Mothers' subjective employment experiences and the behaviour of their nursery school children

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Most research on the effects of maternal employment on children has followed the 'maternal deprivation' hypothesis, which focuses on differences in the behaviour of children of employed and non-employed mothers. Yet this framework may have impeded an examination of a more relevant question, namely the impact of mothers' employment-related experiences. Accordingly, this study assesses the influence of mothers' job satisfaction, job involvement and role conflict on the behaviour of their nursery school sons and daughters ($n = 46$ and 45 respectively). The effects of maternal employment on their nursery school children were found to be mediated by (a) the nature and quality of the employment experience (i.e. positive or negative), (b) the type of child behaviour assessed, and (c) the sex of the child. Mothers' job satisfaction was positively associated with daughters' self-control and negatively with conduct problems, their role conflict was negatively related to sons' and daughters' self-control, and positively associated with sons' conduct problems and daughters' immaturity. These results support the hypothesis that the quality of the maternal employment experience influences nursery school children's behaviour.

The possible effects of maternal employment on children has long been an issue of some concern (Hoffman, 1963, 1974, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1982). Traditionally, maternal employment has been thought to have a detrimental impact on the child (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1982). Smith (1981) reports a poll indicating that only 44 per cent of women believe that maternal employment would have no harmful effect on children. Nearly all child-care books of the 1950s and 1960s disapproved of the employed mother and alternative child-care arrangements during the child's early years (Etaugh, 1976). Objections to employed mothers of young children stem from the 'maternal deprivation' hypothesis, according to which it is assumed that physically absent mothers exert a detrimental effect on children, particularly in their formative years. Concern about the employed mother has been exacerbated by the recent increase in the number of employed mothers (cf. Fallows, 1983).† The US Census Bureau estimates that by 1980, 45 per cent of American mothers of nursery school children were employed away from the home, leaving some 7.5 million infants and toddlers. In Britain, it is estimated that some

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† The term 'employment' is differentiated throughout from 'work', in that the former refers to an activity conducted for financial gain, typically (but not invariably) away from the home setting.

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50 per cent of women with dependent children are in full- or part-time employment (cf. Parry & Warr, 1980).

Research on the effects of maternal employment has generally contrasted the behaviour of the children of employed and non-employed mothers (cf. Smith, 1981). This approach has been compared to an assessment of the effects of the mothers' 'address' (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1982), or simply the effects of 'being' at work (Fineman, 1983). Research utilizing this paradigm has generally resulted in inconclusive findings (Hoffman, 1974, 1983), frequently confounding the effects of age, education and race (Hoffman, 1977). Accordingly, it is suggested here that the maternal deprivation framework, which focuses on the presence or absence of the mother due to employment, may be inadequate for studying the effects of maternal employment on children. Such a simple approach cannot account for the full range of experiences and stressors that confront the employed (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) or non-employed (Farel, 1980) mother, which may mediate the effects of maternal employment/non-employment on children (Jahoda, 1982).

An alternative theoretical and methodological framework would not emphasize the employed/non-employed dichotomy but rather the way in which the mother concerned perceives her employment experiences.* Burke & Bradshaw (1981) point to the individual's employment experiences in considering the impact of job-related events on non-employment experiences, while Cochran & Bronfenbrenner (1979) postulate that subjective employment experiences might be one of the more important factors influencing parents' child-rearing behaviours. More specifically, Hoffman (1963) has suggested that a mother's satisfaction with her employment influences her parenting behaviour. On an empirical level, maternal attitudes toward employment (e.g. whether the mother wants to work or not) exert a positive influence on children (Woods, 1972). Harrell & Ridley (1975) showed that mothers' work satisfaction was positively associated with the quality of mother-child interaction. Likewise, fathers' self-reported employment experiences were positively related to the quality of their interactions with their sons, but not their daughters (Barling, 1983a). Finally, given the fact that the number of employed mothers is clearly rising (Hoffman, 1979; Parry & Warr, 1980), assessing employment experiences and their relationship to children's behaviour may be more relevant than a continuing focus on the employed/non-employed dichotomy.

This present research investigates the influence of mothers' employment experiences on their nursery school children's behaviour. Three experiences central to mothers' employment are assessed: First, maternal job satisfaction is studied. Previous research suggests that (a) children of mothers dissatisfied with their employment are at a higher risk for behavioural problems (Hoffman, 1963); and (b) fathers' job satisfaction is related to their sons' (but not daughters') general behaviour (Barling, 1983a). The second variable of interest is mothers' involvement with their job. There are numerous suggestions in the literature that parents' job involvement affects children negatively (e.g. Greiff & Munter, 1980; Machlowitz, 1980; Rohrlich, 1980). Yet Barling (1983a) showed that fathers' job involvement was positively related to their sons' (but not their daughters') scholastic performance. Finally, mothers' role conflict is studied. The negative effects of maternal employment postulated by the maternal deprivation hypothesis are widely accepted (e.g.Etaugh, 1974; Smith, 1981; Fallows, 1983) and this may well increase mothers' role conflict. Hoffman (1974, 1979) suggested that children whose mothers experience considerable strain between these two roles may suffer ill-effects; while maternal role conflict is positively related to child abuse (Gelles & Hargreaves, 1981).

Based on research findings suggesting that parents' experience of marital discord:

*Interestingly, this conceptual and methodological approach allows for a focus on the effects of fathers' work-related experiences on their children's social and scholastic behaviours (see Barling, 1983a), a process largely ignored in considering the impact of parental work experiences on children (Bronfenbrenner & Cochran, 1982; Heyns, 1982).
MATERNAL EMPLOYMENT AND CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR

(Emery, 1982; O'Leary & Emery, 1982) and experience of employment (Barling, 1983b) are associated with children's behaviour, it is predicted that nursery school children's behaviour will be related positively to their mothers' employment experiences. More specifically, significant associations will emerge between mothers' employment experiences and their daughters' (but not sons') behaviour. Such predictions are in accordance with (a) associations between parents' experiences of marital distress and children's behaviour (Emery, 1982; O'Leary & Emery, 1982) and (b) associations between fathers' employment experiences and their sons' behaviour (Barling, 1983b). The trend is for positive associations to emerge between parents' experiences (whether of marital discord or employment) and children's behaviour, and for the correlations to be greater in the case of same-sex parent-child dyads.

METHOD

Subjects
Principals of various nursery schools in a lower middle-class area in Johannesburg, South Africa, were approached, and their permission requested to contact the children's mothers. Letters were then sent to these mothers informing them of the nature of the research, and requesting their participation. Voluntary participation was obtained from 91 white mothers, all blue-collar or secretarial workers in full-time employment and the teachers of their children (46 boys, 45 girls; $M_{\text{age}} = 4.5$ years, range $=2–6$ years). Enrolment of the children in the nursery school by their parents was voluntary.

Assessment
All mothers completed Warr et al.'s (1979) job satisfaction and job involvement questionnaires. The 15-item overall job satisfaction questionnaire assesses satisfaction with intrinsic and extrinsic job factors; and each of the 15 items is rated on a seven-point scale ('extremely dissatisfied' to 'extremely satisfied': scale minimum = 15, maximum = 150). Test-retest reliability of this job satisfaction questionnaire over a nine-month period is satisfactory (0.63). All six items of their questionnaire assessing job involvement are rated on a seven-point scale ('No, I strongly disagree' to 'Yes, I strongly agree': scale minimum = 6, maximum = 42). Again, test-retest reliability over a six-month time span was adequate (0.65). Role conflict was assessed using Parry & Warr's (1986) Interaction Strain Questionnaire. This 12-item questionnaire (with three response alternatives presented for each item, viz. 'Yes, true', 'Don't know', and 'No, untrue'); scale minimum = 3, maximum = 36) has been found to be reliable (coefficient alpha = 0.75) and valid. Full-time and part-time employed mothers' interaction strain differs significantly ($t = 2.98$, $P < 0.01$).

Two separate questionnaires were used to assess children's behaviour. First, Kendall & Wilcox's (1979) 33-item Self Control Rating Scale (SCRS) was completed by all the teachers of the 91 children to obtain global ratings of the children's self-control. The SCRS (with each item rated on a seven-point scale, indicating either extreme self-control or impulsivity; scale minimum = 33, maximum = 231) is both reliable and valid (Kendall & Wilcox, 1979; Kendall et al., 1981). The 55-item Behavior Problem Checklist (BPC, Quay, 1979) was completed by the teachers, and each item was rated on a three-point scale. The BPC provides data on conduct (17 items; subscale minimum = 0, maximum = 51) and personality (14 items; subscale minimum = 0, maximum = 42) problems, immaturity (7 items; subscale minimum = 0, maximum = 21) and socialized delinquency (6 items; subscale minimum = 0, maximum = 18). However, the socialized delinquency factor was not used in this study since it is questionable whether it is relevant to the behaviour of nursery school children. There is a considerable wealth of data attesting to the reliability and validity of the BPC (O'Leary & Johnson, 1979).
Table 1. Descriptive statistics for mothers’ employment experiences and teachers’ ratings of children’s behaviours

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Boys</th>
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<th></th>
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<th>Girls</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>min</td>
<td>max</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>min</td>
<td>max</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher ratings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-control</td>
<td>132.41</td>
<td>37.12</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>207</td>
<td>154.36</td>
<td>35.31</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>207</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct</td>
<td>6.35</td>
<td>5.93</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>3.87</td>
<td>5.95</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality</td>
<td>4.20</td>
<td>4.35</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4.64</td>
<td>5.44</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immaturity</td>
<td>2.35</td>
<td>2.78</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.56</td>
<td>2.74</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternal employment</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job satisfaction</td>
<td>85.76</td>
<td>13.02</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>86.42</td>
<td>13.29</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job involvement</td>
<td>27.44</td>
<td>9.70</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>29.42</td>
<td>9.50</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role conflict</td>
<td>27.35</td>
<td>6.12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>28.16</td>
<td>7.89</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The criteria stipulated for a particular questionnaire to be used in this research were (a) psychometric adequacy, (b) unidimensionality to reduce the number of correlation coefficients required, and (c) ease of understanding by South African mothers. All three criteria were fulfilled.

Procedure

Nursery school teachers initially distributed informed consent forms to all mothers of children in their classes. Once maternal permission was obtained, the job satisfaction, job involvement and role conflict questionnaires were distributed to the mothers who completed them at home. Teachers independently completed the SCRS and BPC for each child in their class.

RESULTS

Methodologically, it is important to note that ratings were not obtained from the same source: the relationship between parental ratings of marital discord and child behaviour is known to be greater than the relationship between external ratings (i.e. teacher ratings) of child behaviour and the parents’ self-report of marital distress (Emery, 1982; O’Leary & Emery, 1982). The possibility of artificially inflated correlations was avoided in this study by correlating mothers’ subjective work experiences with teacher ratings of their nursery school children’s behaviour. Descriptive data for teachers’ ratings of the boys’ and girls’ behaviour, and mothers’ self-ratings of employment experiences, are presented in Table 1.

Correlations between maternal employment experiences and the reported behaviours of their children are shown in Table 2, separately for sons and daughters. Mothers’ job satisfaction was related positively to their daughters’ self-control ($r = 0.24$, d.f. = 44, $P < 0.05$), negatively with their daughters’ conduct problems ($r = -0.30$, d.f. = 44, $P < 0.025$), but not with any of their sons’ behaviours. Mothers’ role conflict was associated negatively with teachers’ reports of their sons’ ($r = -0.32$, d.f. = 44, $P < 0.025$) and daughters’ ($r = -0.33$, d.f. = 43, $P < 0.01$) self-control, and positively with reports of their sons’ conduct problems ($r = 0.24$, d.f. = 44, $P < 0.05$) and daughters’ (but not sons’) immaturity ($r = 0.30$, d.f. = 43, $P < 0.03$).

Mothers’ work involvement did not correlate significantly with any of the reports of boys’ or girls’ behaviours.
Table 2. Correlations between maternal work experiences and the behaviour of their sons (n = 46) and daughters (n = 45)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Children's behaviour</th>
<th>Job satisfaction</th>
<th>Job involvement</th>
<th>Role conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-control</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>-0.11</td>
<td>-0.32*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>0.24*</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>-0.33*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conduct problems</td>
<td>0.16</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.24*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.30*</td>
<td>-0.20</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personality problems</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>-0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Immaturity</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>0.06</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>-0.19</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>0.30*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data for boys presented on top line.
*P<0.05.

DISCUSSION

In focusing on mothers' employment experiences rather than maternal employment versus non-employment, the results of this study go beyond stereotypes associated with the maternal deprivation hypothesis which suggest the effects of maternal employment on children are inevitably negative. Specifically, maternal employment (as opposed to non-employment) experiences can influence the child positively or negatively, and the direction of this association is determined by three factors: (a) the specific type or quality of the employment experience; (b) the nature of the child's behaviour; and (c) the sex of the child.

The fact that mothers' job satisfaction was associated with daughters' greater self-control and fewer conduct problems is in accordance with research findings showing that fathers' job satisfaction is related positively to boys' general behaviour (Barling, 1983b). In both cases, there is a positive association between parents' experiences of employment and children's behaviour, and a same-sex effect is evident. On the other hand, negative emotions (e.g. role conflict) associated with mothers' employment were related to greater conduct problems for boys and immaturity for girls. Thus, the sex of the child moderates the influence of mothers' positive employment experiences (e.g. job satisfaction). Moreover, the sex of the child interacts with the nature of the child's behaviour (i.e. under- or overcontrol) in predicting the impact of negative emotions associated with mothers' employment (for example, through role conflict). Research on child psychopathology suggests that conduct problems may be manifest more in boys, and immaturity in girls. However, although maternal role conflict was associated positively with the self-control of their sons and daughters, the SCRS provides a global index of behaviour. The results from the BPC pinpoint more precisely the specific behaviours of sons' and daughters' that are related to mothers' role conflict.

That there was no relationship between mothers' employment involvement and nursery school children's behaviour does not appear to be consistent with previous results (e.g. Barling, 1983a). However, fathers' work involvement was related to children's scholastic performance, and there is no measure comparable to scholastic performance available for nursery school children. It is suggested, therefore, that the absence of a significant relationship between children's behaviour and mothers' job involvement is not necessarily
inconsistent with that of fathers’ work involvement and children’s behaviour (Barling, 1983b). Rather, behaviours similar to scholastic performance are not required of nursery school children. In this sense, the lack of a significant correlation between mothers’ work involvement and children’s behaviour is possibly related more to the behaviours required of nursery school children than any potential impact of the mothers’ work involvement (Hoffman, 1979). The influence of mothers’ work involvement on older children (particularly their daughters, given the possibility of a same-sex effect), remains to be assessed. Given the similarities between the present results and those on research on fathers’ employment and their elementary school children’s behaviour (Barling, 1983b), it is expected that mothers’ employment experiences may be an important predictor of their elementary school daughters’ scholastic performance (cf. Heyns, 1982).

A conceptual issue concerns the process whereby children’s behaviour is influenced by parents’ experiences, whether of marital discord or employment. Parents’ experiences per se cannot directly influence children’s behaviour. Rather, it is suggested that parents who perceive their employment experiences differently (e.g. satisfied or dissatisfied with their employment) probably behave differently at home. In turn, it is parental behaviour, rather than employment experiences per se, which influence the child. If this is the case, the importance of the employment experiences/child behaviour relationship itself might be misleading: research could focus more profitably on those parental behaviours that are a function of differential perceptions of employment experiences that influence children’s behaviour (cf. Barling & O’Leary, 1983). Research following this alternative approach might focus more on the association between parents’ employment experiences and parent-child interactions (cf. Barling, 1983a).

Two policy issues emerge. First, the present results suggest that maternal role conflict is associated negatively with self-control problems of nursery school sons and daughters, and positively with conduct problems for sons and immaturity for girls. Beliefs consistent with the maternal deprivation hypothesis probably increase role conflict. Yet, whether resulting stereotypes regarding the detrimental effects of maternal employment on children (cf. Fallows, 1983) fit empirical reality can be questioned (cf. Hoffman, 1979, 1983). The results of this study, together with those showing that fathers’ constructive employment experiences are associated with (a) self-reports of the quality of the father-son interaction (Barling, 1983a) and with sons’ enhanced scholastic performance and general behaviour (Barling, 1983b); and (b) that the quality of alternative child-care arrangements are associated with children’s behaviour when their mothers are employed (Harrell & Ridley, 1975), are not consistent with the deprivation hypothesis. Should the results of the present study be replicated, changing beliefs about the supposed effects of maternal deprivation as a consequence of work may be an appropriate course of action. In turn, this might decrease widespread role conflict amongst women (Fallows, 1983), thereby reducing the negative impact of role conflict on mothers’ themselves, and in turn, their children. Second, if parental (both mother and father) employment experiences are indeed associated with children’s behaviour, it becomes incumbent on organizations to enhance the quality of working life for all their members. Research suggests that this may be possible without any negative effects accruing to the organization (Barling & Harenbrug, in press).

Future research assessing the effects of maternal employment on children’s behaviour might profitably follow the conceptual and methodological framework utilized in this research, which emphasize the role of parental employment experiences rather than their employment status. In any such research, the probability that the mothers of many nursery school children are in part-time employment should be recognized; and the association between the employment experiences of mothers in part-time employment situations and children’s behaviour should be assessed. Moreover, the relevance of specific aspects of job satisfaction (e.g. satisfaction with work itself, people at work, supervision, pay and promotion), job involvement (e.g. self-esteem arising from involvement) and the specific
domain of the role conflict (e.g. parent vs. spouse, parent vs. self, parent vs. professional) should be researched. In addition, it has been found that social, spouse or supervisor support buffers deleterious effects arising from employment experiences (House, 1981; Kobasa & Puccetti, in press). In a similar manner, the quality of parent-child relationships might buffer any negative effects of parental experiences (cf. Emery, 1982; O'Leary & Emery, 1982), and their potential mediating role should be investigated directly. A final point concerns the issue of causality. Although it is widely assumed that parental employment affects children (Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1982), there is no research support for this supposition. In fact, the plausibility of reverse causality (e.g. sick children influencing their mothers' employment: Saltz, 1981) cannot be excluded. Consequently, future research should be based on longitudinal data in an effort to unravel any confusion regarding the direction of causality in the association between maternal employment experiences and children's behaviour.

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