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ABSTRACT

This review examines the literature on the effect of marriage and motherhood on women's psychological well-being. The paper discusses the impact of child rearing on life satisfaction and feelings of stress and considers the special problems of the working mother. Changing social attitudes surrounding a woman's role as wife and marital dissolution as another source of stress for women are investigated. The importance of support in the form of good child care arrangements and positive family attitudes are noted as two variables which can help reduce the stress of role conflict for working women. The role of mental health workers in dealing with stress is emphasized along with the importance of a systems approach to alleviate stress. (JAC)

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IMPACT OF CHANGING SOCIETAL PRESSURES
AFFECTING MOTHERS

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IMPACT OF CHANGING SOCIETAL PRESSURES AFFECTING

MOTHERS

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The psychological well-being or distress of women is largely determined by the roles of wife and mother which are central to most women's lives. Most people are married for some portion of their adult lives and 90% of women who have ever been married bear children (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1978). The role of family caretaker has always been assigned to women. Even today, with social changes which support a choice of achieving motherhood, or the timing of it, women place their family responsibilities above other considerations, including employment.

Families and Quality of Life

Families determine the quality of life for their members. Married adults have a lower risk of emotional disorder than those who are not married. This is more true of men than of women. Delinquent or disordered behavior, substance abuse, and other disorders of living are considerably lower in married men than in their single counterparts. Women, however, do not have a substantially reduced risk of disorder; in some studies, the risk actually appears elevated (Gove, 1972; Gove & Tudor, 1973; Radloff, 1975; Wyman & McLaughlin, 1979).

Child rearing has a major impact both on life satisfaction and on feelings of stress. Women with children report high levels of satisfaction and fulfillment but also high levels of stress (Campbell, 1965). Some studies have shown that full responsibility for preschool children can be linked to psychological distress, especially for mothers with many

children, limited incomes, or inadequate emotional support networks (Brown & Harris, 1968; Seiden, 1976). Negative aspects of the roles of wife and mother include marital inequality, marital dissolution, dual full-time occupations of outside employment and childrearing, derogation of housewife's work.

WOMEN AS WIVES

In the conventional sex role, a woman has her identity fashioned around the roles of wife and mother. The wife's social standing, economic status, and life style are reflections of her husband's occupational standing. She is dependent on him for economic survival and considers him superior in the relationship as head of the family. Traditionalists point out advantages of this subordinate-superior relationship. Erikson (1965) and Freud (1974) assume that it reflects the natural order of things. Others state that wives with autonomy and independent identities would threaten the stability of their marriages since they would not always accede to their husband's authority. Furthermore, giving women access to the world beyond "kinder" and "kuche", as for example, through education, would make them malcontent with performing their wifely duties (cf., Friedan, 1963). More recently (Gilder, 1973) it has been proposed that marital inequality is necessary to build male egos and thus provide men with motivation for remaining in the marital union.

In contrast, feminist analyses of marital roles propose quite different implications. Overinvestment in the role of wife prevents women from developing their capacities and from acquiring a sense of autonomy and self worth (Frieze, Parsons, Johnson, Ruble, & Zellman, 1978). Women's mental health and social justice can be improved by redressing power imbalances in marital relationships. (Kidder, Fagan, & Cohn, 1980). The

powerful negative implications of women's reliance for one's identity, status, and economic survival are mammoth. The conventional housewife in a precarious position with rates of divorce approaching 40%.

DIVORCE

Marital dissolution is a potent source of stress for women (cf., Bloom, Asher, & White, 1978) often implicated in depression, agoraphobia, and other disorders (Chambless & Goldstein, 1980; Marecek, Kravetz, & Finn, Note 1). The strain of divorce is heightened for women with conventional role orientations (cf., Bloom et al., 1978). The dissolution of marriage often leads not only to the loss of a partner, but also to rapid, forced role transitions such as entry into the labor force, adjustment to being autonomous, and acquisition of skills in such "masculine" domains as household repair, finances, and driving a car (Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1977; Rawlings & Carter, 1979). Mothers also usually bear in the brunt of their children's adjustment to divorce, since children are usually left in maternal custody. Recent research implicate mothers' adjustment and consequent withdrawal in problems young children experience due to marital dissolution. Finally, women of all levels of affluence experience severe economic stress. Only between one fifth and one third of ex-husbands contribute regularly toward their family support and the amounts are often very small (Aslin, 1978). The jobs available to women pay poorly and fail to offer opportunities for advancement. Most women, even those well-educated, find their academic training has not provided them with marketable skills. In addition, employment often necessitates the purchase of child care services, which strains a small paycheck even further.

dependent children in the home--have increased their labor force participation from 36% in 1960 to over 61% in 1978 (U.S. Department of Labor, 1978). Most of the more than 38 million women in the labor force are here to stay out of both necessity and choice. Reasons for staying are related to complex changes in demographic, economic, and social realms; they are also related to the specific benefits accruing to paid employment.

Benefits experienced by Employed Women

Direct and obvious benefits of outside employment include a personal income; eligibility for social security and pension funds; direct access to health insurance and other fringe benefits, an opportunity to use and develop job-related skills; and access to an extended network of people. These contribute to goals of the woman to build a productive adult life.

Other benefits, not so direct, are related to psychological well-being. Employed women show fewer symptoms of psychosomatic illness than do women who are in the home fulltime (Bane, 1976), and employed women seem to have more positive self-concepts and higher levels of self-esteem (Nye, 1974b). Employed women also tend to be more satisfied with their work than are unemployed women, whose activities are in the home (Newberry, Weissman, & Meyers, 1979). Working women are more likely to have equitable roles in their marriages, including a more equitable distribution of power (Bahr, 1974; Ross & Sawhill, 1975). They also are more likely to enjoy their relationships and activities with their children than do women who are involved in fulltime, at home care of their children (Nye, 1974b).

STRESSES EXPERIENCED BY EMPLOYED WOMEN

The benefits, however, are sometimes compromised by factors related to labor force inequities. Women are typically found disproportionately in low-paying, dead-end jobs. In 1975, over half of the women in the labor force were in "clerical" and "service" occupations (U.S. Department of

Labor, 1977). Even women who are in potentially upwardly mobile positions have more limited opportunities for promotion and advancement than do men.

Personal stressors are also important. There is some evidence that employment creates its own stress within many marriages, due to the frequently increased independence of working women, new conflicts in scheduling related to home and employment responsibilities, and the tension surrounding pressure for alterations in marriage and family role functions (Bane, 1976; Nye, 1974a). Some working women are anxious about the possibility of becoming more successful than their husbands, (Rapoport & Rapoport, 1976, reporting work by Paloma and Garland).

WORKING MOTHERS: STRESS RELATED TO THE CARE OF CHILDREN

There are 15 million working women who have children at home. A major source of stress for these women may lie in coping adequately with the dual responsibilities of employment and motherhood. There are three major issues for these women: finding quality care for children; dealing with popular misconceptions about the effects of maternal employment and nonparental care on children and for full involvement on the job and continuing primary responsibility for child rearing and home maintenance.

Finding and affording good day care

Some sources claim that there is ample supply of substitute or nonparental care available (e.g., Larson, 1976). However, of the 16 million children between the ages of 3 and 13, whose mother were working 1975, slightly fewer than 2% were enrolled in group-care centers. (U.S. Department of Labor, 1977). However, when asked recently what day care arrangements they would prefer, approximately 40% of the mothers who had children under the age

of 6 indicated that they would use group day care and nursery school facilities if they were available.

In years past, parents in this country reportedly preferred informal care as provided in a home over group care (Emlen, 1973; Perry, 1961). This shift may be due to an increased awareness of the importance of developmentally stimulating experiences in the early years of life; it may also reflect a change in the availability of high quality informal care. As more women enter the labor force, fewer women can provide babysitting and care for children of family members and neighbors. And as more women focus on paid employment as an integral part of adult life, the attraction of offering child care has probably diminished because informal care is typically poorly paid and offers neither pensions nor fringe benefits accruing to other labor force jobs.

Even if preferred and available, the generally higher cost of these educationally oriented programs--particularly if unsubsidized--often prices them beyond the budgets of many working mothers (Kanerman & Kahn, 1979). The ability to find such care is limited by the supply of available arrangements that are of acceptable quality, accessible to the home, offered on a constant basis, and within the parents' budget. For many working mothers, the supply is severely limited, and the care obtained becomes a source of concern rather than support.

CONCERN ABOUT EFFECTS ON CHILDREN.

Other stressors with which working mothers must cope are the uncertainty and myths that surround popular understanding of the effects of maternal employment and nonparental care of children.

Effects of maternal employment on Children

Of primary importance is the fact that maternal employment in itself does

not harm children (Etaugh, 1974); the children of working and nonworking mothers are substantially similar in school performance, social adjustment, and incidence of delinquency (Moore, 1978). In some circumstances, a woman's performance in her parental role may be enhanced by her involvement in work (Hoffman, 1974).

Also important is the fact that maternal employment appears related to several positive aspects of children's development. Children of working mothers tend to have higher educational aspirations and, especially in lower class families, sometimes show higher academic achievement (Moore & Sawhill, 1976). The daughters of working women tend to have higher job aspirations than the daughters of nonworking women (Moore, 1978), and the children of working mothers frequently have less traditional sex role concepts, perceive smaller differences in male and female sex roles, and evaluate women's competence more highly than do the children of nonworking women. In addition, when compared to children of unemployed mothers, children of working mothers sometimes seem more likely to assume responsibilities for household tasks (Moore, 1978; Moore & Sawhill, 1976).

A critical factor mediating the effects of maternal employment on children, however, is the mother's attitude toward her work; if she is satisfied with her employment, her child's adjustment is likely to be quite positive (Hoffman, 1974). One factor affecting many mothers' feelings about work, in turn, is satisfaction with arrangements for their children's care (Harrell & Ridley, 1975). A mother's satisfaction with the care of her children receive is dependent on at least two factors: the quality of that care and her perceptions of the effects of care on her own child. The latter perceptions are set in turn within her general understanding of the effects of nonparental care; in this area, as is true of maternal employ-

ment, some misconceptions and myths are prevalent.

Effects of Day Care on Children

The effects of day care for any particular child depends on several specific variables--the child's developmental needs, the ways in which the family mediates the effects of a particular program, and the actual characteristics of the care program itself (Belsky & Steinberg, 1978; Barnes & Dunlop, Note 1), however, some observations can be made about the effects of day care. Most research in this area are on group-care programs of relatively high quality; therefore, generalizing to child-care programs of lesser quality must be undertaken cautiously.

One of the primary concerns of mothers and professionals alike has been the effect on the child's attachment to mother. The evidence is mixed (Blehar, 1974), but most studies have found that day care does not damage a child's emotional bond with the mother (Belsky & Steinberg, 1978). Findings also show that children from infancy on can apparently form secure attachments to care givers, and these attachments do not replace the bond with the mother (Farran & Ramey, 1977; Moore, 1978).

Another concern is intellectual development. Day care does not appear to have effects one way or the other in most children (Belsky & Steinberg, 1978). The primary influence on intellectual development continues to be the child's home and family. Disadvantaged children, however, appear to show increases in intellectual development while using day care (e.g., Ramey & Smith, 1976).

Social development has also been an area of concern. Some investigators have found only minimal differences between day-care and home-reared children in behavior with peers (Finkelstein & Wilson, Note 2). More frequently day-care children have been found to show increased levels of interaction with peers, particularly if they enter day care before the age of 2. These children

appear to be somewhat more peer-oriented and less adult-oriented than are home-reared children. Some investigators have found that day-care children behave more aggressively toward peers and adults than do some home-reared children (Schwarz, Strickland, & Krolick, 1974), others have found no differences between day-care and home-care children (Etaugh, 1980). In the cases where differences have been found, they may have been due to inadequate attention on the part of the care givers to the development of cooperative behaviors rather than to characteristics of the children (Barnes & Dunlop, Note 1).

In sum, neither maternal employment nor day care appears to negatively affect children. The more positive the mother's attitude is toward her work, the more satisfied she is with her children's care arrangements, and the higher the quality is of the children's care, the greater the likelihood that both mother and child will benefit from maternal employment and participation in day care.

Managing Two Fulltime Jobs

Mother's attitudes toward her work, her satisfaction with day-care arrangements, and the actual quality of her children's care are dependent on the support she receives from several sources; equitable sharing of responsibility for care from her family; the provision of good, supplementary care from her community; and acknowledgement and understanding of the responsibilities that parents have toward their children from her employer. This support is present for some women.

Many more women, however, are without such support and live with the often intense pressures of competing responsibilities to a fulltime job and to fulltime child rearing. These pressures may lead to several kinds of stress

associated with both mental and physical ill health, including role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload (French & Caplan, 1972). The conflicts over responsibilities in these two areas create specific limitations and tensions for many women: anxiety about performance as a parent, tensions within the family and diminished possibilities for equal involvement in job and career opportunities (Berger, Foster, & Wallson, 1978).

The core of the stress experienced by these women is that they are expected to meet all traditional obligations to the home and family and are not expected to lessen significantly the extent of that obligation, if they must, or choose, to enter the labor force. Since the working world has evolved as if its employees had no families (Rapoport & Rapoport, 1976), jobs and work standards are generally structured without reference to parental obligations. Because of this structure of work, men continue to have minimal time for families because jobs do not permit it, and many working mothers are somehow expected to "make do", continuing to shoulder full responsibility for family while also absorbing the responsibilities of employment.

What are the solutions? Dunlop (1981) has reviewed several suggestions: (1) That we return to a more agrarian, less industrial society in which the demands of work and family seem easier to integrate. This would involve historical and life-style changes of great magnitude; (2) Another is that we license for parenthood, allowing adults to have children only if they can make advance provision for the fulltime care of children during their dependency. This suggestion would involve significant changes in some basic cultural values; (3) The third suggestion is that we utilize the opportunities

inherent in the present dilemma to create fuller and more healthy lives for adults and children. This suggestion would involve numerous changes in employment and family role structures. This last plan is the most viable, since rather than turning the clock back or sharply ahead to a future that limits the rights of individuals to bear children, it acknowledges the multiple realities of the present situation.

Concluding Thoughts

Women will remain in the work force. Half the women in this country work and many seek fuller integration of work and family responsibilities. Support for this effort promises benefits to children, adults and society. Society needs children; children need consistent, responsive, and loving care; adults need help in their care of children to derive benefits of both child rearing and employment.

Personal and family stress experienced by many women is influenced significantly by broader factors, including demographic, economic and social. Working women are stressed by tasks of finding good day care for children, monitoring and understanding the effects of substitute care on children, and working out new arrangements for the sharing of work and child-rearing responsibilities within the family.

Mental health professionals can be helpful to these women. Although professional help is varied, three considerations are of special importance to many employed women experiencing stress. First, it is important to focus on the individual's family and community system. The problems of employed mothers are not the result of personal inadequacies but the outgrowths of several interacting systems' variables: Work place policies that may discriminate

(overtly or benignly) against women, especially women with children.

WOMEN WHO STAY AT HOME

About 40% of female population are full-time housewives; the proportion is even higher among women with young children. Housework and housewives have been among the most controversial and sensitive issues raised by the women's movement. Feminists' critiques of the housewife role have sometimes been interpreted as a derogation of housewives themselves or as a repudiation of family life. The role must be distinguished from those who occupy it and the low esteem in which society has held housework and childcare must be recognized. The GNP does not calculate the value of housework nor does the housewife get benefits of employment outside the home (e.g., social security, vacation, sick leave or disability insurance).

Studies on the contribution of the housewife role on women's psychological well-being or distress are somewhat contradictory, possibly because of responses from different groups of women and changes in attitude over time. Consistently, however, housewives are less physically healthy than their employed counterparts, (Waldron, 1980), and seem to have either similar or higher levels of psychological and psychosomatic symptoms (Welch & Booth, 1977; Marecek et al., Note 1).

We see in our time society's willingness to give women the choice of staying at home or to work outside of it as suits their preferences or family needs. Also we see that the role of fulltime housewife is coming to be regarded as a stage in the life cycle rather than a permanent ascribed status. These trends should increase the satisfaction women experience as housewives.

Housewives have a lower self-esteem than employed mothers (Birnbaum, 1975). The typical statements housewives give about themselves "I'm just a housewife," "I don't do anything interesting" or even "I do not do anything" reflect this. Society's negative attitude about housework may affect women's appraisals of themselves, and this lack of self-work may contribute to feelings of depression. This problem is especially acute for middle class housewives, whose activities may seem unglamorous and unstimulating compared to those of their spouses or employed peers.

An occupational hazard of fulltime housework experienced by both middle- and working-class housewives is social isolation (Lopata, 1971; Marecek et al, Note 1). Lack of a social network appears to place housewives in special jeopardy when a crisis--especially a marital crisis--occurs (Brown & Harris, 1978).

Implications for Therapists

Although many women find motherhood the most fulfilling aspect of their lives, there are strains associated with the role demands placed on mothers. Women who feel burdened by the responsibilities of caring for young children or by the isolation of spending their days at home are responding in normative ways to difficult circumstances. They should not be regarded as unfeminine or immature. Their therapists can help them be exploring ways of reducing the strains in the situation or ways of altering the situation itself.

Seeking paid employment is a common "escape route" for bored or unhappy housewives (Williams, 1977). However, when women take on employment outside the home, they frequently retain their full burden of family responsibilities and thus run the risk of serious role overload. Therapists working with housewives contemplating employment outside the home can support them in renegotiating their household responsibilities before seeking work. If such renegotiating

tiating is impossible, alternative solutions, such as cooperating with other parents in child care or forming a support group of other women, could be suggested.

Finally, it is important for therapists themselves to be free of derogatory attitudes toward housework and housewives or toward employed mothers. It is unlikely that clients self-esteem and their sense of empowerment can be raised if therapists do not accord them dignity and respect the life choices they have made.

CONCLUSIONS

Current literature on the psychology of women delineates the changing social conditions that have changed women's lives. This literature offers new insights and interpretations that challenge those formulated under outmoded value premises. Therapists who are conversant with this body of knowledge will be more able to examine critically their values regarding family life and to accept different value choices on the part of their clients.

Many therapists have supported couples searching out new solutions to female role dilemmas: "commuter" marriages (i.e., marriages in which the spouses live in different geographic locations because of their work), delayed childbearing and voluntary childlessness, and communal households. Although it is important to encourage such solutions, it is crucial to recognize the limitations of individualistic solutions in the absence of broader social change. The fact that society now tolerates such diversity in family life is a step forward, but it is a small step. The larger and more urgently needed step is the one that will transform the institutions of the family and work world to ensure that women's participation in each promotes their psychological well-being and fulfillment.

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