

# 1 Introduction and Review of the Literature

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## Introduction

This book examines the effects of the mother's employment on family life and children's well-being. It starts with a review of the previous research and then reports the results of a study designed to answer the questions that emerge. The study focuses on 369 families with a child in the third or fourth grades of the public schools in an industrialized city in the Midwest. They represent a broad socioeconomic range and include both one-parent and two-parent families, African Americans and Whites. Extensive data have been obtained from mothers, fathers, children, teachers, classroom peers, and school records. The guiding hypothesis that emerges from the review of previous research is that maternal employment has few, if any, direct effects on the child; it operates mainly through the effect on the family. Three aspects of family life seem particularly important in mediating child effects: the role of the father, the mother's sense of well-being, and the parents' childrearing attitudes and behaviors. The data analyses reported here trace each of these links and reveal how the mother's employment affects family life and, by that route, affects child outcomes.

The book is divided into three parts. The first includes a review of the previous research and a description of the study. The second reports the results of the analyses that examine how the mother's employment status affects the father's role in the family, the mother's sense of well-being, and childrearing patterns. The third section deals with the effects on the child and how these are mediated or moderated by the effects on the three dimensions of family life. Throughout the book, attention is given to how socioeconomic conditions, the mother's marital status, ethnicity, and the child's gender affect these patterns. We start in this chapter with a review of the literature that served as background to our study.

Review of Previous Research

Any review of the research on the effects of maternal employment in the United States must first place the pattern in its social context. Currently, most mothers in the United States are employed. Not only is this true for mothers of school-aged children, as it has been for two decades, but it is also true for mothers of infants less than one year old (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1997). The pace with which maternal employment rates have increased to this point, however, is so rapid that many people fail to realize its prevalence. Furthermore, attempts to understand its effects often ignore the fact that this change is part of a whole complex of social changes. Both employed mothers and homemakers today live in a very different environment than their counterparts forty or even twenty years ago.

There are few social changes that are so easy to document as the increased employment of mothers in the United States. The steady rise in maternal employment rates over the years is clearly illustrated in Table 1.1. The pattern, rare in 1940, had become modal by 1977. By 1996, 70 percent of the mothers with children under eighteen were in the labor force.

Maternal employment rates still differ by age of the youngest child, but this difference has diminished as the greatest recent increases have occurred among married mothers of infants and preschoolers. The rate of employment for married mothers of infants one or under almost doubled between 1975 and 1995, from 30.8 percent to 59 percent (Table 1.2). As Table 1.3 shows, in 1960 18.6 percent of all married mothers of preschoolers were employed, but by 1996, that rate had jumped to 62.7 percent.

Table 1.3 also indicates another change over the years. Whereas in 1960, employed mothers were more likely to be from single-parent families, this

Table 1.1. *Labor Force Participation Rates of Mothers with Children under 18, 1940 and 1946–1996*

Year	Percent in Labor Force
1940	8.6%
1946	18.2%
1956	27.5%
1966	35.8%
1976	48.8%
1986	62.5%
1996	70.0%

Table 1.2. *Labor Force Participation Rates for Wives, Husband Present, by Age of Youngest Child, 1975–1995 (in percent)*

Age of Youngest Child	1975	1985	1995
1 year or younger	30.8	49.4	59.0
2 years	37.1	54.0	66.7
3 years	41.2	55.1	65.5
4 years	41.2	59.7	67.7
5 years	44.4	62.1	69.6
6 to 13 years	51.8	68.2	74.9
14 to 17 years	53.5	67.0	79.6

difference has now vanished. For single mothers who have been married, the current employment rates are just slightly higher than those of married mothers, while both groups show higher rates than never-married mothers. The statistics in these three tables document a major social change in the United States.

It is reasonable to assume that a mother’s employment status affects the child’s development – that the accommodation to the dual demands of employment and parenting influences the family structure, functioning, interaction patterns, and childrearing orientations, which, in turn, have significance for child outcomes. Yet, in fact, we know amazingly little about what the differences are between these families and how such differences affect children.

Table 1.3. *Labor Force Participation Rates for Mothers by Marital Status and Age of Youngest Child, 1960–1996 (in percent)*

Year	Married		Widowed, Divorced, Separated		Never Married	
	6 to 17 years	Under 6 years	6 to 17 years	Under 6 years	6 to 17 years	Under 6 years
1960	39.0	18.6	65.9	40.5	NA	NA
1970	49.2	30.3	66.9	52.2	NA	NA
1980	61.7	45.1	74.6	60.3	67.6	44.1
1990	73.6	58.9	79.7	63.6	69.7	48.7
1996	76.7	62.7	80.6	69.2	71.8	55.1

NA, not available.

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There are two major reasons for this lack of knowledge. First, much of the research in this area fails to take account of the social changes that have occurred. Maternal employment research is often built on data collected in the 1950s, as though family life had remained unchanged. However, as maternal employment patterns have changed over the years, so, too, have other aspects of society and particularly the family. Family size in America has decreased, the management of a household has become more efficient, marital stability has declined, notions of what a person should expect from life have changed, women's roles have been reconceptualized, childrearing orientations are different, and the adult roles for which children are being socialized are not the same as they once were. The selective factors that determine which women will seek employment and which will not have been altered; what was once the deviant choice is now the modal choice. It is not only the employed mother today who must justify her role and cope with possible guilt and anxiety about how this affects her children, but also the full-time homemaker who feels a need to explain her decision and to defend her failure to contribute economically to the family and to conform to the new image of women (Hoffman, 1984b, 1989).

Second, in all of the research during the last forty years, it has been clear that the mother's employment status is not so robust a variable that the simple comparison of the children of employed and nonemployed mothers will reveal consistent differences (Hoffman, 1961, 1974, 1979, 1989). For one thing, relationships had to be examined with attention to other variables that moderated effects; particularly important were social class, the mother's marital status, whether the employment was full- or part-time, the parents' attitudes, and the child's gender. In addition, the research needed to examine the relationships between the mother's employment status and the more proximal variables that mediated the effects on the child. It needed to consider, for example, how maternal employment affected the child's experience in the family and how these experiences, in turn, influenced child outcomes. Unfortunately, few studies have sought indirect effects through linkages, and fewer still have adopted a mediation model in studying the effects of employment on children.

This review begins with a summary of the research that has examined the direct relationship between the mother's employment status and child outcomes and then concentrates on the three variables that have emerged as most likely to be mediators of child outcomes: the father's role, the mother's state of well being, and parent-child interaction patterns. A final section describes the efforts to examine socioeconomic, marital status, and ethnic differences in maternal employment effects. Studies of the effects of

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day care, other forms of nonmaternal care, and after-school care will be reviewed in Chapter 11.

### *Differences Between Children of Employed and Nonemployed Mothers*

Most of the studies that have compared the children of employed and nonemployed mothers on child outcome measures (e.g., indices of cognitive and socioemotional development) have failed to find significant differences (Heynes, 1982; Zaslow, 1987). The research that has shown reasonably consistent differences has examined the relationships within subgroups based on social class and gender. Patterns that have been revealed over the years include the following:

1. Daughters of employed mothers have been found to have higher academic achievement, greater career success, more nontraditional career choices, and greater occupational commitment (Alessandri, 1992; Eccles & Hoffman, 1984; Hoffman, 1979, 1980).
2. Studies of children in poverty, in both two-parent and single-mother families, found higher cognitive scores and higher scores on socioemotional indices for children with employed mothers (Cherry & Eaton, 1977; Heynes, 1978; Kreisberg, 1970; Vandell & Ramanan, 1992).
3. A few studies have found that sons of employed mothers in the middle class showed lower school performance and lower IQ scores during the grade school years. Although two recent studies did not replicate this finding (Gottfried, Gottfried & Bathurst, 1988; Stevenson, 1982), a third did (Desai, Chase-Lansdale, & Michael, 1989).
4. Some nonacademic differences between characteristics of children with employed and nonemployed mothers have also been found, but with less consistency. Daughters of employed mothers have been found to be more independent, particularly in interaction with their peers in a school setting (Hoffman, 1974, 1979; Schachter, 1981; Siegel, Stolz, Hitchcock, & Adamson, 1963), and to score higher on socioemotional adjustment measures (Alessandri, 1992; Gold & Andres, 1978a). Results for sons have been quite mixed and vary with social class, preschool experience, and age at testing (Zaslow, 1987).
5. Sons and daughters of employed mothers have less traditional sex-role ideologies (Hoffman, 1979, 1989).

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### *The Father's Role*

In addition, several studies have found relationships between the mother's employment status and family patterns that, in turn, have been related to children's sex-role attitudes, academic performance, and social competence. Of particular note is the father's participation in household tasks and child care. Fathers play a more active role when the mother is employed (Gottfried, Gottfried, & Bathurst, 1988; Gottfried, Bathurst, & Gottfried, 1994; Hoffman, 1983, 1986; Pleck, 1983). Three possible consequences of this increased participation of fathers have been suggested:

1. It mitigates the mother's potential overload from the dual role.
2. A less traditional model of adult roles is presented.
3. It enhances the child's cognitive development.

**Relief for the Mother.** There is some support for the first suggested consequence: In a national sample study, Kessler and McRae (1982) found that among currently married mothers, the higher morale of employed mothers commonly reported in the research holds only when their husbands help with child care.

**Less Gender Role Traditionalism.** There is also evidence for the second possible consequence. The increased participation of fathers associated with the mother's employment has been found to extend across the traditional division of labor. For example, Baruch and Barnett (1987) found that in single-wage families, more active fathers participate by spending more time with their children, but are not as likely to take part in child care and household tasks. In dual-wage families, on the other hand, a merging of roles is more common. Research has shown that fathers in dual-wage families participate more in family tasks traditionally carried out by mothers (Hoffman, 1983, 1986; Pleck, 1983). This effect is more pronounced when the mother is employed full-time, when there is more than one child, and when there are no older children in the family, particularly no older daughters. Furthermore, some studies indicate that the effect is more pronounced when the mother's income approaches the father's (Model, 1981; Scanlon, 1978). The fact that the husbands of employed mothers are more active in household tasks and child care also appears to be a causal relationship, and not merely a selective factor, because the relationship holds even when sex-role ideology is controlled (Crouter & Huston, 1985; Hoffman, 1986), and it is frequently reported by parents as an effect of employment (Gottfried,

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Gottfried, & Bathurst, 1988; Hoffman, 1983). Because father involvement has increased generally in recent years (Bond, Galinsky, & Swansberg, 1998; Hill & Stafford, 1980; Pleck, 1983), it has been suggested that there also has been an increased responsiveness by fathers to their wives' employment (Lamb, 1981).

The effects of maternal employment on the traditional division of labor in the family are important in several respects. In particular, it is likely that this is one of the routes by which maternal employment operates to diminish sex-role traditionalism. The employment of a mother calls for some accommodation by the father. Although the response has been modest, there has been some, and this, in turn, diminishes traditionalistic attitudes in families (Baruch & Barnett, 1986b). Data have shown that the relationship between the father's participation and children's diminished sex-role traditionalism is significantly stronger in the employed-mother families than in the families with nonemployed mothers (Baruch & Barnett, 1986b). This difference may reflect the nature of the father's participation: in the employed-mother family there is more of a merging of roles between the parents, while in the nonemployed-mother family, the involved father spends more time with the children but the traditional sex-based division of labor is maintained (Baruch & Barnett, 1987; Crouter, Perry-Jenkins, Huston, & McHale, 1987). The repeated finding that the children of employed mothers hold less stereotyped attitudes about sex roles than do the children of nonemployed mothers may be at least partly explained by the intermediating effect on the parental division of labor. The children's nonstereotyped attitudes might be because of the parents' attitudes but also because they observe their parents' less traditional roles.

**Cognitive Enhancement.** The third hypothesis is that fathers' involvement with children *enhances* the child's cognitive abilities and that by this route employed mothers' children are more advantaged than the children of full-time homemakers (Hoffman, 1980; Gold & Andres, 1978a; Gottfried, Gottfried, & Bathurst, 1988). There are two forms of this idea.

One of these is specific for daughters: that is, father participation may decrease gender-role stereotyping, and this may have positive effects on daughters' achievement motivation and behavior. Since daughters of employed mothers are often found to have higher cognitive scores as children and to show higher achievement patterns as adults, this is a viable hypothesis, but the actual chain of connection – from maternal employment, to father participation, to decreased traditionalism, to daughters' higher achievement – has not previously been empirically examined.

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The other hypothesis is that father-child interaction is particularly cognitively stimulating, especially with respect to competence in math. This hypothesis derives from earlier research that compared achievement test scores of children in single-mother families and two-parent families and found such advantages for the latter group. This body of work has been criticized and the suggestion has been made that it is not the presence of the father but the financial advantage of a father that accounts for the difference (Barber & Eccles, 1992; Herzog & Sudia, 1973). Nevertheless, Gottfried, Gottfried, and Bathurst (1988) found that higher involvement of fathers was associated with children's higher cognitive scores within a primarily two-parent sample with social class controlled.

Such results, however, do not mean that father involvement per se has a special advantage. They might mean that the benefits for children stem from having an additional adult of either gender involved – that it is augmented parenting that is advantageous. This possibility receives some support from the research of Dornbusch and his colleagues (1985), which indicated that some of the problems associated with single-mother status are mitigated by the presence of an additional adult of either gender. It is possible that father involvement in employed-mother families compensates for lesser interaction with employed mothers, but does not provide an overall enhancement of the child's environment. As yet, no study has actually demonstrated special benefits of fathers' involvement with children. Neither are there any data showing that the father's involvement mediates cognitive or achievement outcomes in employed-mother families – either compensation or enhancement (Gold & Andres, 1978a; Gottfried, Gottfried, & Bathurst, 1988).

In summary, then, the data show that the father's role in the family is affected by the mother's employment status. They also show that his role has significance for child outcomes. More attention needs to be given, however, to how different aspects of the father's participation in household tasks and child care affect children. Such research should separately examine families with employed mothers and those with full-time housewives. The separate examination is particularly important because data suggest that the nature and effects of father participation are different in the employed-mother family than in the nonemployed-mother family (Barnett & Baruch, 1987; Crouter & Crowley, 1990; Crouter, Perry-Jenkins, Huston, & McHale, 1987). For example, Crouter and her colleagues (1987) found that the increased involvement of fathers associated with mothers' employment includes functional rather than fun activities. A fuller understanding of these issues could shed light on the higher achievement patterns so often

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found for daughters of employed mothers: the diminished sex-role traditionalism in dual-wage families could be the important link. Further, either the greater interaction between fathers and children or specific patterns of interaction could be involved in the link between the mother's employment status and children's cognitive abilities.

**The Marital Relationship.** A research issue that has been considered is whether the mother's employment status affects the marital relationship. Further, the possibility has been raised that the father's participation in household tasks and child care may moderate such effects (Hoffman, 1989).

Most studies investigating the effects of maternal employment on marital satisfaction find no difference (Smith, 1985; Warr & Perry, 1982). When differences are found, a negative correlation between maternal employment and marital satisfaction occurs more often when there is sex-role traditionalism, resentment of the employment by either parent, a lower-class sample, or the father is the reporter. A positive relationship is more likely to be found when the sample is educated or middle class, the mother wants to work, the work is part-time, or the mother is the reporter (Hoffman, 1986). In several studies of highly educated *dual-career* couples, both parents report that the mother's career has enhanced their marriage, despite the inconveniences it has caused (Emmons et al., 1987; Gilbert, 1985). It is interesting also to note that for employed women, the impact of marital stress seems to be less pervasive (Weinraub, Jaeger, & Hoffman, 1988), and work provides a buffer against debilitating anxiety (Cleary & Mechanic, 1983; Hetherington, 1979; Stewart & Malley, 1987; Stewart & Salt, 1981).

Consistent with the idea that the nature and significance of the father's participation in child care may be different in single-wage and dual-wage families, however, high father participation has been found to be related to fathers' marital dissatisfaction in dual-wage families and not in single-wage (Baruch & Barnett, 1987; Crouter et al., 1987). The reason for the different relationships to marital satisfaction is not clear, but there are at least two possible explanations. One is that because the father's participation in child care in the dual-wage family may not be intrinsically motivated, he may resent it. There is evidence that fathers in dual-wage families often complain about their wives' availability for child care and indicate concern that their own careers may be suffering because of the family demands on their time (Baruch & Barnett, 1986a, 1987; Emmons et al., 1987; Gilbert, 1985). Another possible explanation has to do with the nature of the father's involvement. As already noted, in single-wage families, the active fathers participate by spending time with their children, but not by carrying

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out the child care and household tasks, as active fathers do in dual-wage families. This pattern of participation may not only be more pleasurable, but it may also avoid the conflicts that can emerge when both parents are involved in the same activities (Hoffman, 1983). Little attention has been paid to the role of marital satisfaction as a possible link between a mother's employment status and child outcomes, but it may be an important one, both in terms of the direct effect of the marriage relationship on children and through its effects on the mother's morale.

*The Mother's Sense of Well-being*

Another aspect of family life that is often seen as linking the mother's employment status to effects on the child is the mother's sense of well-being, and numerous studies have compared employed mothers to full-time homemakers on various indices of mental health and life satisfaction. Most of this research has found a higher level of satisfaction among the employed. These results have been found for professional women (Birnbaum, 1975) and for blue-collar workers (Ferree, 1976), in national samples (Kessler & McRae, 1982; Veroff, Douvan, & Kukla, 1981) and in more homogeneous ones (Gold & Andres, 1978a, 1978b). In addition, employed mothers have been found to score lower on psychosomatic symptoms, measures of depression, and various stress indicators (Burke & Weir, 1976; Kessler & McRae, 1982; McLoyd, Jayaratne, Ceballo, & Borquez, 1994). Furthermore, employment has been shown to be a source of psychological support in times of family difficulties (Cleary & Mechanic, 1983; Hetherington, 1979; Stewart & Malley, 1987; Stewart & Salt, 1981). Nevertheless, these relationships can be affected by the mother's attitude toward the job (Gove & Zeiss, 1987; Baruch & Barnett, 1987; Staines, Pleck, Shepard, & O'Conner, 1978), by the stability of child-care arrangements (Goldberg & Easterbrooks, 1988), and, as already noted, by the father's participation in child care (Kessler & McRae, 1982).

Although the bulk of the research on employment status and mothers' mental health has found higher morale among employed mothers, some investigators found no significant differences (Baruch & Barnett, 1986c; Radloff, 1980; Repetti & Crosby, 1984; Ross, Mirowsky, & Huber, 1983). However, despite an extensive search, we found no study that showed the mental health of full-time homemakers to be higher than that of employed women, and this same conclusion is reported in other reviews (Repetti, Mathews, & Waldron, 1989; Warr & Parry, 1982b). Because most of this research has been conducted with middle-class samples, it has sometimes