

WOMEN, WORK, AND FAMILY: WAYS TO WELL-BEING

by

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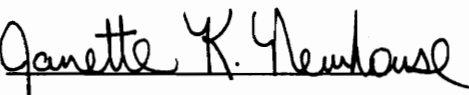
Family and Child Development


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(ABSTRACT)

The purpose of this research is to identify combinations of variables that most affect well-being among employed women. A hypothesized model of the stress and coping process examines the influence of situational demands on mediators, and mediators on well-being. Job and family strain, as well as coping resources such as spousal support, social support, and coping strategies were proposed to mediate between situational demands, represented by husband's chore time, number of children, job flexibility, job hours, career stage, and job status and the outcome variable, well-being. Data from a national sample of 277 married, employed women representing dual-employed families were subjected to path analytic analyses using LISREL 7. Findings generally supported the proposed model. Results suggest that both role strain and coping resources mediated the stressor effects of situational demands on well-being.

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who have been my social support

and the other family members and friends

my parents, who taught me how to live and learn

my daughter, Cathy

my husband, Bob

DEDICATED TO

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Last, but not least, my thanks go to all those ICMA and VLGMA partners who took the time to respond to the questionnaire that provided the data for this dissertation. I feel a real kinship to them, and I hope they will reap some benefit from this research.

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INTRODUCTION

Lazarus and colleagues (Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Monat & Lazarus, 1985) advance a theoretical model suggesting that mental and physical health effects such as well-being are a function of situational demands that include number of children, job flexibility, and work hours, mediated by coping efforts and social support. In contrast, Pearlin and colleagues (Pearlin, 1989; Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan, & Mullan, 1981; Pearlin & Schooler, 1978;) posit that role strain, as the stressor, is antecedent to coping responses that act to mediate its effect on emotional stress. A third conceptualization suggests a combination of the two previous models. Situational demands are envisioned as antecedents to role strain. Coping resources and affective evaluations of marital, parental, and occupational stress mediate the relationship between role strain and physical distress (Guelzow & Bird, 1989; Guelzow, Bird, & Koball, in press).

Building on the reasoning and empirical findings of these previous studies, the model under investigation is presented for examination (Figure 1). This model explores relationships among factors related to well-being in employed women. Significant findings from previous studies determined the inclusion and placement of the fourteen variables in the proposed model.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Situational demands--husband's chore time, number of children, job flexibility, work hours, career stage, and job status--are identified as antecedents of role strain (Gilbert, 1985; Guelzow et al., in press; Piotrkowski, Rapoport, & Rapoport, 1987). The mediators in this model act as intercessors between situational demands and well-being. Role strain, as a mediator, represents women's appraisal of accumulated and persistent problems, challenges, or threats that occur in family and job settings. As demands accumulate and persist, level of role strain increases (Pearlin, 1989).

Coping resources, on the other hand, may be activated to prevent, avoid, manage, or control the situational demands that bypass role strain. More often, however, they are thought of as attempts to reduce the detrimental effects of role conflict, overload, and time pressure inherent in job and family strain (Monat & Lazarus, 1985; Pearlin, 1989). In other words, the experience of role strain triggers protective reactions described as coping resources. Problem-focused and emotion-focused coping, as well as social support and spousal support, mediate between demands and outcomes (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Even though they have different purposes, both role strain and coping resources are considered mediators because of their intercessory function between situational demands and well-being. The ultimate purpose of this model of stress and coping is to examine combinations of variables that most affect well-being.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The presumed paths in the proposed research model depicted in Figure 1 are based on expectations for study results, given past findings. The focus of

the review, then, is primarily on direct effects, though some indirect effects are mentioned. Justification for variables will be shown through previously established relations between situational demands and mediators, and between mediators and well-being.

Situational Demands

This study includes six objectively measurable circumstances that make daily demands on the lives of employed women (Figure 1). Previous research has established these situational demands as possible stressors for employed women, and each has shown relationships to mediator variables.

Husbands' time commitment to household tasks is related to women's levels of role strain and their perceptions of husband's supportiveness (Gilbert, 1987; Gutek, Repetti, & Silver, 1988; Rachlin, 1987). The number of children in the family also affects perceptions of role strain, as well as evaluations of husband's support (Bird & Ford, 1985; Voydanoff & Kelly, 1984). Moreover, greater job flexibility is associated with lower job and family strain (Bohen & Viveros-Long, 1981). Job hours, too, have an effect on strain. Women who spend long hours on the job and on job-related tasks at home report higher strain (Guelzow et al., in press; Staines & Pleck, 1983).

Career stage refers to a sequence of levels of work which become progressively more prestigious (Voydanoff, 1987). As women progress from one career stage to the next, they report less role strain and more spousal support (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987; Schnittger & Bird, 1990). Higher job status, or location in the occupational hierarchy, also leads to lower strain and has a positive effect on husband's support (Golding, Resnick, & Crosby, 1983; Piotrkowski & Repetti, 1984).

Mediators

There are two columns of mediating variables in the proposed model. Each potentially affects feelings of well-being. Pressures from situational demands intensify job and family strain. If no attempts are made cognitively or instrumentally through coping resources to reduce the effects of role strain, women may then be vulnerable to lower well-being. Often, however, women depend on one or more coping resources such as problem- and emotion-focused coping, or perceived spousal or social support to minimize the effects of stressors, protect themselves from role strain, and maintain well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Pearlin, 1989).

Role strain. Past research has focused on role strain as a single factor, combining the stressor effects of various roles. In an effort to address their unique contribution to explanations of well-being, this study differentiates between job strain and family strain. Each is expected to have distinct functions in the stress and coping process (Aneshensel, 1986; Eckenrode & Gore, 1990).

Job strain refers to stress-related problems, challenges, or threats experienced in the work environment and includes role overload, role ambiguity, role conflict, autonomy, job satisfaction, and time pressure (Kahn, 1981). Family strain, most often described as feelings of role conflict, overload, and time pressures, represents experiential circumstances within marital and parental roles that affect well-being (Voydanoff, 1987). Together, job and family strain have been empirically linked to husband's supportiveness, social support, as well as use of problem- and emotion-focused coping (Emmons,

Biernat, Tiedje, Lang, & Wortman, 1990; Gutek et al., 1988; Pearlin, 1983; Pearlin & McCall, 1990).

Coping resources. Coping resources, represented by the second column of mediators, serve to prevent, avoid, manage, or control the role strain that results in lower perceived well-being (Monat & Lazarus, 1985; Pearlin, 1989). For example, a husband's emotional support for the wife's employment and his attempts to share more of the household chores can be especially important to women's psychological well-being as these efforts ease the effects of women's job and family strain (Gilbert, 1988; Rachlin, 1987; Vanfossen, 1986). Broader social support also mediates the effects of situational demands and role strain on well-being (Kessler, Price, & Wortman, 1985). In both job and family environments, perceived social support is related to higher well-being among employed women (Coyne & DeLongis, 1986; DeLongis, Folkman, & Lazarus, 1988; Turner, 1983).

Emotion-focused coping helps to regulate emotions aroused by a stressor, whereas problem-focused coping acts to alter the source of stress. Women use emotion-focused coping strategies such as wishful thinking, distancing, emphasizing the positive, and self-isolation more often when they view stressful situations as unchangeable or beyond their control (Folkman & Lazarus, 1984; Schnittger & Bird, 1990). Problem-focused coping such as seeking information and advice, thinking about ways to handle a problem, or planning and following a course of action, are used more frequently when a situation is appraised as changeable (Folkman et al., 1986). Both types of coping are associated with positive outcomes (Folkman et al., 1986); however,

problem-focused coping has demonstrated a stronger link to well-being than has emotion-focused coping (Billings & Moos, 1981).

Well-Being

Well-being in the context of this study denotes lower anxiety and depression and higher general positive affect, indicating a state of positive mental health (Veit & Ware, 1983). Though measures of well-being have addressed various facets of mental and physical health, this study concentrates only on psychological factors as they are influenced by antecedents in the model. Women achieve well-being through a complex process of stress and coping; this research attempts to determine the pathways through which situational demands act on mediators, which, in turn, lead to well-being.

METHODS

Sample and Procedure

This study reports on data collected from a national sample of 277 employed women in intact marriages in 1989. The women worked an average of 43 hours per week and had an average of two children. Approximately two thirds of those sampled had earned a college degree. The women were primarily white (99%), reported a median income of approximately \$18,000, and earned an average of 21%-30% of the family income. Their average age was 43.

Study participants received a survey booklet, cover letter, and a stamped, addressed return envelope. One week after the initial mailing, a postcard encouraged nonrespondents to participate and thanked those who had returned booklets. A follow-up letter was mailed two weeks after the postcard mailing. Finally, five weeks after the first letter, a follow-up letter with

another booklet was sent to anyone who had not returned the survey.

Responses were received from 50% of those initially contacted.

Measurement

Outcome variable: Well-being. **Well-being** was assessed by 29 items from the Mental Health Inventory (MHI), a measure of psychological well-being developed for use in general population surveys (Rand Corporation & Ware, 1979). Responses were reported on a scale ranging from 1 (Never) to 7 (Very Often) for items such as "(feeling) anxious or worried" or "relaxed and free of tension." Some items were reverse coded so that high scores always indicated high well-being. The coefficient alpha for the scale in this study was .95.

Mediators: Coping resources. **Husband's family support** was measured by an item asking whether the husband did his fair share of the household chores. Responses reflected low to high assessments. The question, "How much emotional support does your partner provide for your job?" measured **husband's job support** from 1 (Very Little) to 7 (Very Much). **Social support** was assessed by the Social Provisions Scale (Russell & Cutrona, 1984). This scale includes 20 statements like "There are people around me who share my attitudes and beliefs" and "There is someone I could talk to about important decisions in my life". The seven-point response scale ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Cronbach's alpha for this study was .94.

Problem-focused and emotion-focused coping were assessed by the Ways of Coping Checklist (WOC, Folkman et al., 1986), a revised version of the checklist developed by Lazarus and Folkman (1984). Participants reported

how often (from 1 = Never to 7 = Very Often) they used each coping strategy when experiencing a stressful work situation and a stressful home situation. Principal factors analysis with iteration was applied to the data. This procedure extracts the number of factors with eigenvalues greater than or equal to 1.0. The axis was rotated orthogonally using the varimax technique. Because the obtained problem- and emotion-focused factor scores for home and work situations were similar and highly correlated, factor scores were collapsed to form a problem-focused coping measure and an emotion-focused coping measure (similar to Folkman & Lazarus' approach in their 1985 research). The coefficient alphas for these created measures were .86 for problem-focused coping and .84 for emotion-focused coping.

Mediators: Strain. Previous studies were examined for definitions and measures of **job strain**. The concepts and dimensions of job strain appeared in a variety of studies, but no single instrument included all the identified dimensions. To distinguish the most frequently used dimensions, a tally was taken from available scales. The job strain scale used in this study is a combination of the identified dimensions, with consideration given to reliability and face validity. The scale included role overload (Bird, 1988), role ambiguity and role conflict (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970), autonomy (Beehr, 1976), job satisfaction (Cammann, Fichman, Jenkins, & Klesh, 1979), and time pressure (Insel & Moos, 1974). Cronbach's alpha for job strain was .88. The Dual-Career Role Strain Scale (Bird, 1988) was used to assess **family strain**. The scale combined marital and parental roles, and used role overload, role conflict, and time pressure as dimensions of measurement. The alpha for this study was .79.

Situational demands. The following item, using a response scale of 1 (Very Easy) to 7 (Very Difficult), measured **job flexibility**: "How difficult is it for you to take time off during your work day to take care of personal or family matters?" This response scale was reverse coded for the analysis. The **job status** variable categorized the respondents into seven occupational levels. Categorization was accomplished by a panel of three experts on work and family, using Hollingshead's (1957) index of occupations based on socio-economic criteria. The number of hours husbands spent doing home chores--things like cooking, cleaning, repairs, shopping, yard work, or family finances on weekdays and weekends was totaled, rounded, divided by 7 (days/week), and labeled **husband's chore time**. **Career stage** was determined by responses to a series of statements describing different stages: 1 (Preparation), 2 (Establishment), 3 (Early Career), 4 (Middle Career), 5 (Late Career). Early Career, for example, was described as "Past the establishment stage and doing meaningful work, but still learning and gaining professional experience."

Data Analysis

The initial model (shown in Figure 1) was estimated using LISREL 7 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1989), based on a maximum likelihood estimation. This program reports several goodness-of-fit measures, including a chi-square (χ^2) with associated degrees of freedom and probability, the goodness-of-fit index (**GFI**), adjusted goodness of fit index (**AGFI**), and root square mean residual (**RMR**). The model specified was a recursive model of well-being for employed women. The variables were all measured, or manifest, variables, so that the model was a structural-equations only model. Figure 2 shows the final model.

RESULTS

Table 1 includes the correlation matrix, means, and standard deviations for the variables in the model. The test of the theoretical model resulted in a χ^2 of 53.17 with 50 degrees of freedom ($p = .35$). The ratio of the chi-square to the degrees of freedom was .94, the GFI was .97 (AGFI = .95), and the RMR was .04, suggesting that the correlation matrix predicted by the model differed, on average, by only .04 from the actual matrix. Each of these indicators revealed that the final model of well-being (Figure 2) provided a good fit to the data.

Insert Figure 2 and Tables 1 and 2 about here

The final model shows the paths to well-being which proved to be significant. The causal relations, if any, among variables within columns is unknown or unspecified. Correlations were allowed, however, between variables that were expected to correlate, or that had large modification indices (Psi matrix). Direct, indirect, and total effects of the variables on well-being are shown in Table 2. A probability value of .05 was used as the criteria for path significance. While all variables do not directly affect well-being, many have significant indirect effects (see Table 2). For the sake of simplicity, all paths are referred to as Betas (B); in LISREL 7 (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1989), however, paths from exogenous to endogenous variables are within the Gamma matrix.

Paths from Mediators: Coping Resources

The strongest direct influence on well-being came from social support (β , or path = .31). The other significant effect from the coping resources to well-being was the perception by the women that their husbands were supportive of their jobs (β = .19).

Neither problem- nor emotion-focused coping showed a significant effect on well-being. Likewise, the perception that the husband was doing his fair share of housework (husband's family support) did not have a significant effect.

Paths from Mediators: Strain

As expected, both job and family strain had direct negative effects on well-being: the more strain, the lower the well-being (β = -.19, -.26, respectively). In addition, women experiencing higher levels of family strain perceived less job support and family support from their husbands (β = -.51 and -.37, respectively). They also reported less available social support (β = -.16), and more often engaged in emotion-focused coping (β = .27).

Higher job strain was associated with women's perception that the husband was doing his fair share of the household work (β = .13). Women reporting higher strain on the job also indicated less perceived social support (β = -.30). Emotion-focused coping was used more frequently (β = .18) and problem-focused coping was used less frequently (β = -.17) by women who experienced higher job strain. Because strain affected other variables that in turn affected well-being, strain also had indirect effects (Table 2). Indeed, the total effects (direct + indirect) of the two strain variables are among the highest in the model (total effects of family strain on well-being = -.40; job strain = -.29).

Family strain did not have a significant effect on problem-focused coping, and job strain did not significantly affect husband's job support.

Paths from Situational Demands

By far the most influential exogenous variable was job flexibility. Less job flexibility contributed to greater levels of both job and family strain ($\beta = -.34$ and $-.28$, respectively). While all of the exogenous variables showed significant paths to various mediators, none had direct effects on well-being. The more hours that husbands were involved with chores at home, the more support women felt for both job and family roles ($\beta = .13$ and $.16$, respectively). Fewer children produced less family strain ($\beta = .11$). The more hours women were employed, the less they used emotion-focused coping ($\beta = -.17$). Women more advanced in career stage perceived less job strain ($\beta = -.12$). The greater their job status, the less women relied on emotion-focused coping ($\beta = -.12$), and the more spousal job support they perceived ($\beta = .15$).

Several paths that were expected to be significant proved not to be. Paths from job status to job strain, career stage to husband's job support, work hours to family and job strain, and job flexibility and number of children to husband's family support were not significant.

Variables Contributing Most to Well-Being

From the situational demands, job flexibility exhibited strong total effects on well-being. Greater job flexibility resulted in lower strain at home and at work, which, in turn, produced higher levels of well-being. Lower levels of job and family strain and higher perceived social support led to a greater sense of well-being. Lower family strain was associated with higher

perceptions of husband's job support, which, in turn, positively affected well-being. Examination of mediators and their total effects on well-being shows notable paths from family and job strain, as well as social support and husband's job support.

DISCUSSION

To the research question, Can psychological well-being among employed women be explained by factors suggested by the proposed model of stress and coping?, the answer is affirmative. The findings of this study support the proposed explanatory model of well-being. Results indicate that significant paths from situational demands to the mediators--role strain and coping resources--continue on to well-being. As proposed, none of the situational demands shows a direct effect on well-being; they either lead to job or family strain or promote the use of coping resources. In all, the data evidence twelve significant paths that progress across the model from situational demands to well-being. This discussion will focus on these paths, beginning with direct effects on well-being.

Effects on Well-Being

Social support has the strongest influence on well-being. Women who perceive that there are others they can talk to and depend on report being happy, relaxed, hopeful, and relatively free of tension, anxiety, and depression. This finding validates other research indicating that when women turn to friends for companionship and aid, they maintain higher levels of well-being (Gottlieb, 1981; Russell & Cutrona, 1984). Knowing that people appreciate and support them may help women feel better about themselves and life in general.

Spousal support is also identified as an important influencer of well-

being. Husband's emotional support for wife's employment leads to greater well-being. Women whose husbands are supportive of their jobs most likely feel validated and valued on both personal and professional levels, leading them to a higher sense of well-being (Gilbert, 1988). In addition, women who report higher job and family strain experience lower well-being (Pearlin, 1983).

Effects on Mediators

Situational demands are indirectly linked to well-being through mediators. These indirect effects are important to this explanatory model, because they illustrate primary relationships that are key to the stress and coping process. Role strain represents a powerful mediator between situational demands and well-being, especially for job flexibility. Women with higher job flexibility report lower job and family strain, and higher well-being. A woman who has some say in the scheduling of work hours or who can more easily arrange for time off when faced with unexpected family events probably derives some sense of personal control (Folkman, 1984). Feelings of control coupled with the benefits of successful scheduling relieve role conflict, overload, and time pressure (Coleman, Antonucci, & Adelman, 1987).

Role strain also mediated the effects of family size and career stage on well-being. As the number of children increased, so did family strain. More children represent additional parental responsibilities, more opportunities for scheduling conflicts, as well as increased marital negotiations related to meshing spouses' multiple roles (Bird & Ford, 1985; Voydanoff & Kelly, 1984). The finding that number of children did not significantly affect job strain supports other research, which has concluded that women with families may

still experience job satisfaction and other benefits of employment (Piotrkowski et al., 1987).

Additionally, as women progressed to more advanced career stages, job strain diminished. One possible explanation is that higher positions on the career ladder offer greater autonomy and financial security. Moreover, by later career stages, women may evidence more skill at negotiation and delegation, so that more of their needs are met (Betz & Fitzgerald, 1987). At later life stages, circumstances and issues change; children are usually older and women have gained experience in coping with the unique problems of dual employment (Schnittger & Bird, 1990).

Job support, another mediator, shows an important relationship between husband's chore time and well-being. Husbands who share more of the family work (instrumental support) were perceived as giving greater emotional support for the wife's employment, leading to higher well-being among the women sampled.

Role strain variables are of key importance; they mediate 10 of the 12 paths to well-being. Family and job strain exert strong direct effects on well-being, but they are negative effects. Thus, women experiencing higher levels of role conflict, overload, and time pressure on their job and in their marital and parental roles report lower well-being.

Besides mediating between situational demands and well-being, role strain also plays a major part as the link between situational demands and coping resources. Women who experience higher levels of job and family strain perceive lower social support. Furthermore, women with higher family strain

report less job support from their husbands. These women indicate feeling greater anxiety and depression, and lower general positive affect.

These findings are important to the conceptualization of coping resources. Previously, it was thought that women coped with elevated strain by seeking out sources of social support (Gottlieb, 1981). However, these results show that the only ways to social support in this model are through job and family strain; therefore, only women with lower strain seem to benefit from the social support and spousal support associated with higher well-being.

On the average, women in this study worked 43 hours per week, had a husband and two children, and reported taking responsibility for the majority of household tasks and child care. It seems probable that women who feel greater pressure from demands at home and on the job find it difficult to initiate and maintain sources of social support. Recent studies point out that the costs to women of maintaining social support networks include depletions of time, physical and psychic energy, as well as the burdens resident in taking on the problems and attendant emotional pain of others. Women are called upon more often by other women and by men to provide support. They have a broader definition of family and friends than do men; thus, they are more vulnerable to any difficulties that a broader social network represents (Belle, 1987; Hobfoll, 1986). Indeed, if women are heavily involved in meeting the demands of family and work, they may consider the prospect of reaching out to others to be too risky, since women not only provide empathy and support daily through their jobs, but also provide empathic support to multiple others (Aneshensel & Pearlin, 1987; Belle, 1987).

Job support from husbands may not be forthcoming if women seek to conceal their needs in order to protect spouses from emotional overload, knowing that husbands have problems of their own, or to protect themselves, in cases where husbands have voiced insecurity or uneasiness about wives' employment (Barnett & Baruch, 1987). Women may feel that husbands do not want to hear about their problems. Such feelings arise when husbands express resentment about the time wives spend working at their jobs, or doing household chores when husbands are home at night, or pressuring husbands for more participation in chores or child care (Emmons et al., 1990; Pearlin & McCall, 1990).

Relationships between role strain and coping strategies are worthy of note, even though they do not show an effect on well-being. Women who feel higher strain report greater reliance on emotion-focused coping, including strategies such as escape-avoidance, self-control, self-criticizing, and selective ignoring. Employed mothers are typically under strain from time pressure, role overload, restricted opportunities, lower job status and income, economic dependency, and the ever-present feeling that they are responsible for the happiness and welfare of others (Barnett & Baruch, 1987). When women are unable to get relief from these pressures, they may feel powerless to influence employers, husbands, and others of importance in their lives. Understandably, they tend to view these stressful situations as unchangeable or out of their control, which sets the stage for using fewer problem-focused and more emotion-focused coping strategies (Barnett & Baruch, 1987).

