



The mental health implications of maternal employment: Working versus at-home mothering identities

Karen Elgar and Andrea Chester

School of Health Sciences, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia

Abstract

Past research exploring the effect of employment on mothers' mental health has largely constructed maternal employment as a problem of identity and energy supply within the theory of multiple roles. Specifically, maternal employment has been investigated as either beneficial (role enhancement hypothesis) or detrimental (role strain hypothesis) to women's psychological wellbeing, with little consideration given towards a more complex relationship. As such, despite three decades of research, there is inconsistent support for both the role strain and role enhancement hypotheses. The few trends to emerge from this research suggest that while maternal employment may be associated with better psychological functioning, this effect may be mediated by the over-absorption of one's time and resources within a particular identity role. Future research would benefit from revising the manner in which maternal employment is constructed as a variable in order to yield more consistent and usable findings.

Keywords

employment, maternal employment, mother, mothering identities, multiple role theory, role strain, role enhancement

Introduction

Women who have jobs often oppose them to the careers which they see their families to be, and feel defensive when their priorities are perceived in any other light. Women who do not work in paid employment ... feel they have to counter the charge of not doing anything, or making anything of their lives (Apter, 1993, p.54).

Despite the increasing participation of women within the workforce of most industrialised countries, the issue of working mothers remains a topic of fierce debate. The so-called 'Mother Wars' has divided public opinion as to whether it is beneficial to have mothers involved in paid employment, for both the sake of the mother and her family (Johnston & Swanson, 2004). In terms of psychological theory and research, the

issue of maternal employment has largely been explored in the context of multiple role theory. The purpose of this paper is to review the manner in which the issue of working mothers has been constructed as a problem of identity and energy supply within the theory of multiple roles. Specifically, the manner in which maternal employment has been viewed as beneficial (enhancement hypothesis) or detrimental (strain hypothesis) to women's psychological health will be explored in light of past research findings. A critical review of the methodological limitations of past research will also be presented as an explanation for why research to date has failed to consistently support either the role enhancement or role strain hypothesis. Finally, future trends in maternal employment and mental health research will be outlined.

Contact: Karen Elgar, School of Health Sciences, RMIT University, GPO Box 2476V, Melbourne, Victoria 3001 Australia
karen.elgar@student.rmit.edu.au

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Cultural constructions of maternal employment

In the past, Western research conducted on the association between employment and mental health has predominantly focused on male employees, for whom the workplace was viewed as a source of stress and the home as ‘a shrine’ of relaxation (Rout, Cooper & Kerslake, 1997, p.264). As such, when research was initiated on the psychological implications of employment on mothers, it was largely assumed that maternal employment, in contrast to the positive experience of being at home and raising children, would be associated with psychological distress (Sears & Galambos, 1993). The construction of childrearing and domestic duties as a natural domain for women also resulted in the expectation that maternal employment would reduce a mother’s capacity to enact these duties, thereby negatively affecting the wellbeing of the spouses and, in particular, the children of these families (Apter, 1993). Therefore, the majority of early research conducted on maternal employment focused on the effects of such a role on the wellbeing of children and ignored any impact on the mother herself. Thus, from the beginning, the study of maternal employment was geared towards a negative expectation of the consequences of mothers in the workplace.

Within the past forty years, however, the movement towards gender equality within most Western countries has contributed to a growth in the literature exploring the ability of women to balance employment on top of childrearing and domestic responsibilities. This body of literature has generally promoted the participation of mothers in paid employment as the natural outcome of gender equality, in that for a woman to truly achieve her full potential, she must simultaneously prove herself within and outside the domain of the home (Brown, Lumley, Small & Astbury, 1994). Maternal employment within this framework, therefore, was not constructed as an opportunity for women but as a necessity for independence and equality.

Current explorations of the association between employment and psychological wellbeing have thus been shaped by the way in which society has constructed maternal stereotypes. Mothering (good versus bad) and work status (employed versus at-home) have been long perceived as

rigid binaries, each with stereotypic expectations (Johnston & Swanson, 2004). The contemporary working mother, for example, is often perceived as a time-rushed, career-focused woman who places her own needs before that of her children (Sharpe, 1984). Conversely, the at-home mother is often presented with ideologies of domestic success, but also as incapable of attaining such success without continual expert advice (Johnston & Swanson, 2004). Research has demonstrated that these stereotypes are closely linked to and perpetuate perceptions of what constitutes a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ mother. One study conducted by Johnson and Swanson (2004) found that while at-home mothers defined the ideal mother as always accessible and ready to put the needs of her child before her own, employed mothers felt that women with interests outside the home tended to be happier, which allowed them to generally be better mothers. Such a study demonstrates the way in which groups of people have constructed the issue of maternal employment as either a highly negative or positive experience according to their own biases. As such, the research that has been conducted on the issue is often subject to cultural constructions of maternal identity. It has also often focused on the psychological consequences of employment as either distinctly positive or negative, rather than exploring the possibility of employment leading to a mixture of positive and negative outcomes.

Theoretical predictions of maternal employment and mental health

The following sections outline the two major hypotheses regarding the effects of multiple roles on mental health: the role strain hypothesis and role enhancement hypothesis. While the role enhancement hypothesis espouses the benefits of employment for mothers, the role strain hypothesis maintains that any such involvement will be detrimental to a mother’s mental health. In light of these theories, the relative benefits and negative consequences that have been put forward specifically in relation to the enacting of multiple roles in motherhood are explored.

The role enhancement hypothesis

Theoretical understandings of the association between employment and psychological wellbeing that contend that the additional role of

paid employee is beneficial to mental health generally derive from the role enhancement hypothesis of multiple role theory. *The role enhancement hypothesis postulates that the energy humans commit to fulfilling their identity roles is abundant and renewable – not only are some role functions performed without a loss of energy, but some roles actually create energy to be used within that role or others. Therefore, by committing oneself to a larger number of desired identity roles, our capacity to function in others is likely to be enhanced (Barnett & Baruch, 1985).*

The role enhancement hypothesis also maintains that each role relationship established by a person allows them to further develop the social identities that give meaning and guidance to behaviour, which is likely to act as a preventive factor against depression or anxiety in individuals (Thoits, 1983). Furthermore, engaging in multiple roles can also lead to role privileges, resources for status enhancement, overall status security, and personal gratification, all of which are likely to enhance mental health (Sieber, 1974). Therefore, the more role identities a person assumes, the more opportunities are available to reduce the strain experienced in existing roles – all of which contribute to better psychological functioning.

Benefits of maternal employment

Mothers involved in work outside the home are also theorised to benefit from a number of specific factors in addition to those generally associated with enacting multiple roles. Primarily, employment allows a temporary reprieve from the highly repetitive, tedious, and seldom acknowledged domestic work associated with the home (Martikainen, 1995). Paid employment also allows women to escape the social isolation associated with being an at-home mother, as well as develop social identities outside their caretaking role. As such, the workplace can provide a potential source of social interaction and support that may help combat stress experienced in the home (Martikainen, 1995).

Employment for many mothers may also help them to avoid negative consequences associated with unemployment, such as financial strain and a self-perceived drop in social status (Apter,

1993). Research has shown that unemployment in mothers has been shown to significantly heighten stress levels and lower self-esteem (Artacoz, Benach, Borrell & Cortes, 2004). For some women, although employment is not an economic necessity, the value they place on financial independence and the ability to financially contribute to the family represents a need to be involved in paid work (LeBlanc, 1999). Similarly, the needs to maintain and advance a career, to regain personal power, and to utilise particular occupational abilities are also associated with reasons for why mothers remain in employment (Frankel & McCarty, 1993). It is likely that a failure or inability to source employment as a mother with these needs will result in heightened experiences of psychological distress.

The role strain hypothesis

In direct opposition to the role enhancement hypothesis, the role strain hypothesis maintains that humans possess a finite amount of energy that is drained by the complexities of the roles they assume (Marks, 1977). People therefore experience difficulty in fulfilling the demands of each identity role when they engage in multiple roles. It is believed that this occurs most often for women when they combine paid employment with domestic and childrearing roles. This hypothesis is intuitively appealing, given that evidence suggests the perpetually rushed experience lower life satisfaction and poorer physical health than those without excessive demands on their time (Roxburgh, 2004).

One aspect of maternal employment theory that is closely related to the role strain hypothesis is the concept of work-family conflict. Work-family conflict refers to the incompatibilities experienced in enacting home and work responsibilities due to the limited availability of resources (Grzywacz & Bass, 2003). It is proposed that work-family conflict represents a chronic strain on psychological resources in particular, leading to poor psychological health outcomes (Lindsay, 2004). Recent research suggests that Australian mothers are subject to a number of work-family conflict factors (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2007).

Negative consequences of maternal employment

As with the role enhancement hypothesis, there are a number of theoretical outcomes pertaining to the role strain hypothesis that are related to employed mothers in particular. One such negative outcome of involvement in paid work on top of motherhood is the exposure to a number of work-related stressors that make the workplace inhospitable for women in general and for mothers in particular. Common experiences for women in the workplace, in comparison to men, include lower pay, lower job mobility, gender stereotype constraints, discrimination, and prejudice (Lindsay, 2004). For mothers especially, success in the workplace is not orientated towards a busy and demanding home life. In many professions, time spent at work is often viewed as 'a proxy indicator for performance', so that workers who cannot dedicate large amounts of overtime (such as mothers) have little chance of promotion or advancement (Apter, 1993, p. 35).

Another negative consequence of maternal employment is the perpetuation of the 'Superwoman Syndrome'. This is viewed as a product of extreme feminist values, in which women feel as though they should have everything (i.e., a happy family, an organised household, a successful marriage, and a lucrative career) by taking the load of the responsibility for achieving each of these goals (Apter, 1993). This is evidenced by numerous studies which have found that despite women's equal participation to their partner in the paid workforce, they still contributed significantly more time in completing domestic, childcare and marital duties than their partner within the home (Brown et al., 1994; Frankel & McCarty, 1993; Gjerdingen & Center, 2005; White, 1999).

Furthermore, some women in the workforce are subject to the experience of maternal separation anxiety. Maternal separation anxiety refers to a mother's sense of worry and guilt over being separated from her child, as well as the fear that others will be unable to care for her child as well as she could (Erdwins, Buffardi, Casper & O'Brien, 2001). The experience of maternal separation anxiety has received little exploration in regards to the strains faced by mothers in participating in the paid workforce; however, it

is likely to represent a very real negative consequence for many employed women, particularly those with their first child or with very young children.

Research on maternal employment and mental health

In comparing employed and at-home mothers on measures of psychological wellbeing, several studies have demonstrated that despite the stress involved in enacting the dual responsibilities of work and home, employed mothers have lower levels of psychological distress than at-home mothers (Artacoz et al., 2004; Brown et al., 1994; Lindsay, 2004). One study that is particularly representative of the manner in which psychological wellbeing is generally evaluated in employed and at-home mothers was conducted by Rout et al. (1997). This study evaluated anxiety, depression, self-esteem, and mother role satisfaction via self-report questionnaires in 101 women aged between 21 and 40. It was found that employed mothers reported significantly lower levels of depression than the at-home mothers, as well as significantly lower levels of somatic anxiety than the norm.

Other studies evaluating the role enhancement hypothesis have provided support for the hypothesis contingent on particular work and home-related variables. As such, it would appear that employed women experience better mental health than at-home mothers when they receive high levels of social support, experience high levels of job control, and have low work or family demands (Gjerdingen & Chaloner, 1994; Lennon & Rosenfield, 1992; Rosenfield, 1989; Roxburgh, 1997, 1999). Further support for the role enhancement hypothesis has also been provided by studies that have explored the outcomes of multiple roles on women's physical health and mortality. The Alameda County study, for example, concluded that women with the greatest number of identity roles, such as being a paid employee as well as a mother, led to the lowest levels of mortality (Kotler & Wingard, 1989).

Research has also provided support for the role strain hypothesis. Lennon (1994) found that at-home mothers had better outcomes on several psychological health indicators as a result of the

lower responsibility associated with at-home duties compared to employment duties. Furthermore, women with little work autonomy in their employment were shown to experience significantly high levels of distress when combined with the additional roles of raising children (Lennon & Rosenfield, 1992). These findings are complemented by research on physical health outcomes that, in contrast to the Alameda County study, suggested that combining marital, parental, and work roles is detrimental to overall health and mortality, by leading to tiredness, exhaustion, and disease (Martikainen, 1995).

It can therefore be seen that the research has provided several inconsistencies in evaluating the role strain and role enhancement hypotheses in light of maternal employment. One aspect of research on the effect of maternal employment on psychological wellbeing, however, has produced fairly consistent findings across the past decade. Studies that have evaluated work-family conflict have constantly shown that high levels of conflict have detrimental effects on mental health in women (Chandola, Martikainen, Lahelma et al., 2004; Grzywacz & Bass, 2003; Lindsay, 2004). These studies provide some support for the role strain hypothesis' claim that human energy is finite and that over-engagement in one role will lead to difficulties in fulfilling another. These findings, however, do not fully account for the complexity of results found in other studies of maternal employment and wellbeing.

Methodological limitations of maternal employment research

In reviewing the research designs of studies in this field to date, there are several possible explanations for the inconsistency of research findings. First, in analysing differences in psychological wellbeing across mothers, women have generally been compared solely on the basis of whether they are involved or not in paid employment. However, the comparison of mothers on a working versus not-working dichotomy does little to account for the variability of effect employment may have on mothers who may engage from one hour to fifty hours of paid work per week. Furthermore, many studies have failed to explore the amount of time consumed by enacting multiple roles or the

subjective time pressure experienced within those roles as reported by mothers. The few studies that have explored these variables have often measured time pressure in multiple roles through either quantifying time spent within domestic or childrearing roles or through qualitative reports of overall time pressure (Roxburgh, 2004). Few studies, however, have used a combination of these methods to gain a more thorough understanding of how time, energy and resources may mediate the effect of multiple roles on psychological health. This is particularly important in the evaluation of whether it is actually time spent in multiple roles or a person's subjective ability to deal with time pressure in multiple roles that potentially leads to role strain.

Furthermore, most studies to date have evaluated the association between multiple roles and psychological wellbeing in terms of the number of identity roles assumed, irrespective of what each role entails. In exploring the number of multiple roles a mother accumulates without reference to the time and energy she may commit to each role, it is possible that reasons for the disparity in results across studies have been overlooked. As mentioned, recent research indicates that despite women's increasing participation in the labour force, women still take an overwhelming responsibility for home and child duties (Gjerdingen & Chaloner, 2004; LeBlanc, 1999). In light of this, a possible explanation for the mixed findings of past research is that while the additional role of paid worker may enhance psychological health, over commitment to any one role may drain personal resources and mediate psychological benefits.

This failure to consider the effect of energy loss is indicative of one of the inherent problems of empirically evaluating the role strain and role enhancement hypotheses. Although energy loss and renewal are at the core of each hypothesis respectively, operationalising 'energy' for the purposes of research has been difficult to resolve and is often avoided in maternal employment research. Researchers have instead often relied on using measures of psychological wellbeing as 'evidence' for the supposed energy loss or renewal. However, this method is clearly an example of circular reasoning and places further limitations on the clear evaluation of these two hypotheses.

Similarly, another problem inherent in evaluating the role strain and role enhancement hypotheses is that the research designs generally utilised do not allow for confirmation of whether employment is likely to *cause* greater psychological wellbeing (Sears & Galambos, 1993). It is equally plausible that mothers with poorer psychological functioning are less likely to seek, obtain and remain in paid employment than mothers with better mental health. As such, conclusions that are mindful of this limitation need to be drawn when evaluating research on maternal employment and psychological wellbeing.

A further point to consider is that measures of psychological wellbeing used in previous studies have largely centered on the assessment of depression (Hock & DeMeis, 1990; Roxburgh, 2004), and ignored other psychological indicators, such as levels of stress, anxiety and general wellbeing. Past research has also failed to consider parent-specific forms of depression, such as postnatal depression. A failure to encompass a broad range of psychological functioning indicators when evaluating psychological wellbeing is likely to lead to a narrow understanding of the processes involved.

Previous research has also been further limited by the lack of replication studies in non-European or American samples. Given the potential impact of differences in employment policies, gender role ideology and welfare options in other countries compared to the fairly liberal and industrialised Europe and America, it is clear that an exploration of the unique experiences of employment and wellbeing across different cultures is necessary. One of the few studies to explore this found that the psychological outcomes of employment were quite different for mothers in Iran compared to Europe and America, largely as a result of Iranian husbands' attitudes to maternal employment (Ahmad-Nia, 2002). This difference in findings highlights the need to evaluate the effect cultural constructions of motherhood and employment can have on the psychological outcomes of such involvement.

One final limitation of research conducted on maternal employment and psychological wellbeing again relates to the cultural and historical construction of motherhood and employment. As outlined earlier, the study of

these variables in Western culture has been unduly influenced by changing stereotypes of parenting and work status, often forwarded by social movements and groups with vested interests. As such, the exploration of employment in mothers has been excessively preoccupied with labeling it as either positive or negative in light of the role enhancement and role strain hypotheses. The mixture of support provided for both hypotheses suggest that the relationship between maternal employment and mental health is far more complex than either hypothesis postulate. Therefore, it is necessary to reconstruct the manner in which maternal employment and mental health are evaluated.

Reconstruction of maternal employment research

In drawing together the research on maternal employment and psychological wellbeing, it would appear that neither the role enhancement nor the role strain hypothesis is able to duly account for the complexities associated with maternal employment and psychological functioning. In general, research trends suggest that while multiple roles are associated with several substantial psychological benefits for wellbeing, this effect can be mediated by the over absorption of one's time and resources within a particular role (Artacoz et al., 2004; Lindsay, 2004; Roxburgh, 2004). This finding provides partial support for both of the two competing hypotheses. As such, it is likely that the construction of maternal employment on a strict positive and negative binary does little to account for the complexity of its association with psychological wellbeing. A further theoretical analysis of constructing maternal employment within the frameworks of the role strain and role enhancement hypotheses is clearly necessary in order to clearly evaluate the association between employment and maternal mental health. From the research reviewed, it appears that a unified approach integrating the two hypotheses to explore the relationship between maternal employment and wellbeing would allow for a clearer approach to addressing the complexities associated with home and employment role identities.

Of key importance to the integration of these two hypotheses is the concept of energy expenditure. Further understanding of the circumstances in

which energy is renewed or conversely depleted in women would allow for better mental health management by mothers in two significant ways. First, a more complex theoretical model of energy renewal/loss in mothers would allow health professionals to develop cognitive and behavioural strategies for both in the home and workplace in order to negate the impact of energy loss on psychological wellbeing in mothers. Second, a greater understanding of how home and workplace factors impact energy and subsequently psychological wellbeing could be used to empower mothers in their decision-making across both domains. This in itself could prove to be a preventative factor against poor mental health in mothers.

Future research that addresses this theoretical issue, as well as the methodological limitations outlined earlier, will help contribute to a greater understanding of the benefits and negative consequences associated with maternal employment for particular groups of women. Trends have already begun to emerge suggesting single mothers, who are arguably more likely to expend more time and energy on domestic and childrearing roles than partnered women, generally experience poorer psychological outcomes in employment compared to other groups of women (Ali & Avison, 1997; Chandola et al., 2004). Such observations may suggest that this cohort of women is not subject to the psychological benefits observed in other groups of employed women due to a higher demand on their energy and time in enacting their multiple identity roles. However, because of the limitations placed on such conclusions by the theoretical frameworks and research designs used, establishing explanations for such group differences is difficult. As such, appropriate interventions are unable to be devised at this stage to improve the psychological wellbeing of mothers at risk.

Furthermore, it would appear that the more stringent measurement of key variables, such as energy expenditure, would assist in identifying whether particular groups of women are more likely to experience poor mental health as a result of their home or employment identities. If, for example, consistent findings demonstrated that particular women were at risk in the workplace due to energy loss as a result of

separation anxiety, it would be in the best interest of not only families but also employers to address this issue by reducing the barriers between work and home. Conversely, if certain elements in the workplace, such as social support, were shown to increase psychological wellbeing in working mothers via energy renewal, efforts could be made within the community to increase or simulate at-home mothers' access to these protective factors. However, due to an emphasis on reducing the impact of maternal employment to a rigid good versus bad binary, as well as a lack of consistency in measurement across studies, such findings have failed to be incorporated into a succinct and understandable theoretical basis.

The necessity of revising the manner in which research on maternal wellbeing and employment is conducted is thus highlighted by the current lack of consistency and usability of previous research findings. The importance of such research cannot be undervalued in light of the increasing number of working mothers in contemporary society. In particular, given the potential impact of poor psychological wellbeing on not only the mothers themselves but also their child and family, it is important for such research to yield findings that lend themselves to real world applications.

Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this paper indicates that there is a clear association between the role of paid employee and psychological wellbeing in mothers. Numerous studies have demonstrated several psychological disadvantages and benefits associated with maternal employment (Lennon, 1994; Rout et al., 1997). However, due to the historical and cultural conceptions of maternal identity roles in Western society, the frameworks developed by the role strain and role enhancement hypotheses for interpreting these results clearly lack the ability to evaluate the complexities of such a relationship. Furthermore, research designs used to explore this relationship have been subject to several widespread methodological limitations. As such, a more thorough understanding of the processes and mediators involved in the relationship between employment and mothers' psychological wellbeing has yet to be established. In accordance with this, the design and application

of real world interventions for mothers at risk of poor psychological health based on conclusions from this research have not been possible. It is clear that the manner in which maternal identity roles are conceptualised and explored in light of multiple role theory needs to be reconstructed to allow a more thorough investigation of the processes involved between maternal employment and mental health.

It is thus proposed that maternal employment research needs to reconstruct itself at a basic theoretical level in re-evaluating the role strain and role enhancement hypotheses. Past research trends indicate that integrating the two hypotheses may provide a more useful explanation. Based on this research, it is suggested that while maternal involvement in paid employment may be beneficial for psychological wellbeing, these benefits may be eroded by an over absorption of a mother's time and/or energy in any one identity role she assumes. Explorations of this hypothesis would also benefit from a more universal approach to measurement of key variables, particularly energy used in enacting roles, with the intention of leading to the possible quantification of specific home and employment variables that may impact the relationship between employment and wellbeing.

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