

## DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 462 658

CG 031 601

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TITLE The Effects of Maternal Employment on the Attitudes, Work Expectations, and Self-Esteem of Urban and Suburban Middle School Students.  
PUB DATE 2002-00-00  
NOTE 18p.  
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143)  
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.  
DESCRIPTORS Attitude Measures; Comparative Analysis; \*Employed Women; \*Family Work Relationship; Grade 6; Middle School Students; Middle Schools; \*Mothers; Self Esteem; Sex Differences; Student Attitudes; Suburban Youth; Urban Youth  
IDENTIFIERS Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale

## ABSTRACT

This study investigated the effects of maternal employment on beliefs and attitudes of suburban and urban middle school students in addition to their comparative levels of self-esteem. A 5-part survey, including demographic information, beliefs about consequences of maternal employment of children; information about the mother's work status; childhood appraisal scale; and Rosenberg's Self-Concept Scale was administered to 38 sixth grade urban students and 38 sixth grade suburban students. The results indicated that both urban and suburban female students perceived significantly greater benefits associated with maternal employment. No differences in perceived costs of maternal employment were found. Urban students were significantly less influenced by their fathers than suburban students. No differential admiration of mothers was noted between the groups, although significantly more suburban than urban mothers were employed in professional jobs. Female students expressed greater admiration for their mothers' accomplishments and had a greater desire to imitate their mothers. During their children's infancy, a greater number of females than males expected not to have outside employment. However, once their child reached school age, both males and females expected to have at least part-time employment outside the home. (Contains 14 references.) (Author/JDM)

ED 462 658

The Effects of Maternal Employment on the Attitudes,  
Work Expectations, and Self-Esteem of  
Urban and Suburban Middle School Students

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### Abstract

This study investigated the effects of maternal employment on beliefs and attitudes of suburban and urban middle school students in addition to their comparative levels of self-esteem. A five-part survey, including demographic information, Beliefs About Consequences of Maternal Employment for Children, information about the mother's work status, an author devised Childhood Appraisal Scale, and Rosenberg's Self-Concept Scale, was administered to 38 sixth grade urban students and 38 sixth grade suburban students. Separate independent sample t-tests were conducted between school type and gender. The results indicated that both urban and female students perceived significantly greater benefits associated with maternal employment. However, no differences in perceived costs of maternal employment were found. Urban students were significantly less influenced by their fathers than suburban students. Suburban students were found to have a greater desire to imitate their fathers and were more comfortable asking their fathers' opinion than urban students. No differential admiration of mothers was noted between these groups, although significantly more suburban than urban mothers were employed in professional jobs. Female students expressed greater admiration for their mothers' accomplishments and had a greater desire to imitate their mothers than male students. Chi square analyses were conducted to analyze the relationship between sex and expected work status. During their child's infancy, a greater number of females expected to have no outside employment than did males. However, once their child reached school age, both males and females expected to have at least part-time employment outside the home. No significant differences across school type or gender were found on the measure of self-esteem.

## Introduction

Now more than ever, two-parent families are dual-income families. In 1989, the rate of maternal employment for two-parent families with school-aged children was seventy-one percent (Hoffman, 1989). Moden and Dempster-McClain (1987) found that in most dual-career families, parents work more than two full-time jobs. Almost half of participants indicated that fathers put in more than full time at work or at a second job, while mothers recorded working only full time. They also found that the age of the youngest child is not a factor in determining the amount of hours worked. Mothers with infant or preschool aged children are just as likely as those with older children to put in extended hours on the job. Mothers who worked regular full time hours or extended hours reported spending 3.5 hours per workday with their children while those working part-time reported 4.7 hours a day with their children. There were no significant differences found with the amount of time fathers spent with their children, 2.3 hours, regardless of the time spent at work (Moden & Dempster-McClain, 1987).

According to the definition of dual-career couples, they place primary importance on the development of both their careers in addition to the management of their marriage and families. A conflict that often results from this attempt at balance is the work-family conflict. During this conflict, the pressures and expectations from one aspect make it difficult or impossible to attend to tasks of the other, often indicating that the two roles are incompatible. Previous studies have indicated that “[f]or women, working longer hours is associated with higher role strain; for men, larger family size and having work schedules that cannot accommodate family needs are associated with higher role strain” (Burley, 1995). Gender differences have also been found in

the equity of household task distribution, perceived spouse support, and the reaction of superiors to perceived family-career conflicts between men and women (Burley, 1995).

According to Skinner (1980), there are several types of stress and strain maternal employment can cause within a marriage. Many dual-career families may also experience role-cycling issues as they try to mesh their different individual careers with the cycles of their families. Working mothers often have overload issues, trying to balance work with their roles as homemakers. Burley (1995) found that men spent about 14.25 hours a week involved in family work while the women they were married to spent 16.33 hours per week in family work.

According to census data, female participation in the work force rose from about 23 percent in 1940 to 60 percent in 1992. This rise in participation sparked an increase in maternal employment. In 1950 only 16 percent of children had working mothers, while today over 70 percent of children have mothers who work outside the home. Recent statistics indicate that half of women with children under one year of age are employed outside the home while over 60 percent of those with children younger than six years of age are employed (Vander Ven, et. al., 2001).

Maternal employment has been found to have an impact on children's views when regarding traditional gender roles. "A gender role is a set of expectations that prescribe how females and males should behave, feel, and think" (Jackson & Tein, 1998). Willetts-Bloom and Nock (1994) found that maternal employment 's effect was dependent on the age of the child when the mother returned to work. When the child was very young, he or she showed acceptance of maternal employment compared to the disapproval of children who were older when their mothers went back to work. Previous studies have found that those with working mothers were more favorable to maternal employment and did not see maternal employment as

fostering negative effects. Those children whose mothers work were more likely to accept and approve of full-time working status among mothers as well as demonstrate less traditional gender role views (Willets-Bloom & Nock, 1994).

In order to study the differences in children's gender-related attitudes, several previous studies were examined. In a study done by Kiecolt and Acock (1988), two hypotheses were explored. The first, father-absence hypothesis, reasons that children raised in a single-mother household have more nontraditional gender attitudes because they lack a father figure. This is based on the idea that fathers generally support traditional gender roles more than mothers. "If this hypothesis is correct, children from single-mother families should prove the most nontraditional, whereas children from single-father families should be the most traditional regarding gender attitudes" (Wright & Young, 1998). The second hypothesis argues that because children who live in single-parent households have to share managerial and household responsibilities with their parent they are taught "to value more nontraditional definitions of gender roles" (Wright & Young, 1998). It has also been found that children raised in divorced families show more androgynous traits than those raised in dual-parent families. Independent women also impact children's gender-related attitudes. For example, children living with only their mother tend to have nontraditional gender attitudes due to the fact that an economically independent woman is raising them (Wright & Young, 1998).

In dual-career nuclear families, Propper (1972) found that parent-child disagreement was more common in families where the mother was employed outside the home versus those where the mother had no outside employment. Sons of working mothers were less likely to report their father as 'the male they most admire.' "Because of the high value placed on economic success in the larger community, a mother's employment (particularly in working-class families where

employment is an economic necessity) probably makes her husband appear ineffectual as a provider and as an effective ideal for his son” (Propper, 1972).

Older adolescent males indicated a more traditional perception of gender roles, citing it is socially acceptable for an adult male to give priority to work responsibilities over family ones, yet they perceived women who worked to be less attractive and viewed their employment as a strain on marriage. The responses of older adolescent males significantly differed from those of all females and younger males. Older males whose mothers worked tended to have more traditional expectations of gender roles, being less likely to believe that fathers should share an equal amount of household tasks and that mothers have the right to choose their own relationships and activities (Jackson & Tein, 1998). On the other hand, maternal employment was found to have a more positive effect on the gender role attitudes of girls. More liberal attitudes regarding women’s place in politics were found in girls whose mothers worked outside the home. Daughters of working mothers were also less likely to agree with a statement asserting that male achievement belongs in work outside the home while female achievement should be within the home (Willets-Bloom & Nock, 1994).

Researchers have found two conflicting views on how maternal employment affects children. The first view is that employment enhances the family as a whole. Outside employment can promote “stimulation, self-esteem, adult contacts, and escape from the repetitive routines of housework and child care” which strengthen her abilities as a mother (Hoffman, 1986). In addition, a mother’s working status can foster a stronger father-child relationship. Since parents in dual-wage families often share childcare responsibilities, fathers have a greater opportunity to spend more time with their children. Propper (1972) theorizes that “[u]nemployed mothers are probably under more psychological pressure to prevent their

husbands from being equal partners in child rearing because their sense of self-worth comes primarily from home and children.”

The opposing view states that because being both a businesswoman and a mother can be difficult, the added stress can lower the quality of mothering (Hoffman, 1986). Furthermore, parents may end up spending less time with their children because they will have household duties in addition to economic responsibilities. On the other hand, mothers who do not work have more time to complete household tasks leaving more time to spend with their children (Propper, 1972).

In order to assess Americans' beliefs about the impact of maternal employment, a scale of Attitudes toward Women's Working was given as part of the National Longitudinal Survey. It was shown that 51.1% of Americans think that working mothers create a less warm and secure relationship with their children. Along the same lines, 67.3% believe that children who attend preschool are more likely to suffer “emotional damage” if they have a working mother (Greenberger, et. al., 1988). A national survey done by the Public Agenda Foundation noted that fifty percent of Americans believe that mothers employed outside the home are “bad for children” and fifty-seven percent feel she “weaken[s] the family as an institution” (Greenberger, et. al., 1988).

The Beliefs About the Consequences of Maternal Employment for Children (BACMEC) is a 24-item scale developed to measure the benefits and costs of maternal employment. When looking at costs and benefits, women who go back to their job despite their belief that working mothers have a negative impact on the family tend to feel stress and conflict about balancing work and family life. Also, mothers who sense many costs and few benefits to working may undergo feelings of guilt, worry, or sadness because they have left their children in the care of



others. The study found the BACMEC to be both reliable and valid based on overall correlations and sub-correlations of costs and benefits (Greenberger, et. al., 1988).

Statistics indicate that families living in urban areas are of lower economic status than those families living in suburban areas (Heaton, et al., 2000). Those living in urban areas tend to be minority populations and families headed by women. Most likely, this is due to the wage gap seen between white males and rest of the workforce. Minority groups, particularly women, earn significantly less per year than males with similar job descriptions (Chao, 2001). Since the minority groups living in urban areas earn less than those living in suburban areas, urban families are more often dual-career families where both parents need to work outside the home to fulfill economic necessity.

Previous research has also examined the effects of poverty on low-income mothers. Nichols-Casebolt (1986) found that low-income mothers who received welfare reported lower levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy (Kunz & Kalil, 1999). “Menaghan (1990) found that low self-esteem among young mothers was related to fewer completed years of education and employment at lower wages and complexity six years later, controlling for characteristics of the mothers' families of origin and their own early cognitive skills”(Kunz & Kalil, 1999). It has also been speculated that a mother’s mood affects her children (Hoffman, 1986). Therefore, since poorer mothers tend to have lower self-esteem, this has the potential to negatively impact the lives of her children.

The purpose of this study was to examine the effects of maternal employment on suburban and urban middle school students as well as differences in self-esteem between the two types of schools. It was hypothesized that urban students would be more accepting of working mothers than suburban students based on the findings that urban mothers are more likely to work

outside the home than suburban mothers. It was also hypothesized that urban students would show lower measures of self-esteem based on the assumption that urban families are of lower economic status and that financial strain highly correlates to low self-esteem.

### **Methods**

#### Subjects:

The subjects used in this study were 76 junior high school students. The sample consisted of 24 males and 14 females from a sixth grade suburban classroom at Cinnaminson Middle School, Cinnaminson, New Jersey and 14 males and 24 females from a sixth grade urban classroom at Rush Middle School, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The subjects ranged in age from 10 to 12 years old. Permission was obtained from parents for the students to participate in the study.

#### Procedure:

The packet used in this study was handed out to subjects in the sixth grade classroom. Subjects were asked to fill out the packet in its entirety. Ample time was given to the students to complete the questionnaire packet. The packet used in this study consisted of five different parts.

In part one, subjects were asked to provide demographic information and to answer questions concerning their career and family expectations. These questions required subjects to disclose information concerning their expectations about family plans, job type, job characteristics, and work preference based on the age of their youngest child. Subjects were also asked 10 questions concerning their attitudes toward their mother and father. These questions required subjects to indicate their degree of agreement with each statement on a 4 point Likert scale.

Part two of the packet was made up of the BACMEC questionnaire (Greenberger et al., 1988). The BACMEC is a 24-item scale developed to measure Beliefs About the Consequences of Maternal Employment for Children. The BACMEC included beliefs about both benefits (13 items) and costs (11 items). Studies of five samples (n=375) have demonstrated that the total BACMEC scale and its subscales are highly reliable and have good convergent, divergent, and concurrent validity (Greenberger et al., 1988).

In part three of the packet, subjects were asked to disclose information about their mother's work status at each stage of development. The stages of development were infancy (birth to 1 1/2 years old), preschool (2 to 5 years old), childhood (6 to 12 years old), and adolescence (13 to 18 years old). The subjects were asked to report whether their mothers were employed part-time, fulltime, or not employed outside the home during each stage of development. Subjects also disclosed information about their mother's job, indicating whether it was professional, white collar, or blue collar work. Subjects were also asked to indicate whether or not they had been raised in a single parent household.

Part four of the packet consisted of the CASR, the Revised Childhood Appraisal Scale (Chambliss, Owens, & Carr, 1991). The CASR is a 13-item questionnaire designed to measure the subject's perception of the consequences of their mother's work status. The subjects were asked to rate each item on a scale from 1 to 4 depending on how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each statement. The statements permitted subjects to indicate if they felt their lives would have been different if their mother's work status had been different when they were growing up. This allowed an assessment of the perceived impact of fulltime and part-time maternal employment, as well as unemployment.

The final part of the packet was the 10-item Rosenberg Self Concept Scale ( ), which was used to measure self esteem. Subjects were asked to indicate on a 4 point Likert scale how strongly they agreed or disagreed with each statement. The statements assessed students' perceptions of self-image.

## Results

### Suburban versus Urban Schools

Directionally adjusted responses were totaled to create two summary measures of attitudes toward maternal employment, one assessing perceived benefits and another assessing perceived costs. Between-subjects t-tests were used to compare participants from urban and suburban middle schools. Significant differences emerged on the perceived benefits scale; urban students gave significantly higher ratings of the benefits of maternal employment than suburban students (urban  $x=54.37, s.d.=9.91, n=38$  versus suburban  $x=48.99, s.d.=12.43, n=36; t=2.36, df=72, p<.05$ ).

In order to create a summary measure of attitudes toward paternal influences, directionally adjusted responses were totaled. Between-subjects t-tests were used to compare participants. Urban students were significantly less influenced by their fathers than suburban students (urban  $x=8.95, s.d.=3.89, n=37$  versus suburban  $x=11.00, s.d.=3.05, n=37; t=2.53, df=72, p<.05$ ).

When assessing several items dealing with students' attitudes toward their fathers significant differences were found. Suburban students were found to have a greater desire to imitate their father than urban students (urban  $x=2.54, s.d.=1.17, n=37$  versus suburban  $x=3.11, s.d.=0.88, n=37; t=2.36, df=72, p<.05$ ). They were also more comfortable than urban students asking their fathers' opinion when they have a problem (urban  $x=2.43, s.d.=1.04, n=37$  versus

suburban  $x=2.97$ ,  $s.d.=0.80$ ,  $n=37$ ;  $t=2.50$ ,  $df=72$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Urban students were more likely to believe that they are more intelligent than their fathers than suburban students (urban  $x=2.11$ ,  $s.d.=1.07$ ,  $n=37$  versus suburban  $x=1.62$ ,  $s.d.=0.79$ ,  $n=37$ ;  $t=2.22$ ,  $df=72$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

There were also significant differences found on individual items. According to the crosstabulation relation, it was found that a higher number of urban mothers are blue-collar workers than suburban mothers. While both had a large number of white-collar workers, there was a significantly greater amount of professional suburban mothers than professional urban mothers (chi square = 10.29,  $df=2$ ,  $p<.01$ ), see Table 1.

Table 1

## Type of School x Type of Mother's Job Crosstabulation

	Mother's Job			
School Type	Professional	White-Collar	Blue-Collar	Total
Suburban	9	18	6	33
Urban	1	21	15	37
<b>TOTAL</b>	10	39	21	70

Suburban students tended to expect a higher number of children than urban students (urban  $x=2.18$ ,  $s.d.=.96$ ,  $n=36$  versus suburban  $x=2.78$ ,  $s.d.=.95$ ,  $n=34$ ;  $t=2.62$ ,  $df=68$ ,  $p<.05$ ). Urban students were also given more responsibilities as a child than suburban students (urban  $x=3.11$ ,  $s.d.=0.86$ ,  $n=38$  versus suburban  $x=2.57$ ,  $s.d.=0.88$ ,  $n=35$ ;  $t=2.61$ ,  $df=71$ ,  $p<.05$ ).

## Sex

Directionally adjusted responses were totaled to create two summary measures of attitudes toward maternal employment, one assessing perceived benefits and another assessing

perceived costs. Between-subjects t-tests were used to compare male and female participants. Significant differences emerged on the perceived benefits scale; female students gave significantly higher ratings of the benefits of maternal employment than male students (male  $x=46.69, s.d.=12.33, n=36$  versus female  $x=55.82, s.d.=8.34, n=38; t=3.67, df=72, p<.001$ ).

In order to create a summary measure of attitudes toward paternal influences, directionally adjusted responses were totaled. Between-subjects t-tests were used to compare participants. Male students were significantly less influenced by their mothers than female students (male  $x=10.28, s.d.=2.13, n=36$  versus female  $x=11.86, s.d.=2.61, n=37; t=2.84, df=71, p<.01$ ).

Significant differences were also found on several other items that dealt with students' attitudes toward their mothers. Female students were found to have a greater desire to imitate their mother than male students (male  $x=2.69, s.d.=0.79, n=36$  versus female  $x=3.13, s.d.=0.93, n=38; t=2.17, df=72, p<.05$ ). They were also more likely to admire their mothers' accomplishments than males (male  $x=3.24, s.d.=0.68, n=37$  versus female  $x=3.61, s.d.=0.64, n=38; t=2.37, df=73, p<.05$ ). Male students were more likely to believe that they are more intelligent than their mothers than female students (male  $x=2.11, s.d.=1.01, n=36$  versus female  $x=1.66, s.d.=0.71, n=38; t=2.25, df=72, p<.05$ ).

Crosstabulations were calculated to analyze the relationship between sex and expected work status. Significant differences were found on expected work statuses of both sexes during different stages of their child's life. During infancy, a greater number of females expected to have no outside employment than males (chi square = 18.01,  $df=2, p<.001$ ). Once the child reaches school age, both males and females expect to have at least part-time employment outside the home (chi square = 13.48,  $df=2, p<.05$ ).

groups. By chance, the urban school had a disproportionately high number of female students, while the suburban sample had a male majority. The significant differences observed between the urban and suburban students may be attributed to this uneven sex distribution. The urban group's perception of greater benefits of maternal employment may actually have been due to the preponderance of female students in the urban school sample. Females in this study indicated a greater desire to imitate their mothers and a greater tendency to admire their mothers' accomplishments than males, which directly parallels the greater number of urban students indicating these same reactions. In order to minimize this problem, future research should seek samples with a more even gender distribution in order to eliminate this potential confound and to clarify the actual attitudinal correlates of urban versus suburban school settings.

The results of this study indicate that urban and suburban middle school students still tend to endorse fairly traditional gender-role attitudes, believing that women should be expected to stay home with their children during their child's infancy. A greater number of males than females expected mothers to remain unemployed as their children got older. Future research exploring the attitudes of high school and college students might further illuminate these issues.

When males' and females' expectations regarding spousal employment were compared, significant differences emerged only during their children's infancy. The percentage of males who expected their spouse to have no outside employment, 43.75%, was significantly greater than the percentage of females who expected their spouse to have no outside employment, 18.92%. After infancy there were no significant differences between males' and females' expectations of spousal employment.

### **Discussion**

The results of this study are consistent with previous research findings regarding the effects of maternal employment on children. However, no significant differences in measures of self-esteem were found between urban and suburban students. According to the results of this study, a greater number of urban mothers tended to have blue-collar jobs while suburban mothers were more likely to hold professional positions. This supports the evidence that families residing in urban areas are in more economic need, making dual-income families more prevalent.

According to the BACMEC, urban students that participated in this study indicated higher ratings of the benefits of maternal employment. This is consistent with the findings of Willets-Bloom and Nock (1994) that children of working mothers are more accepting of maternal employment than those whose mothers remain at home. In addition, suburban students indicated a greater desire to imitate their father and ask their fathers' opinion than urban students. Urban students tended to believe they were more intelligent than their fathers, perhaps providing more support of Propper's (1974) claim that in dual-wage families, fathers become less of a role model for their children because they cannot provide sufficient economic support.

When analyzing the results of this study, it is important to consider the possibility that sex may have been a confounding factor in the comparisons between the urban and suburban school



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