Employment commitment as a moderator of the maternal employment status/child behavior relationship

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Summary
Research findings suggest that maternal employment exerts no consistent detrimental effects on children. In this study, the moderating role of employment commitment and child sex on the relationship between maternal employment status and child behavior is investigated. Mothers and teachers provided behavioral ratings for 185 elementary school children ($M$ age = 9.42 years). Employment commitment moderated the influence of employment status on mothers' and teachers' ratings of children's attention problems and immaturity. Children whose mothers' employment status and commitment were not congruent were less attentive and more immature than those whose mothers' employment status and commitment were congruent. The statistical and applied significance of these results is suggested, as is the possibility that mother-child interactions mediate the manner in which incongruencies between employment status and employment commitment influence children’s inattention-immaturity.

Introduction

Consistent with the emphasis on the quantity rather than the quality of time a mother spends with her child, concern is still expressed regarding possible detrimental effects of maternal employment on children. For example, only 44 per cent of women believe maternal employment exerts no harmful effect on children (Smith, 1981). This is not surprising given (a) the disapproval expressed in earlier child care books towards maternal employment and alternative child-care arrangements during the child’s younger years (Etaugh, 1974; Heins, Stillman, Sabers and Mazzio, 1983), and (b) emotional rather than empirical arguments against maternal employment in widely-read magazines (Amiel, 1985; Failows, 1983).

Research on the effects of maternal employment invariably contrasts the behavior of children whose mothers are in paid employment with those whose mothers are homemakers (see Hoffman,
1980, 1983). This research implicitly accepts the inevitability of an 'economic determinism' (Suchet and Barling, 1986), namely that work experiences exert a unidirectional effect on family functioning. As a result of numerous methodological problems inherent in this research (e.g. the mothers' race, education and family income are often confounded with maternal employment status; Bronfenbrenner and Crouter, 1982; Heyns, 1982), and inconsistent findings, Kamerman and Hayes (1982) argue persuasively that research which merely contrasts the behavior and/or attitudes of children of employed mothers and homemakers will provide no new insights. As the prevalence of maternal employment is clearly increasing (Grossman, 1982; Parry and Warr, 1982) and is now the modal pattern in most industrialized countries, it would be appropriate to study the possible relationship between maternal employment and children's behavior. However, the simplistic notion that employment status per se influences children's behavior should be discarded. Instead, different approaches for understanding this social issue should be sought.

One alternative strategy is to assess variables associated with maternal employment status which moderate the maternal employment status–child behavior relationship. The present study investigates employment role commitment as a moderator of the maternal employment status–child behavior relationship. Confronting the frustration of blocked employment role commitment (i.e. homemakers committed to employment, or employed mothers committed to the role of homemaker) on a daily basis may be a chronic stressor for the mother. On the other hand, being in a situation where one's employment role commitment is fulfilled (i.e. employed mothers with high employment commitment, or homemakers with low employment commitment) might enhance the mothers’ psychological well-being.

Several sources of data suggest that children of mothers faced with a chronic stressor, such as blocked employment role commitment, may fare worse than those whose mothers are in a less stressful situation. First, the school competence and achievement of children whose mothers were not employed and had a negative attitude towards employment was significantly better than the children of employed mothers who did not wish to be employed (Farel, 1980). Second, employment commitment moderates the impact of unemployment. Unemployed individuals with a high commitment to employment suffer more psychological distress than their unemployed counterparts with low employment commitment (Jackson, Stafford, Banks and Warr, 1983). Third, the conflict experienced between the employment and homemaker roles among employed mothers is associated with their nursery school children's behavior problems (Barling and Van Bart, 1984). Fourth, the reasons for a mother being employed or not employed may be more important than employment status itself (Haller and Rosenmayer, 1971). Finally, chronic stressors encountered by a mother are associated with child behavior problems (Wolfe, Jaffe, Wilson and Zak, 1985), and also with maladaptive parenting (Turner and Avison, 1985) which itself is associated with child behavior problems (Jouriles, Barling and O'Leary, 1987; Patterson, 1982). Thus, employment commitment may be one of the psychological processes associated with the effects of maternal employment status that influences children.

The present study also assesses whether the sex of the child moderates the relationship between maternal employment status and children's behavior. There are consistent sex differences in children's social behavior (O'Leary and Carr, 1982), and maternal employment status (Hoffman, 1983) and employment experiences (e.g. interrole conflict, job satisfaction; Barling and Van Bart, 1984) are differentially associated with the behavior of boys and girls.

The failure to control for the influence of maternal race, educational level and income, and frequent use of measures of children's behavior that are unreliable and of unknown clinical/applied meaning are consistent problems in previous research on the maternal employment status–child behavior relationship. In addition, ratings of child behavior are typically derived either from the teacher or the mother, but not both; even though teachers and mothers
often rate the same child’s behavior differently. Mothers in distressed marriages usually rate their children as more problematic than teachers of the same children (O’Leary and Emery, 1984), perhaps because teachers’ training equips them to evaluate children’s behavior more accurately, and teachers have a wider basis for comparison. The present study thus examines two possible moderators (viz. employment role commitment and the child’s sex) of the relationship between maternal employment status and child behavior, and overcomes problems of past studies by (a) using both teachers’ and mothers’ ratings of elementary school children’s behavior of employed mothers and homemakers, (b) controlling potential confounds experimentally (e.g. mothers’ race) or statistically (viz. mothers’ educational level, number of children, age of the mother and child, and level in the organizational hierarchy), and (c) using reliable and meaningful indices of children’s behavior.

Method

Subjects and setting

Three hundred and forty mothers at one elementary school in a middle socioeconomic class area were asked to participate in this research; the data in this study are based on the 185 fifth and sixth grade elementary school children (M age = 9.42 years, S.D. = 0.89; 99 boys, 86 girls) whose mothers agreed to participate (a response rate of 54.4 per cent). Fifty-five mothers (30 per cent) were homemakers, 130 mothers (70 per cent) were in full-time employment. The mothers’ mean age was 35.11 years (S.D. = 4.84); 31 per cent of the mothers had attended but not completed formal schooling, 40 per cent had completed formal schooling, while the remaining 29 per cent had received some higher education (M years of education = 12.3, S.D. = 1.68).

Questionnaire materials

Children’s behavior problems

To assess different child behavior problems, Quay and Peterson’s (1983) 89-item Revised Behavior Problem Checklist was completed by the teachers and mothers of all the children. Each item presents a problem behavior, and where necessary, a specific description of the problem. Each item is then rated on a three-point scale according to whether the behavior does not constitute a problem (0), is a mild (1) or a severe (2) problem. Six subscales representing core child behavior problems are derived, viz. conduct disorder (22 items; e.g. ‘disruptive; annoys others’), socialized aggression (17 items; ‘steals in company with others’), attention problems–immaturity (16 items; ‘short attention span; poor concentration’), anxiety–withdrawal (11 items; ‘self-conscious; easily embarrassed’), psychotic behavior (6 items; ‘expresses beliefs that are clearly untrue [delusions]’), and motor excess behavior (5 items; ‘restless; unable to sit still’). The internal and test–retest reliability and contrasted-groups and concurrent validity of each of these scales is acceptable over a variety of different samples (Quay and Peterson, 1983).

Ten items (item numbers: 3, 7, 11, 18, 46, 51, 59, 72, 76 and 86) were omitted from the teacher-rating checklist in this study as the local school board believed they were either irrelevant or offensive. As a result, the reliability of each of the six subscales was re-analysed. Three items (‘cheats during class test or exam’, ‘seeks company of older, “more experienced” companions’ and ‘is part of a group that rejects school activities’) were discarded from the teachers’ rating of socialized aggression because these three items detracted from the homogeneity of the subscale. Ratings of conduct problems, socialized aggression, attention–immaturity, anxiety, psychotic
behavior and motor excess behavior by both mothers (alpha = 0.92, 0.73, 0.88, 0.83, 0.53 and 0.74 respectively) and teachers (alpha = 0.94, 0.64, 0.92, 0.83, 0.74 and 0.66 respectively) were then internally consistent.

Employment role commitment

Warr, Cook and Wall's (1979) six-item scale was used to assess mothers' employment commitment. Jackson et al. (1983) have shown that two alternative forms of the employment commitment scale, for employed and non-employed individuals, predict psychological well-being. Item meaning is identical across the two forms, with some items re-worded slightly to reflect differences in employment status (e.g. 'If I wasn't working I wouldn't feel right' versus 'I don't feel right unless I'm working'). In the present study, the internal reliability of this scale both for employed mothers (alpha = 0.91) and homemakers (alpha = 0.92) was highly satisfactory.

Results

Most previous research investigating the consequences of maternal employment for children failed to exclude possible confounding variables. Therefore, the first step in all the 2 × 2 × 2 (employment status × employment commitment × child sex) ANOVAs, with the mother and teacher ratings of child behavior as the dependent variables, was to control statistically for all demographic variables measured which might be associated with any of these independent or dependent variables (see Table 1). Consequently, a series of 2 × 2 × 2 (employment status × employment commitment × child sex) analyses of covariance, controlling for age of the mother and child, the number of children at home, the mother's educational level and position in the organizational hierarchy, were computed.

In assessing the interaction between employment status, employment commitment and the child's sex on mother and teacher ratings of children's behavior, 70 F tests would be required. To reduce the probability of Type I errors occurring because of the large number of F tests required, and to remain consistent with the theoretical basis of this study, only employment status as a main effect, and employment commitment and sex of the child as moderators of employment status, were examined. Although sex differences across child behavior problems could be predicted on the basis of previous research (e.g. O'Leary and Carr, 1982), a further test of such main effects was of no conceptual importance in this study. The question of interest is whether the sex of the child moderates the relationship between employment status/employment commitment and child behavior problems. Variance attributable to the sex of the child is also controlled by virtue of its inclusion as a main effect before the significance of any interactions are assessed. In addition, neither mothers' nor teachers' ratings of psychotic behavior were analysed further because they are of questionable relevance to the present study: It is doubtful whether maternal employment status or employment commitment could predict psychotic behavior.

In terms of the comparisons of interest, two significant effects emerged. The employment status × employment commitment interaction was significant for both teachers' (F (1,183) = 5.23, p < 0.025) and mothers' (F (1,183) = 4.16, p < 0.05) ratings of inattention problems and immaturity. In other words, children whose mothers' employment status and commitment were not congruent (i.e. employed with low employment commitment or homemakers with high employment commitment) were rated as less attentive and more immature than their counterparts whose mothers' employment status and commitment were congruent (i.e. employed and high employment commitment or homemakers with low employment commitment) (see Figure 1).
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<td>0.05</td>
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<td>18.79</td>
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<td>0.57</td>
<td>0.29</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>1.99</td>
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*Data for teachers' ratings below the diagonal; data for mothers' ratings above the diagonal; data in diagonal reflects correlation between teachers' and mothers' ratings.

†r ≥ 0.16, p < 0.05; r ≥ 0.23, p < 0.01.
more inattentive and less immature \((M = 9.79, S.D. = 7.16\) for teacher ratings on the modified scale; \(M = 7.59, S.D. = 5.98\) for mother ratings) than those of Quay and Peterson's (1983) sample of 24 children with the externalizing psychiatric disorder \((M = 7.0, S.D. = 5.67)\). On the other hand, children whose mothers' employment status and employment commitment were congruent were rated by their teachers \((M = 5.42, S.D. = 6.14)\) and mothers \((M = 4.59, S.D. = 4.61)\) as similar to Quay and Peterson's (1983) normal children \((M = 5.56, S.D. = 6.4\) for 293 boys; \(M = 2.43, S.D. = 4.66\) for 273 girls) on inattention and immaturity.

**Discussion**

The results of this study support recent suggestions (e.g., Bronfenbrenner and Crouter, 1982) that no further benefit can be derived from focusing only on the possible effects of maternal employment status. After statistically removing the influence of potentially confounding variables, maternal employment status was not associated with any of the teachers' or mothers' ratings of child behavior as measured in the present study. Of greater importance, however, is that employment commitment moderated the relationship between maternal employment status and children's attention problems and immaturity. This finding achieves added importance for two reasons. First, similar interactions emerged for both mothers' and teachers' ratings of this behavior, even though there was only 42.25 per cent shared variance between these two ratings. Second, the results obtained may be clinically as well as statistically significant. Mother ratings and teacher ratings (on their modified form) of the inattention–imaturity problem subscale were higher than those of Quay and Peterson's (1983) sample of children with an externalizing psychiatric disorder. The teacher ratings of inattention–imaturity in the present study may even have been higher had two of the items (viz. 'acts like he or she were much younger; immature, “childish”'; 'unable to work independently; needs constant help and attention') not been excluded because of objections from the school board.

The results of this study suggest that the relationship between children's attention–imaturity and maternal role incongruence is statistically and clinically significant. Nonetheless, these results do not isolate the process whereby the employment status–incongruence influences child behavior. It is suggested that the items of the inattention–imaturity problems subscale measured here are related more to the nature and quality of parent–child interactions that follow the mothers' experience of an employment status–commitment incongruency than to the incongruency itself. In the same way that parental marital satisfaction (Belsky, 1984; Brody, Pilligreni & Sigel, 1986; Patterson, 1984), maternal role satisfaction (Lerner and Galambos, 1985) and fathers' job dissatisfaction (Barling, 1986a) influence child behavior through parent–child interactions, it is suggested that the maternal employment status–commitment incongruency affects maternal–child interaction, which in turn influences child behavior (see Hoffman, 1986). The fact that conduct problems are usually associated with marital distress (O'Leary and Emery, 1984), while those items measuring inattention and immaturity were associated with the incongruency between employment status and employment commitment suggests that the nature of parent–child interactions may be a function of the type of stressor experienced by the parents, and this should be investigated in future research.

An issue inherent in this study that is common to research on maternal employment concerns the construct validity of the employment role concept. For example, the validity of Lerner and Galambos' (1985) role satisfaction index remains to be assessed, while neither the incongruency between employment status and commitment operationalized in this research nor Farel's (1980)
index of role satisfaction derived from the employment status–employment attitude discrepancy have been validated. Given the proliferation of research focusing on diverse aspects of the maternal employment role, such as interrole conflict (Barling and Van Bart, 1984; MacEwen and Barling, in press; Suchet and Barling, 1986), role satisfaction (Lerner and Galambos, 1985), role commitment (Fare, 1980) and role involvement (Pleck, 1985), it remains for future research to assess the construct validity of these seemingly diverse employment role experiences.

The present findings point to a number of issues that remain to be addressed. First, the reasons for a mother’s employment (e.g. financial, self-actualization) might be an important moderator variable, as they may influence employment commitment. Second, recent findings suggest that the relationship between children’s behavior and both fathers’ work dissatisfaction (Barling, 1986a) and mothers’ role satisfaction (Lerner and Galambos, 1985) is mediated by their interactions with their children. Third, recent findings suggest the salience of fathers’ employment role experiences (Barling, 1986b), and their possible influence on children’s behavior problems should be investigated. Fourth, the checklist completed by the teachers in the present study had to be shortened slightly. Although the reliability of the modified scale was satisfactory, and the correlations between parent and teacher ratings (see Table 1) suggest there may have been no alteration in construct validity, the present results remain to be replicated using teacher ratings of the entire Revised Behavior Problem Checklist. Finally, future research must assess processes through which the employment status–employment commitment incongruency exerts any effects on children’s behavior. Likewise, variables that reduce the influence of this incongruency (e.g. spouse and/or social support) should be assessed. It is hypothesized that the maternal status–maternal employment incongruency influences mother–child interactions, and it is these interactions which influence the child’s behavior. Although this is consistent with findings from a longitudinal design (Lerner and Galambos, 1985), reverse hypotheses (e.g. an immature, inattentive child increases a homemaker’s employment commitment) remain plausible (see Crouer, 1984). Thus, future research should use longitudinal research designs wherever possible.

In conclusion, the present results support previous suggestions (e.g. Bronfenbrenner and Crouer, 1982) that maternal employment status alone does not predict children’s behavior. Instead, psychological experiences and expectations surrounding the mother’s employment or homemaker role are crucial in understanding the link between maternal employment and child behavior.

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