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**Authors**

Tangney, June Price  
Feshbach, Norma Deitch

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SOME IMPLICATIONS OF MATERNAL EMPLOYMENT  
FOR THE NOTHER AND THE FAMILY\*

June Price Tangney  
Norma Deitch Feshbach

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS.

June Price Tangney is currently Lecturer in the Department of Human Development at Bryn Mawr College. She received her doctorate in clinical psychology from UCLA in 1985.

Norma Deitch Feshbach is chair of the UCLA Department of Education, She holds a joint professorship in the UCLA Graduate School of Education and the Department of Psychology.

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Gerson (1985) has suggested that, because the structural characteristics of the workplace have been relatively inflexible in response to the influx of working women and mothers over the past few decades, the burden of change now falls most heavily on the family. From this perspective, one might expect that the employment status of mothers of young children would have an impact on the family's emotional environment and functioning.

Repetti (1987) has identified several processes by which mothers' work context and family life may reciprocally affect each other, processes that may be heightened by rigidity in the work environment. Her interviews with working mothers revealed numerous instances of a "systematic spillover" of stress and associated emotions initially derived from the workplace, but then transferred to the family context after 5:00 p.m. The interviews also indicated a prevalence of "role overload," and an ensuing competition for personal resources. These mothers were aware that they had a limited amount of time and limited emotional resources. A number of the interviewees indicated that demands at work left them with less energy, less empathy, and less sensitivity for their family members than they might otherwise have to offer.

Although most of the "spillover" effects cited by Repetti's subjects were negative in nature, the potential positive effects of mothers' work experiences on family relationships have not gone unnoticed by Repetti or other researchers in the field (e.g., Barnett and Baruch 1979; Bronfenbrenner 1979; Hoffman 1979; Nieva and Gutek 1981). Indeed, the global nature of the relation between maternal employment and family well-being remains a highly debated and contested question in the literature (Hoffman 1979, 1984; Hoffman and Nye 1974; Pleck 1985). For example, the concern regarding child-care attendance related to mothers' employment producing negative child outcomes, seemingly laid to rest by such reviews as those of Clarke-Stewart and Fein (1983) and Rutter (1981), are being raised by the studies of Owen, Easterbrooks, Chase-Lansdale, and Goldberg (1983) and Barglow, Vaughn, and Molitor (in press), especially in the area of parent-child relations.

One can find empirical evidence for both positive and negative effects of maternal employment. Researchers have begun to identify a host of factors which appear to moderate the linkages between mothers' experiences in the workplace and the quality of interpersonal relationships in the family setting. These factors range from family demographic characteristics (e.g., Staines, Pleck, Shepard and O'Connor 1978), to mothers' job satisfaction (Piotrkowski and Crits-Christoph 1981) and family members' attitudes towards mothers' employment (Gerson 1985; Repetti 1987). Hoffman (1979) has also suggested that the implications of maternal employment for the mother-child dyad may vary with the developmental level of the child.

Even under the best of circumstances, however, the fact remains that mothers employed outside the home still face the enormous task of juggling dual roles. The majority of working mothers must negotiate a balance between work and family commitments in a world of work that has yet to offer flexibility tailored to their special needs. In fact, as Nieva and Gutek (1981) have pointed out, many employed mothers find less flexibility in the workplace than their male counterparts, because employees in female dominated occupations are less likely to belong to unions which can secure fringe benefits such as paid personal leave for family emergencies.

Just as the structural characteristics of the workplace have been slow to respond to the need of the employed mother, so too have the structural characteristics of the modal American family. Although there has been a trend in the past decade towards increased division of household labor (Pleck 1979, 1982), wives--working outside the home or not--are still responsible for the majority of household chores (Berk 1980; Berk and Berk 1979). And the degree of the husband's participation in these chores appears to be more a function of the husband's general attitudes towards gender roles than a response to actual time demands and pressures experienced by the wife (Perucci, Potter and Rhoads 1978). In addition, it has been suggested that men generally attend to multiple role demands sequentially, while women are expected (and expect) to fulfill their role demands simultaneously (Hall 1972).

There is no question but that today's employed mother faces many challenges in working out the logistics of pursuing a career while raising a family. The current paper explores the relation of mothers' employment status to a variety of factors relevant to the home environment, particularly those that may directly affect the emotional and cognitive development of children in these families. The results are based on secondary analyses of data from two independent studies--one of parents of preschool children, the other of families of elementary school children. Because issues pertaining to mothers' employment status were incidental to the main thrust of these studies, this report cannot do justice to more complex models of the linkages between work and family contexts. Most notably, our data sets do not include many of the factors hypothesized to moderate the interface between work and family situations. Rather, it is hoped that these secondary analyses can contribute added

information concerning the global relationship of maternal employment to some parent and family characteristics critical to children's healthy emotional development, while at the same time underlining some of the special needs of mothers who work outside the home.

Study I examines the relationship of maternal employment to indices of parental stress and empathy in a sample of 246 mothers and fathers of pre-school children. Study II addresses the implications of maternal employment for parental empathy, stress, parenting attitudes and characteristics of the family environment among a second sample of 58 mothers and fathers of elementary school children. In addition, Study II links maternal employment status to children's affective and cognitive development at two points in the elementary school years.

## METHOD

### Subjects

Study I. Of 350 questionnaire packets distributed to mothers and fathers of children attending several preschools in the Southern California area, 267 (76 percent) completed protocols were returned. The data set was comprised of 82 pairs of mothers and fathers married to each other, 84 additional mothers, and 19 additional fathers. For the current study, a number of families were dropped because the mothers did not provide employment data. Analyses presented here were based on 246 completed questionnaires.

Participants in Study I were primarily American-born, Caucasian, married, well-educated males and females between 30 and 40 years of age, representing a diversity of religious affiliations. Nearly all father respondents were employed full-time, but the employment status of mothers was more variable. Roughly one-third of participating mothers held full-time positions and 41 percent reported no employment outside the home. Although parents' occupations represented a broad range of socio-economic status levels, the average status of respondents was in the upper end of middle-class. The mean Hollingshead score for fathers was 5.7, and for mothers the average Hollingshead occupational score was 4.2.

Study II. Subjects were 58 parents (37 mothers, 21 fathers) of children attending an elementary school in the Los Angeles area. The population served by the school is economically, ethnically, and culturally diverse, explicitly matched to the proportion of children from different backgrounds in the community. Approximately 43 percent of participating mothers worked 40 hours per week or more outside the home and 24 percent reported no employment outside the home.

### Measures and Procedures

Study I. Parental questionnaire packets were, in some cases, distributed by hand when parents picked up their children from school. In other cases, the packets were mailed to the home. Included with each packet was a self-addressed, stamped return envelope and a cover letter explaining that the purpose of the study was to learn more about parents' attitudes and opinions. The questionnaire packets included the Parental Chronic Stress Scale, the Life Experiences Survey (a measure of acute life stress), the Parent/Partner Empathy Scale, and a short demographic questionnaire. These measures are described in greater detail below. It was estimated that the entire questionnaire packet would require 30-60 minutes to complete.

Study II. Children completed self-report measures of self-concept, depression, aggression, and aggression-anxiety at ages 8-9 (Time I) and again at ages 10-11 (Time II). Self-report measures were administered to the 10-11

year old groups in their classrooms; data from 8-9 year old subjects were gathered in small groups of less than 10 children. In all cases, inventory items were read aloud, and research assistants were available for individual assistance. The Audio-Visual Measure of Empathy (Feshbach 1982) was administered to children in small groups of four or five, at both Time I and Time II. Wide Range Achievement Test measures of spelling and mathematics were administered to small groups of children, while the reading measure was administered individually.

Teachers completed a 17-item inventory on each child at both Time I and Time II, which included the Aggression Rating Scale and a measure of depression. At Time II, parents were mailed questionnaire packets which included the Childrearing Practices Report, the Family Environment Scale, the Parental Chronic Stress Index, the Feshbach Parent/Partner Empathy Scale, and a short demographic questionnaire. These measures are described in greater detail below.

#### Description of Parent Measures

The Parent/Partner Empathy Scale (Feshbach and Caskey 1986) is comprised of 40 items, rated by parents on a 4-point scale. This measure yields a total empathy score as well as four factor analytically derived subscales--cognitive, emotional expression, spouse/partner, and empathic distress.

On the Parental Chronic Stress Index (Feshbach 1986), parents rated the degree of personal stress resulting from each of 12 major categories: money, household chores, time demands, relationship with spouse/partner, relationships with others, occurrence of unusual or unplanned events, children, family's health, own health, society (e.g., inflation, crime, etc.), self, and occupation/unemployment. Each item is rated on a 6-point scale, ranging from (1) "no stress" to (6) "extreme stress" experienced over the past several months. A total chronic stress score was derived by summing the 12 items.

The Life Experiences Survey (Sarason, Johnson and Siegel 1978) provides an index of acute life stress. Respondents are asked to indicate which life changes they had experienced during the previous year, and whether each event had been experienced as having a positive, negative, or neutral impact on the respondent. A positive life change score was created by summing the number of positive events which occurred during the previous year; the negative life change score represented the number of negatively experienced life events. The total change score was comprised of positive and negative life changes combined.

The Family Environment Scale (Moos and Moos 1981) yields Cohesion, Conflict, and Expressiveness subscales, each comprised of 9 items.

The Childrearing Practices Report (Block 1965) consists of 91 attitudinal items, each rated on a 7-point scale. For the purposes of this investigation, seven a priori scales were constructed from a subset of these items: Autonomy, Achievement, Over-Protective, Affectionate, Inhibition of Emotions, Hostile/ Angry, and Punitive orientations. Alpha coefficients calculated separately for mothers and fathers indicated satisfactory internal reliability for most a priori scales. Fathers' Over-Protective and Hostile/Angry scales, however, exhibited markedly low reliabilities, indicating that fathers' specific attitudes in these areas tend to be inconsistent across items. In addition, an index of parental agreement-disagreement in the area of childrearing attitudes, similar to that of Block, Block, and Morrison (1981), was created by calculating mean absolute difference of parents' ratings on each of the original 91 childrearing attitude items.

Mothers' Employment. In Study I, mothers indicated the number of hours worked per week outside the home on a 7-point scale, such that (1) indicated no formal employment outside the home, (2) 1-5 hours weekly, (3) 6-10 hours

weekly, (4) 11-20 hours weekly, (5) 21-30 hours weekly, (6) 31-40 hours weekly, and (7) over 40 hours weekly. In Study II, the mother employment variable consisted directly of the number of hours worked per week outside the home, as reported by the mother.

#### Description of Children's measures

The Children's Depression Inventory (CDI) (Kovacs 1978, 1980/81) consists of 27 multiple-choice items. Each item assesses one symptom by presenting three choices, graded from 0 to 2 in the direction of increasing clinical severity.

The Children's Self-Report of Aggression and Aggression-Anxiety was derived from a 22-item measure of aggressive tendencies, based on Bendig's (1962) revision of the Buss-Durkee Inventory, and a 19-item aggression-anxiety scale developed by S. Feshbach. Both measures have been used in several previous studies (Feshbach and Feshbach 1969, 1982, 1986; Feshbach and Singer 1971), which provided evidence for the reliability, stability, and construct validity of these instruments.

The Self-Concept Scale used in the previous study was an abbreviated version of Sears' (1966) self-concept test. Twenty items were rated by children on a 5-point scale.

The Feshbach Audio-Visual measure of Empathy (Feshbach 1982). Children's affective responses to ten two-minute videotaped vignettes provide the index of empathy. Each vignette depicts a social-emotional situation relevant to the arousal of happiness, pride, anger, sadness, or fear. There are two vignettes for each emotion. After viewing each vignette, children are asked to indicate the emotion they feel from a list of emotion words provided, as well as the intensity of the felt emotion, on a 9-point scale. The total empathy score is based on the sum of individual weighted scores which indicate the degree of match between the respondent's affective reports and those experienced by the children depicted in the vignettes. (Weights were derived from normative data obtained in a previous study; see more detailed description in Feshbach and Feshbach 1986.) Separate empathy scores were also obtained for responses to vignettes depicting positive effects, and to vignettes depicting negative emotions.

The Wide Range Achievement Test (Jastak and Jastak 1978) is a standardized measure of achievement in the areas of reading, spelling and arithmetic.

The Teachers' Ratings of Children's Aggression and Depression. The Aggression Rating Scale is comprised of seven items rated on a 5-point scale. The eight depression items comprising the Depression Rating Scale were largely adapted from the CDI. Several earlier investigations (e.g., Feshbach 1984; Feshbach and Feshbach 1982, 1986) provide evidence for the reliability and validity of these measures.

#### Analyses

Bivariate correlations were computed to evaluate the relation of mothers' employment (number of hours worked outside the home by the mother) to the various parental, family and child characteristics. Secondary analyses explored the possibility of a curvilinear component in these relationships. A series of polynomial regression analyses were conducted, with hours worked as the initial predictor, followed by a variable representing the number of hours worked squared. In addition, partial correlations examined the importance of mothers' education as a possible mediator of the observed bivariate relationships between maternal employment and the studies' psychological measures.

#### RESULTS

The relation of maternal employment status to parents' stress and empathy was first examined in the larger Study I among parents of preschool children. Table 1 presents the correlations of hours worked per week by the mother with indices of mothers' and fathers' stress, both chronic and acute. Not surprisingly, hours worked outside the home showed a moderate positive relation to mothers' reports of their own chronic day-to-day stress and to their experience of negative life changes. Fathers' acute stress was unrelated to mothers' employment status. But there was some indication that in the area of household chores (and to a lesser extent concerning unusual events), the

Table 1. Parental Stress Correlates of the Number of Hours Worked per Week by Mother (Study I).

	Mothers	Fathers
Chronic Stress		
Money	.19*	-.01
Household Chores	.14+	.31**
Time Demands	.15+	-.11
Spousal Relationship	.13+	-.01
Other Relationships	-.08	-.13
Unusual Events	.01	-.21+
Children	-.01	.07
Family Health	.04	-.17
Own Health	.10	-.06
Society	.01	-.10
Self	.03	-.10
(Un)Employment	.27***	-.06
Total Chronic Stress	.20*	-.18
Ns	(152-163)	(82)
Life Event Stress		
Negative Life Events	.26**	.12
Positive Life Events	-.04	-.09
Total Life Events	.14	.00
Ns	(117)	(51)

Note: p<.10+    p<.05\*    p<.01\*\*    p<.001\*\*\*

Table 2. Empathy Correlates of the Number of Hours Worked per Week by Mother (Study I).

	Mothers	Fathers
Empathy		
Cognitive	-.17*	.12
Emotional Expression	.01	-.10
Spousal	-.08	.01
Empathic Distress	-.03	-.10
Total Empathy	-.07	-.03
Ns	(150-161)	(75-81)

Note: p<.05\*

husbands of employed mothers actually experienced less chronic stress than the

husbands of women who worked little or not at all outside the home. Other aspects of fathers' chronic stress were inconsistently linked to maternal employment.

In addition to parental stress, parents' empathic orientation or responsiveness is of special interest here. As noted earlier, Repetti's (1987) interviews with mothers employed full-time outside the home indicated the possibility of a link between role overload and decreased maternal empathy and sensitivity. It seemed important to empirically assess this possibility since empathic responsiveness is central to the role of the parent. Table 2 presents the correlations of hours worked per week by the mother with indices of mothers' and fathers' empathy. Maternal employment was significantly, negatively correlated only with the cognitive component of mothers' empathy. Negligible findings were observed for the other aspects of maternal empathy and for all aspects of fathers' empathic responsiveness.

To summarize, although Study I revealed no dramatic differences in parental stress or empathy as a function of maternal employment, there nevertheless appeared to be a modest covariation between the number of hours worked per week outside the home by mothers and these mothers' reports of chronic and acute stress. In addition, there was a hint that maternal employment might be negatively linked to one aspect of empathy among mothers of preschool children.

To explore this matter further, these relationships were subsequently examined in a second study of mothers and fathers--parents of older, elementary school-aged children. Study II provided the opportunity to assess the reliability of the modest results obtained in Study I, while also extending this examination of the correlates of maternal employment to include other aspects of the family environment.

Table 3 presents the Study II correlations of hours worked per week by mothers with measures of mothers' and fathers' chronic stress. Among the mothers of these older children, very weak positive correlations were observed

Table 3. Parental Stress Correlates of the Number of Hours Worked per Week by Mother (Study II).

	Mothers	Fathers
Chronic Stress		
Money	.15	.03
Household Chores	-.17	.19
Time Demands	.31+	-.38+
Spousal Relationship	.24	.23
Other Relationships	.15	.30
Unusual Events	.12	-.02
Children	.23	-.02
Family Health	.09	.23
Own Health	.10	.06
Society	-.01	.04
Self	.06	-.14
(Un)Employment	.29+	-.14
Total Chronic Stress	.25	.08
Ns	(36-37)	(21)

Note:  $p < .10+$

between employment and stress, correlations which in all cases failed to reach statistical significance but which were in a direction consistent with those observed in Study I. In this sample of fathers, chronic stress was generally



unrelated to wives' employment commitments.

In Study II, the correlations between hours worked by mothers and indices of mothers' and fathers' empathy were non-significant across the board. The slight indication of a negative linear trend between mothers' employment commitments and maternal empathy in Study I was not born out in this second sample. However, it has been suggested that, for mothers and children alike, there may be some moderate, optimal degree of maternal involvement in the outside world of work (Hoffman 1984). Thus, the possibility of a curvilinear component to these relationships was assessed. Table 4 presents the results of polynomial regression analyses with various aspects of parental empathy as the dependent measures. Among mothers of elementary school children, there was a very clear curvilinear relationship between empathy and number of hours worked outside the home. Mothers employed part-time appeared to be more empathic than full-time mothers and mothers who did not work outside the home. Parallel analyses among the Study I mothers of younger children and among fathers in both samples revealed no such curvilinear relationships.

Thus far, we have examined how mothers' employment status relates to psychological characteristics of the mother herself. But these psychological characteristics--stress and empathy--are generally viewed as important contributors to parenting behavior and to children's emotional growth and well-being. The question remains, then, whether maternal employment relates to broader aspects of the family and o children's emotional and social adjustment.

In Study II we found that mothers' employment status appeared to have little bearing on more global aspects of the family environment. Family conflict, cohesion and expressiveness (as measured by the Moos Family Environment Scale) did not vary markedly as a function of hours worked per week by mothers. Nor did mothers' and fathers' childrearing attitudes co-vary with

Table 4. Polynomial Regression Analyses: Number of Hours Worked per Week by Mother Predicting Aspects of Parental Empathy (Study II).

	Standardized Beta		Change in R <sup>2</sup>	multiple R
	Hours Worked	Hours [2] Worked-		
Mother's Empathy				
Cognitive	1.68	-1.71	.19*	.44*
Emotional Expression	1.55	-1.70	.19*	.44*
Spousal	1.03	-1.13	.08	.30
Empathic Distress	.85	-.80	.04	.22
Total Empathy	1.74	-1.84	.22**	.47*
Father's Empathy				
Cognitive	.12	-.05	.00	.08
Emotional Expression	1.04	-1.03	.07	.27
Spousal	.40	-.54	.02	.18
Empathic Distress	.30	-.54	.02	.26
Total Empathy	.66	-.77	.04	.22

Note: Analyses of mothers' empathy based on 34-35 mothers; analyses of fathers' empathy based on 19 fathers. p<.05\* p<.01\*\*

Table 5. Children's Developmental Outcomes Related to the Number of Hours Worked per Week by Mother (Study II).

	Year 1	Year 2
Empathy		
Positive Empathy	-.02	-.31+
Negative Empathy	.00	-.21
Total Empathy	-.01	-.29
Emotional and Behavioral Adjustment		
Self-Concept	-.41*	-.14
Depression (Teacher Scale)	.22	.21
Depression (Self-Report)	.15	.17
Aggression (Teacher Scale)	.12	.24
Aggression (Self-Report)	.16	.22
Aggression-Anxiety	-.27	-.15
Cognitive Measures		
WRAT Reading	.04	-.20
WRAT Spelling	-.06	-.03
WRAT Math	.29	.34+
Ns	(28-30)	(27-31)

Note:  $p < .10$      $p < .05$ \*

maternal employment. The number of hours worked per week by mothers, however, did have a very modest, but identifiable relationship to aspects of children's emotional and behavioral adjustment (see Table 5). Although the majority of correlations between child measures and mothers' outside work commitment failed to reach statistical significance (only the negative correlation between children's self concept and hours worked by the mother was significant at the .05 level), the pattern of linear relationships is striking in that 20 of the 24 obtained relationships were in a direction consistent with the notion that maternal employment is very modestly related to compromised emotional, social, and cognitive functioning among offspring. These child outcome measures were at least partially independent of one another in that they were obtained from two sources--the teachers and the students themselves--using several different measurement methods. To the extent that one is willing to assume independence of measures, a simple sign test would indicate that such a pattern of correlations is extremely unlikely by chance ( $z=3.346$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

To parallel the analytic approach adopted with the parent measures, polynomial regression analyses were conducted to evaluate the possibility of a curvilinear component to these relationships. None of the polynomial terms contributed significantly to the prediction of child outcome measures, with the sole exception of positive empathy in Year 1. In Year 1, the relationship of maternal employment to children's positive empathy paralleled the results involving maternal empathy. Children of mothers employed part-time responded with more empathy than children of mothers employed full-time and mothers not employed outside of the home. The change in R associated with the polynomial term was .20,  $p < .05$ , and the multiple R for the full regression equation was .44. The curvilinear relationship between maternal employment and children's positive empathy was not replicated in Year 2. Rather, in the latter year, there was a trend indicating a straight negative linear relationship between these two variables.

Finally, secondary analyses were conducted to assess the relevance of parental education to the bivariate correlates of maternal employment. Partial correlations, controlling for mothers' educational level (or fathers' educational level in analyses involving father measures) were virtually identical to the simple bivariate correlations reported above. In the few instances where small differences between bivariate and partial correlations were observed, the effect of the partial correlational analysis was to enhance

the observed relationships. For example, in Study I, stronger negative relationships were obtained between maternal empathy and mothers' outside work commitments when controlling for maternal education. In general, however, the result revealed that education had little bearing on the links between maternal employment and aspects of the family.

## DISCUSSION

Our findings do not bear out the dire concerns expressed by some laymen and psychologists regarding the negative implications of maternal employment for the mother and the family. Mothers' outside employment commitments, as indicated by hour worked per week outside the home, did not appear to have dramatic negative consequences for parents', families', or children's adjustments. There were, however, some modest signs of stress and strain in the families of employed mothers that warrant consideration.

Taken together, the results from these two independent studies of mothers and fathers of young children indicate that mothers' outside work commitments are modestly associated with maternal stress and maternal empathy. The maternal stress correlates of mothers' employment were primarily linear in nature for mothers of both preschool and elementary school children. The relationships between maternal empathy and mothers' employment were more complex. Among mothers of preschool children, maternal empathy was negatively correlated with hours worked outside the home in a direct linear fashion. Among mothers of elementary school age children, however, this relationship proved to be curvilinear, such that part-time employment was associated with the greatest level of empathic responsiveness. One might speculate that this shift, over the course of the family life cycle, in the nature of the link between maternal empathy and employment may be due to some sort of selection factor. That is, the characteristics of mothers who opt not to pursue outside employment while caring for preschool children may be distinct from the characteristics of the group of mothers who opt not to pursue outside employment even after their children have entered elementary school. Alternatively, developmental changes in children's age-specific needs may alter the implications of maternal employment for the mother-child dyad (Hoffman 1979).

This pattern of findings was, to some degree, mirrored in analyses of the developmental outcome data from offspring of parents in Study II. There was a very modest negative, linear relationship between hours worked by the mother and children's social, emotional, and cognitive functioning. But there was also some evidence of a curvilinear trend in the relationship between children's empathy and maternal employment, a finding that paralleled the links between maternal empathy and maternal employment. This result, taken together with the corresponding linear trend in Year 2, suggests that full-time maternal employment is generally associated with slightly lower empathy among children. However, the empathic responsiveness of children whose mothers work part-time or not at all outside the home is more variable, and may hinge on developmental factors.

At least three major cautions must be considered when interpreting these results. First, as mentioned, the observed links between maternal employment status and the various family and child variables were extremely modest in magnitude. To be sure, each facet of parent, family, and child functioning multiply determined, and hence one would not expect dramatic correlations involving any single predictor variable. From a practical standpoint, this may be a situation where "a little is a lot" (Abelson 1985). Nonetheless, any conclusions drawn from the current investigation must be tempered by a consideration of the magnitude of the observed relationships. Maternal employment status accounted for a very small percentage of the variance in parents', families', and children's psychosocial adjustment.

A second consideration pertains to the conceptual limitations of the current investigation. The studies' findings bear on the simple relationship between hours worked outside of the home by the mother and aspects of family functioning. Because the studies were not initially designed to address questions concerning mothers' employment, the data sets did not include indices of many factors hypothesized to be important mediators of the linkages between work and family contexts. So, although it was determined that the observed relationships varied little as a function of parental level of education, it was not possible to explore the impact of, for example, mother's job satisfaction, husband's attitude towards the wife's career, or flexibility inherent in the mother's (and father's) work schedule. Future investigations incorporating such moderator variables would do much to inform the nature of the findings reported here.

The third, and most important consideration concerns the question of causality. The results reported here are correlational, and hence cannot speak to the causal nature of the links between maternal employment status and aspects of parental, familial, or child functioning. One might surmise that the strains of juggling dual roles within two rather inflexible systems might engender among some mothers personal stress experiences and a modest reduction in empathic responsiveness, which in turn may have an impact on the mother-child relationship and children's subsequent emotional, social, and cognitive functioning. But one could as easily imagine some set of selection factors in operation here, such that mothers who choose (or are required) to work full-time outside the home are disproportionately represented among financially and emotionally stressed families. Such financial or emotional stress could also account for the family characteristics that were weakly associated with maternal employment.

It is the authors' contention, however, that at some point the causal nature of the observed relationships between maternal employment and aspects of the family become moot. The fact remains that a large percentage of American mothers work, and in the current studies, mothers who work full-time outside the home tended, in general, to be somewhat more stressed and somewhat less empathic than mothers who work part-time or mothers who did not work outside the home. These findings suggest that it would be valuable to develop and extend programs aimed at supporting the mother employed full-time. As Gerson (1985:151) so aptly stated:

Public debate, social policy, and academic research would...be better served if attention finally shifted from the historical preoccupation with mother absence to the more fundamental question of how to provide high quality caretaking for children now that a large proportion of American mothers are in the labor force to stay.

We would argue that this question could profitably be extended to include an examination of policies that might lead to a more flexible, workable interface between home and work environments, policies that would allow employed mothers to negotiate the demands of dual full-time roles with less personal and family stress.

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