Lerner & Galambos, 1986), not only to their employment status. A number of factors were noted that could have indirect effects on child outcomes, including maternal stress, life satisfaction, role strain, characteristics of the parent-child relationship, and, of course, the quality of the child care itself. Some of these variables, such as maternal traits, are perceived as having significant influence on the parent-child relationships whereas others, such as job content, are considered to be more distal. Thus, researchers began to evaluate the conditions under which maternal work had positive or negative consequences for mothers, children, and families.

At the present time, some researchers are examining how parents and children are bringing their social experiences into the parent-child relationships, and how that might affect those relationships and child
outcomes. Both parents and children spend significant portions of their days in different social environments (e.g., workplaces, schools, childcare settings, etc.) that can influence the nature of parent-child interactions.

**Implications for Practice & Research**

The work-family framework has helped to focus attention on the supports that are needed to minimize the negative spillover from work to the parent-child relationship. Welfare reform has increased our awareness of the range of supports needed by different types of families. For example, practitioners are now more appreciative of the fact that we need to design different models of workplace responsiveness to the different needs of working families. Clearly, researchers need to continue to examine the relationships between work-family experiences and factors related to diversity, such as race/ethnicity and social class (see Wolfer & Moen, 1996).

In response to the recent waves of research on maternal employment, there have been some shifts noted in employers' perspectives about the work-family issues experienced by working mothers. Increasingly, employers seem to recognize that when child outcomes are not positive, the work of parents can be negatively affected. Similarly, when children do well, working parents (and mothers, in particular) seem to be able to concentrate more on their work responsibilities. This acknowledgement has had some significant implications for organizational commitment to work/life initiatives.

There are a number of different facets to the current research agenda concerning maternal employment. Some studies have examined the relationships between the career advancement of working mothers and the quality of employment as well as the supports available to working families. There is particular interest in the changes in life satisfaction as opportunities for advancement increase. A number of researchers are investigating the organizational opportunities and constraints that impact the work and family experiences of working mothers.

The findings of studies about maternal employment and child outcomes bring a number of policy issues to the forefront because the domains of work and family are embedded within a larger societal context. There is a wide range of policy options that could have an impact on different stakeholders groups. For instance, most mothers needing or wanting to work are concerned the availability of affordable, quality child care, parental leave policies, and job security. Experiences with welfare reform have accentuated the need for carefully crafted legislation that not only helps low-income women move from public assistance, but also promotes sustainable employment options (see Zaslow, et al., 1999). Public policies that constrain or mandate work-family options are of concern to private employers. Educational administrators recognize that policies could change expectations for the roles that public schools are expected to assume with regard to the work-family experiences of some families.
References


Other Recommended Readings on this Topic:


**Locations in the Matrix of Information Domains of the Work-Family Area of Studies**

The Editorial Board of the Teaching Resources section of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network has prepared a Matrix as a way to locate important work-family topics in the broad area of work-family studies. (More about the Matrix ...).

Note: The domain areas most closely related to the entry's topic are presented in full color. Other domains, represented in gray, are provided for context.
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**Domain F: Theoretical Underpinnings to All Domains**
About the Matrix

Sloan Work and Family Research Network
Resources for Teaching: Mapping the Work-Family Area of Studies

Introduction

It was appropriate that the members of the Founding Editorial Board of the Resources for Teaching began their work in 2000, for their project represented one of the turning points in the area of work and family studies. This group accepted the challenge of developing resources that could support the efforts of teaching faculty from different disciplines and professional schools to better integrate the work-family body of knowledge into their curricula. The Virtual Think Tank began its work with a vision, a spirit of determination, and sense of civic responsibility to the community of work-family scholars.

A fundamental challenge emerged early in the process. It became clear that before we could design resources that would support the teaching of those topics, we would first need to inventory topics and issues relevant to the work-family area of studies (and begin to distinguish the work-family aspect of these topics from "non work-family" aspects).

The members of the Virtual Think Tank were well aware that surveying the area of work and family studies would be a daunting undertaking. However, we really had no other choice. And so, we began to grapple with the mapping process.

Purpose

1. To develop a preliminary map of the body of knowledge relevant to the work-family area of study that reflects current, "across-the-disciplines" understanding of work-family phenomena.

2. To create a flexible framework (or map) that clarifies the conceptual relationships among the different information domains that comprise the work-family knowledge base.

It is important to understand that this mapping exercise was undertaken as a way to identify and organize the wide range of work-family topics. This project was not intended as a meta-analysis for determining the empirical relationships between specific variables. Therefore, our map of the workfamily area of study does not include any symbols that might suggest the relationships between specific factors or clusters of factors.
Process

The Virtual Think Tank used a 3-step process to create the map of the work-family area of studies.

1. **Key Informants:** The members of the Virtual Think Tank included academics from several different disciplines and professions who have taught and written about work-family studies for years. During the first stage of the mapping process, the Virtual Think Tank functioned as a panel of key informants.

   Initially, the Panel engaged in a few brainstorming sessions to identify work-family topics that could be addressed in academic courses. The inductive brainstorming sessions initially resulted in the identification of nearly 50 topics.

   Once the preliminary list of topics had been generated, members of the Virtual Think Tank pursued a deductive approach to the identification of work-family issues. Over the course of several conversations, the Virtual Think Tank created a conceptual map that focused on information domains (see Table 1 below).

   The last stage of the mapping process undertaken by the Virtual Think Tank consisted of comparing and adjusting the results of the inductive and deductive processes. The preliminary, reconciled list was used as the first index for the Online Work and Family Encyclopedia.

2. **Literature review:** Members of the project team conducted literature searches to identify writings in which authors attempted to map the work-family area of study or specific domains of this area. The highlights of the literature review will be posted on February 1, 2002 when the First Edition of the Work-Family Encyclopedia will be published.

3. **Peer review:** On October 1, 2001, the Preliminary Mapping of the work-family area of study was posted on the website of the Sloan Work and Family Research Network. The members of the Virtual Think Tank invite work-family leaders to submit suggestions and comments about the Mapping and the List of Work-Family Topics. The Virtual Think Tank will consider the suggestions and, as indicated, will make adjustments in both of these products. Please send your comments to Marcie Pitt-Catsouphes at pittcats@bc.edu

Assumptions
Prior to identifying the different information domains relevant to the work-family area of study, members of the Virtual Think Tank adopted two premises:

1. Our use of the word “family” refers to both traditional and nontraditional families. Therefore, we consider the term “work-family” to be relevant to individuals who might reside by themselves. Many work-family leaders have noted the problematic dimensions of the term “work-family” (see Barnett, 1999). In particular, concern has been expressed that the word “family” continues to connote the married couple family with dependent children, despite the widespread recognition that family structures and relationships continue to be very diverse and often change over time. As a group, we understand the word “family” to refer to relationships characterized by deep caring and commitment that exist over time. We do not limit family relationships to those established by marriage, birth, blood, or shared residency.

2. It is important to examine and measure work-family issues and experiences at many different levels, including: individual, dyadic (e.g., couple relationships, parent-child relationships, care giver care taker relationships), family and other small groups, organizational, community, and societal. Much of the work-family discourse glosses over the fact that the work-family experiences of one person or stakeholder group may, in fact, be different from (and potentially in conflict with) those of another.

Outcomes

We will publish a Working Paper, "Mapping the Work-Family Area of Study," on the Sloan Work and Family Research Network in 2002. In this publication, we will acknowledge the comments and suggestions for improvement sent to us.

Limitations

It is important to understand that the members of the Virtual Think Tank viewed their efforts to map the work-family area of study as a "work in progress." We anticipate that we will periodically review and revise the map as this area of study evolves.

The members of the panel are also cognizant that other scholars may have different conceptualizations of the work-family area of study. We welcome your comments and look forward to public dialogue about this important topic.

Listing of the Information Domains Included in the Map
The members of the Virtual Think Tank wanted to focus their map of work-family issues around the experiences of five principal stakeholder groups:

1. individuals,
2. families,
3. workplaces,
4. communities, and
5. society-at-large.

Each of these stakeholder groups is represented by a row in the Table 1, Information Domain Matrix (below).

**Work-Family Experiences:** The discussions of the members of the Virtual Think Tank began with an identification of some of the salient needs & priorities/problems & concerns of the five principal stakeholder groups. These domains are represented by the cells in Column B of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individuals' work-family needs & priorities
- Individuals' work-family problems & concerns
- Families' work-family need & priorities
- Families' work-family problems & concerns
- Needs & priorities of workplaces related to work-family issues
- Workplace problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs & priorities of communities related to work-family issues
- Communities' problems & concerns related to work-family issues
- Needs and priorities of society related to work-family issues
- Societal problems & concerns related to work-family issues

**Antecedents:** Next, the Virtual Think Tank identified the primary roots causes and factors that might have either precipitated or affected the work-family experiences of the principal stakeholder groups. These domains are highlighted in Column A of the Information Domain Matrix.

- Individual Antecedents
- Family Antecedents
- Workplace Antecedents
- Community Antecedents
- Societal Antecedents
Covariates: The third set of information domains include factors that moderate the relationships between the antecedents and the work-family experiences of different stakeholder groups (see Column C in Table 1).

- Individual Covariates
- Family Covariates
- Workplace Covariates
- Community Covariates
- Societal Covariates

Decisions and Responses: The responses of the stakeholder groups to different work-family experiences are highlighted in Column D.

- Individual Decision and Responses
- Family Decisions and Responses
- Workplace Decisions and Responses
- Community Decisions and Responses
- Public Sector Decisions and Responses

Outcomes & Impacts: The fifth set of information domains refer to the outcomes and impacts of different work-family issues and experiences on the principal stakeholder groups (see Column E).

- Outcomes & Impacts on Individuals
- Outcomes & Impacts on Families
- Outcomes & Impacts on Workplaces
- Outcomes & Impacts on Communities
- Outcomes & Impacts on Society

Theoretical Foundations: The Virtual Think Tank established a sixth information domain to designate the multi-disciplinary theoretical underpinnings to the work-family area of study (noted as Information Domain F).
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