

The impact of mothers' employment on family relationships

Mothers' increasing labour-market participation is seen as having far-reaching effects on family relationships. Some see these effects as detrimental, whereas others are more optimistic. This small-scale study by a team of researchers at South Bank University explored how mothers and their partners understood the impact of the woman's employment on their relationships as a couple and as parents. The study found that:

-  Concerns that mothers' increasing labour-market participation means that they are becoming more rooted in their work life and more 'work-centred' at the expense of their family responsibilities were not borne out.
-  What happened in the mothers' workplace and how their work interacted with their home life affected family relationships. These were just as important as the amount of time they spent working in maintaining sound family relationships. Yet, most family-friendly policies focus on the time spent at work.
-  Mothers and fathers thought that the mother's work had a positive impact on their family relationships. The mother's employment provided skills and resources that meant they could meet their children's emotional, developmental and material needs better. Their relationship with their partner was enhanced because they shared the financial burden of providing for their family and had more common interests.
-  Mothers had some problems switching off 'bad' work feelings. Some who had to bring home work resented the time they spent on this. Some fathers felt their partner lacked time for being a couple and paying attention to their children. Some also regarded the transference of the mother's workplace ethos and skills – and workplace-generated stress – into the home as intrusions into family life.
-  Family-friendly policies were ineffective in helping the mothers to deal with the stresses of paid work, as they did not affect the gendered division of labour in the mothers' homes. Nor did these policies mitigate the effects of the impact of work stresses on family life. Such policies focused on the amount of time spent at work rather than on how that time was being used and the quality of that time.

Background

The proportion of working mothers with dependent children is increasing, especially among those with children under the age of five. Although the majority of mothers work part-time, increasing numbers are working full-time. Dramatic increases in mothers' employment are seen as having important effects on family life. Some argue that it makes mothers think of themselves as self-sufficient individuals rather than as someone who prioritises their home life and family relationships. Others see it as leading to more equitable relationships between both partners in a couple, and to parents devoting quality time to their children.

The findings from this small-scale study do not wholly support either the negative or the positive perspective. This suggests that these theories tend to over-simplify working mothers' lives.

The researchers interviewed 37 mothers and 30 fathers in couples who had at least one pre-school child. The mothers were working in a hospital or in an accountancy firm. All the mothers in the study had strong, traditional views about what being a 'good mother' and a 'good partner' was about. Employment did not necessarily lead to more egalitarian relationships with their partners.

In fact, most of the mothers and fathers interviewed subscribed to highly traditional and stereotypical views about the gendered division of labour within the home. The mothers had primary responsibility for the home and the conduct of family life. Mothers who worked full-time were just as concerned as those working part-time to 'be there' for their children and to meet the needs of their children and their family.

Dynamics of home and work time

Family-friendly policies and flexible working practices focus mainly on the management of mothers' work time and the amount of time they spend at work. However, the findings from this study suggest that employers may also need to address other key issues which have an impact on family life, such as:

- workplace ethos and working practices; and
- the extent of autonomy and control that mothers experience in the workplace.

Workplace ethos and working practices

The mothers' understanding about the meaning of work was shaped by their workplace ethos. Those working in the hospital had a strong investment in, and commitment to, caring for the local community. They talked about their work as "making a difference"

and "playing a part", reflecting the hospital's mission of "serving the community".

By contrast, the mothers working in the accountancy firm had a far more individualistic relationship to work. This was framed around the personal benefits they received from their employment (especially monetary rewards such as cash incentives and bonuses) and individual endeavour, rather than social value. Again, this reflected the firm's mission: "dedicated to client satisfaction".

Many mothers saw their work identity, work skills and their feelings about work as affecting their family relationships and home life. In particular, they felt that transferring their work ethos and skills had a positive impact on family life.

"In nursing you can't just leave the work behind you when your shift is over ... If my husband is not feeling very well he's expecting me to become the nurse, and other family members do the same thing." (Mother working in the hospital)

"I've learnt negotiation skills and I have taught my children negotiation skills and they use it effectively." (Mother working in the accountancy firm)

Autonomy and control

Autonomy relates to the amount of self-determination and flexibility an employee has in deciding how to spend their time, on what, with whom, and where. Control is about the extent to which an employee manages resources and staff and has a leadership or a strategic role within the organisation.

The mothers saw quality of time as an especially important resource in their workplace, particularly in regard to monitoring and demands on time. In the hospital, mothers in higher status jobs saw themselves as having low 'time sovereignty' because of an increased emphasis on managerialism. By contrast, in a devolved organisational structure, mothers in lower status jobs in the accountancy firm tended to see themselves as having high levels of time sovereignty.

"What I like least about my job is that increasing amounts of my time is spent on paperwork, which leaves less time for patient care ... you have no control because things are out of your hands." (Mother working in higher status job in the hospital)

"I have a lot of responsibility ... I have to think fast and make decisions quickly because there's no one there to check with ... The job allows me to use my own initiative and I have lots of freedom." (Mother working in lower status job in the accountancy firm)

The mothers' views of the impact of their employment on family relationships

The mothers in the study regarded themselves as being responsible for meeting their family's needs. They largely saw their employment as supporting this responsibility, but sometimes felt that it could make family relationships difficult.

Most mothers thought that their employment had important beneficial effects on their relationships with their children and with their partner. They saw their employment as helping them to meet their children's emotional, developmental, social and material needs, and felt that their children largely appreciated this.

Many mothers also stressed the importance of being a good role model for their children.

"[My daughter] said 'Mummy, I want to be like you when I grow up, I want to go to work'. I was really touched and I could see that my going to work is a positive influence on her."

In addition, they spoke about how they valued the time they spent with their children.

"I have less time with them, but I value that time with them. When you're at home with them all the time, you take your time with them for granted. I have a much better relationship with them by going to work."

The mothers felt that sometimes their employment could have a negative impact, because they had too much to do and were tired when they got home. They could also feel that their children sometimes resented them working if it cut into times when the children wanted to be with their mother. However, such drawbacks were not the most prominent feature of the mothers' accounts.

The mothers were concerned with being a 'good' partner as well as a 'good' mother. In terms of providing their partner with a comfortable home environment, some of the mothers emphasised how they tried to ensure that their employment had as little impact as possible. Others regarded their paid work as a feature of a sharing relationship, for instance, by providing financially for their family, so that their partner was not the sole economic provider. Some mothers stressed that their work enhanced their relationship with their partner by creating common interests.

"We're supportive of each other's work ... that creates a bond between us."

Where mothers took work home with them, this did not always cause problems, but it could sometimes cause resentment. The mothers could also find it hard to 'switch off' from work, and brought their feelings about work home with them. This could be in a positive way, but they sometimes brought home work-generated stresses and strains which caused difficulties in their family relationships.

"If I've had a good day it puts you in a positive frame of mind, I'm more bubbly and will spend more time playing with the kids ... But when I've had a bad day, I have less energy, I'm drained and tired, all I want to do is sleep and so I'll want to spend less time with them."

Other mothers viewed work as having a limited influence on their home and family relationships.

"When I leave work that's it, I don't think about it until I come in again the next day."

The fathers' views

Most fathers felt that the mother's work was beneficial and facilitated family life. They talked about it enhancing the quality of their relationship together, and recognised the way in which work enabled their partner to develop and express different aspects of her identity. They also appreciated having help in supplementing the financial costs of raising a family.

"I couldn't imagine myself with a partner who chose to stay at home and who didn't have a life outside our family. For starters, what would we talk about? ... [It's] good for the family because we can sit down together and plan financially for the future because we have two incomes to work with."

The fathers also talked about how the mother's work benefited their children. They felt that it enhanced the quality of mother-child relationships, helped their children to develop useful skills, and provided them with a positive role model.

"[Our son] can learn from her going to work because she may do something at work that she can use with him at home. Just talking to [him] about her day at work really helps his language and communication and skills."

Many fathers particularly valued the mother applying her work ethos and skills to home life, for the couple and for their children. They felt proud and supportive of their partner's job.

A few of the fathers either had mixed opinions, or felt that their partner's work had a negative impact because she did not have enough time to devote to the family. They could feel that there were fewer opportunities for the parents to have time alone together, and could be uneasy about the way in which the demands of the mother's work, and work-related stress, might result in their children's needs not being fully met.

"I don't personally see the need for two parents to be working long hours. You know, you keep on hearing so much in the news about children going awry because there's no-one there to properly supervise them."

Some fathers felt that the mother's bringing home aspects of her work ethos and skills and working from home were intrusions into their family life. They resented the way in which the mother's experiences at work could cause tension in the household.

"If it's a bad day, she's miserable and we have to tip-toe around her whilst she's slumped out on the settee in front of the TV. That can be quite annoying because we all have to suffer for her bad day at work."

Conclusion

The above findings from the study highlight how stresses in family relationships could arise as much from the *quality of time* spent at work by the mothers as from the *amount of time* they spent at work. Family-friendly workplace policies and practices may have helped the mothers to modify their time schedules to balance the demands of work and family, but tended to individualise their difficulties. There were also structural inequalities in the mothers' access to these practices – most of those who were in lower status, lower paid jobs were not eligible to use them.

The researchers conclude that family-friendly workplace policies and practices may need to focus more clearly on such aspects as:

- managing the intensity of work;
- how an organisation manages the level of workload;
- the extent to which employees can feel autonomy and control;
- the extent to which mothers feel able to achieve their goals in the context of the time available.

About the project

Researchers at South Bank University carried out a qualitative case study of mothers working in a hospital and in an accountancy firm, both in the London area. Interviews were carried out in 2001 with 37 mothers and 30 fathers in couples who had at least one pre-school child.

The mothers and fathers were interviewed separately to gain 'her' and 'his' perspectives on the impact of the mother's employment on family relationships. The sample contained a spread of mothers working full-time or part-time in both the workplaces, and across higher, intermediate and lower status jobs in the two organisations. The majority of the fathers were employed full-time.

How to get further information

The full report, **Caring and counting: The impact of mothers' employment on family relationships** by Tracey Reynolds, Claire Callender and Rosalind Edwards, is published for the Foundation by The Policy Press as part of the Family and Work series (ISBN 1 86134 534 8, price £14.95).