

Gender, Multiple Roles, Role Meaning, and Mental Health*

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This paper examines gender differences in the consequences of combining spouse, parent, and worker roles for mental health. I suggest that work and family roles have different meanings for males and females, and that differences in the meaning of these roles may be partially responsible for why the mental health advantages of holding multiple roles are fewer for women than for men. Based on qualitative analyses of follow-up, in-depth interviews with 40 employed married parents who participated in a community panel study of mental health, I find that sex differences in the perceived relationship between work and family roles may help account for sex differences in distress by contributing to male-female differences in both the extent and nature of work-parent conflicts, attributions of responsibility for marital problems, feelings of guilt, and self-evaluations as parents and spouses. By identifying gender differences in the meaning of roles among individuals who have the same multiple role configuration, and suggesting how these differences can help explain sex differences in well-being, this research may expand existing theories about the mental health consequences of multiple role involvements.

Current theories about the mental health consequences of multiple role involvements are unable to explain the persistence of gender differences in distress among married per-

sons, because they focus almost exclusively on social structural factors (e.g., gender inequality in the family and workplace) and ignore the meaning of social roles to men and women. The purpose of this paper is to examine the meaning of work and family roles to males and females, and to suggest how gender differences in the meaning of these roles, together with social structural factors, may more fully explain gender differences in distress among the married than theories which are based primarily on structural factors.

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BACKGROUND

A problem that has preoccupied sociologists is the inability of existing theories about the consequences of holding multiple roles to explain the persistence of gender differences in distress among the married. Earlier research from several theoretical perspectives focused on the role accumulation hypothesis, which argues that women's mental health disadvantage is a result of the fewer numbers (and types) of roles they possess relative to men (Gove and Tudor 1973). Much of this work was interested in whether women's

increased labor force participation reduced the gender gap in mental health. This research provided inconsistent support for the role accumulation hypothesis since it revealed that holding multiple roles is not always beneficial (or harmful) for women. For instance, while some studies found that employment benefits women (e.g., Kessler and McRae 1982; Rosenfield 1980), others showed no difference between the distress of employed wives and homemakers (e.g., Aneshensel, Frerichs, and Clark 1981; Cleary and Mechanic 1983; Gore and Mangione 1983; Pearlin 1975).

Dissatisfied with this approach for glossing over the complexities of people's role involvements, researchers focused on the psychological effects of various role configurations. By comparing men and women who hold the same roles, this work revealed that certain role combinations are differentially protective for males and females. With regard to female employment, studies documented that employed married mothers are more anxious, distressed, have more somatic complaints (and are sometimes more depressed) than similar fathers (Menaghan 1989; Thoits 1986).

To account for these sex differences, researchers turned to social structural factors such as the division of household labor and labor market inequality, both of which are rooted in traditional gender norms and expectations. This work emphasized the importance of examining the characteristics of roles (and interactions among roles) for specifying the conditions under which holding work and family roles is beneficial (or harmful) for men and women. For instance, husbands' modest contribution to housework and childcare is a source of strain for employed wives, which puts them at risk of disorder relative to men (Kessler and McRae 1982). Moreover, wives' lower earnings increase their depression by decreasing their power (and control) relative to their husbands' (Rosenfield 1989). The division of household labor, coupled with husbands' and wives' preferences for the wife's employment, also affect their symptoms (Ross, Mirowsky, and Huber 1983).

However, existing structural arrangements are necessary, but not sufficient, to explain why the mental health advantages of combining work and family roles are fewer for women. Studies controlling for structural variables (e.g., occupation, income, and the

division of labor) still find sex differences in symptoms (Radloff 1975; Reskin and Coverman 1985; Rosenfield 1992). While previous work provides insight into aspects of roles which have an emotional impact, and elucidates how husbands' and wives' roles interact, it ignores the *meanings* men and women attach to their roles. I contend that work and family roles have different meanings for males and females, and that these differences may be a crucial additional factor for explaining the persistence of sex differences in distress among the married.

Role Meaning

Meaning may depend on *relationships* among roles. For instance, if spouse and parent roles involve the provision of economic support, combining work and family roles should be beneficial, since employment contributes to one's ability to engage in socially-expected role behaviors. However, if spouse and parent roles do not include the provision of economic support, combining these roles should be troublesome, since employment detracts from one's ability to engage in socially-desirable role behaviors. Stated another way, the degree to which family roles are *dependent on* or *independent of* employment should influence well-being.

Research on the family suggests that, historically, the meaning of work and family roles has differed for males and females, and that there has been greater interdependence between work and family obligations for men than for women. Whereas men's family roles largely involved economic support, women's family roles were based on emotional support and nurturance (Bernard 1981; Hochschild 1989; Thompson and Walker 1989). To the extent that women's family roles continue to be less closely tied to employment than men's, it follows that employed wives are more likely than employed husbands to experience role conflicts and feelings of guilt from combining work and family, and to evaluate themselves as less successful parents and spouses. Insofar as work and family roles continue to be interdependent for males and independent for females, we could expect that combining these roles will continue to be more stressful and less protective for women relative to men.

Several conceptions of meaning have been

employed in stress research, most of which have been used in studies of life events rather than multiple role involvements. Brown and Harris (1978) and later Wheaton (1990) conceptualized meaning as the circumstance surrounding an event or an individual's role history. However, while the context of events helps explain differential vulnerability to life events, event context is insufficient for understanding sex differences in well-being. Recently, Thoits (1991, 1995) conceptualized meaning as the salience of roles in persons' self-conceptions. However, this approach is also insufficient for explaining sex differences in well-being because work and family roles may be highly salient to males and females, but still have different meanings for the genders.

To better account for sex differences in the mental health consequences of multiple role involvements, I am seeking to develop a conception of meaning which captures gender differences in the relationships among social roles which have been suggested in the family literature; in my research, meaning refers to *sociocultural beliefs* about what constitutes a "good" husband and father and a "good" wife and mother, and more specifically, whether individuals view work and family roles as *independent* or *interdependent*.

By emphasizing the perceived relationships among roles, my conception of meaning is similar to Linville's (1987) notion of self-complexity. Linville hypothesized (and found) that greater self-complexity (i.e., maintaining distinctions between one's various role-identities) is a protective factor for people experiencing stressful life events because negative self-appraisals associated with a negative event in one role domain do not affect feelings about other aspects of self. My definition of meaning parallels Linville's notion of self-complexity because it highlights the perceived linkages between role-identities as a moderating factor for people under stress. However, in contrast to Linville, I suggest that combining work and family roles is less stressful and more protective for males than for females due to the greater independence between work and family role-identities for men relative to women. The contrast between Linville's and my predictions is due to the fact that we focus on different sources of stress. Whereas Linville examines the effects of life events, I focus on the effects of role involvements. Given our

different foci, it is possible that independence of roles *buffers* the impact of events, but *exacerbates* the impact of multiple role involvements.

The following four questions are examined in this paper: (1) Does the meaning of work and family roles vary for men and women? That is, are spouse and parent roles dependent on the work role for men, but independent of the work role for women? (2) Are individuals who view these roles as independent more likely to experience role conflicts (and feelings of guilt) than persons who view them as interdependent? (3) Do individuals who view work and family roles as independent evaluate themselves as less adequate spouses and parents than persons for whom these roles are interdependent? (4) Do gender differences in the perceived relationships among roles help explain why the mental health advantages of combining work and family roles are fewer for women than for men?

The reader should be aware that while the model I am exploring assumes that sex differences in role meaning produce sex differences in role conflicts, self-evaluations, and distress, it is possible that these factors also influence the meanings people attach to their roles. Although future research should sort out the causal direction of these relationships, the purpose of this paper is to identify gender variation in role meaning and explore its consequences for mental health.

DATA AND METHODS

To answer these questions, this paper presents the qualitative findings of a larger project which included quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative portion was based on a two-wave prospective panel study of the stress experiences of a stratified random sample of married and divorced Indianapolis residents. Structured personal interviews were administered in 1988 with 700 respondents (354 married) and again in 1990 with 532 located persons (289 married). Detailed information about sampling procedures, response rates, and sample characteristics have been published elsewhere (Simon 1992; Thoits 1992, 1994).¹ Quantitative analyses were conducted on a subsample of persons in the panel which included *employed married mothers and fathers of children*

under 18 years of age in dual-earner marriages (N = 92).

The qualitative portion of the research was based on content analyses of follow-up, open-ended interviews I conducted in 1991 with a subset of 40 men and women from the larger employed-married-parent subsample. This subset included *full-time employed married parents who had a child under 18 years of age at home and whose spouse was employed full-time*. These respondents were selected because I wanted to examine *variation* in the perceived relationships between roles among men and women who have the *same* multiple role combination and role situation (e.g., a full-time dual-earner marriage). Since I expected race to be another source of variation in the perceived relationships among roles, the follow-up sample was restricted to White respondents, thereby limiting the generalizability of the findings. Respondents were first identified by computer-generating the case numbers of persons in the panel with these characteristics and, on a random basis, they were then invited to participate. Over 90 percent of the eligible persons contacted agreed to be reinterviewed.

The sociodemographic characteristics of the larger employed-married-parent sample and the follow-up sample appear in the Appendix. While the two samples are similar in terms of age and number of children living at home, the follow-up sample includes more persons high on education and household income (reflecting that these respondents were in marriages in which *both* spouses worked *full-time*). Males and females differed most in age and family income. Husbands were older than wives and more likely to have higher family incomes.

Bivariate analyses of distress at Time 2 [T2]² on both the larger employed-married-parent sample and the follow-up sample (not reported here) indicate that, consistent with the epidemiological literature, these employed married mothers are significantly more anxious, distressed, and have more somatic complaints (although they are not significantly more depressed) than similar fathers. Multivariate analyses on the larger sample (not shown here) further indicate that, when sociodemographic and structural variables (such as occupation, income differences between spouses, and the division of labor) are held constant, women's symptoms still exceed those of men.

While the survey data allowed me to assess

sex differences in distress, my theoretical questions required in-depth data. To capture the meaning of roles, several belief questions were included in the follow-up interview. Respondents also were asked about the effects of their jobs on their roles (and self-conceptions) as spouses and parents. Probes were used in conjunction with each question in order to obtain detailed answers. Tape-recordings of the interviews were transcribed soon after they were conducted, and emergent themes were content-coded. Computer searches were conducted on the codes in order to identify all references to information relevant to my research questions. The quotes selected for presentation illustrate these themes and are typical of other responses. Note that this paper seeks to explore and generate hypotheses, not test hypotheses.

One point about the follow-up study is noteworthy: While I interviewed 75 percent of the husbands during their first scheduled appointment, over 50 percent of the wives had to reschedule their interviews at least one time. This reflected their lack of "spare" time and probably reflects greater "role overload" among working wives relative to working husbands.

FINDINGS

The Meaning of Work and Family Roles to Men and Women

To assess men's and women's beliefs about roles, respondents were asked if "being a good father (and mother) depends, in part, on a man's (woman's) ability to provide economic support for his (her) children." They also were asked if "being a good husband (and wife) depends, in part, on a man's (woman's) ability to provide economic support for his (her) spouse." Clear sex differences emerged in men's and women's *beliefs*. Whereas the majority of men believed that providing economic support is a key component of their family roles, only a minority of women viewed this as important for wives and mothers.

For example, while most men believed that providing love, emotional support, and companionship are as important as providing for their families financially, 80 percent also emphasized the negative consequences for a man's self-image of not making a financial

contribution to his family. The following response of a teacher was typical of the men.

"I don't think it's everything, but I do think it's critical because the father would not feel good about himself. His self-image would be low. I think that most men would sink into depression. You can show love for a child, but I feel that you would not be happy without providing support for that child." (#0163M)

In fact, for almost all of the men, providing economic support is synonymous with being a father and husband. A safety manager succinctly stated: "I think that one of the prerequisites of being a husband is being able to provide." (#0493M)

While there was near-uniformity among men, there was variability in women's beliefs about the economic obligations of mothers and wives. Like men, most of the women believed that being a "good" mother and wife involves more than providing economic support, and that women must provide love, emotional support, and companionship. However, 25 percent of the wives also believed that women have economic obligations to their families because they view marriage as a partnership. By contributing economically, they thought they could reduce their husbands' financial pressure and improve their children's standard of living. A teacher explained: "I feel I'm helping my spouse financially by taking on some of his burdens. I feel I'm more of an equal partner, sharing jobs and responsibilities." (#0133F)

In contrast to these women, 35 percent of the wives believed that women's family roles do not include the provision of economic support. These wives emphasized the traditional non-economic ways in which a woman could be a good wife and mother. Another teacher stated: "To be a good mother, you have to be there for your kids. You have to be understanding and caring. You don't need money to do those things." (#0092F)

Yet, a third group of wives (40%) had ambivalent beliefs about the relationship between work and family roles for women. A nurse expressed this ambivalence when she commented: "I feel like it's more the father's responsibility. But in another way, I feel like it's the mother's and the father's responsibility to provide support." (#1066F)

However, whether the women believed that work and family roles are interdependent or

independent, or had ambivalent beliefs, all of them viewed employment as an *added* responsibility, and felt that a woman's *primary* obligation to her children and spouse is to provide a well-kept home, emotional support, and nurturance. This next teacher explained:

"If someone comes to your house and it doesn't look tidy, they don't say 'gosh, your husband's not a very good house-keeper.' So you have your job, plus your keeping house, plus your taking care of the children." (#1100F)

Interestingly, when respondents described their *feelings* about combining work and family roles, even clearer sex differences in the perceived relationships among roles were revealed. Most of the women said that they feel "pulled in different directions," "constantly needed," and "confused." Of the women, 85 percent also felt *guilty* about combining work and family because they perceive that a consequence of having a job is that they sometimes slight their children and neglect their husbands. An operations clerk expressed her guilty feelings during a conversation about emotions:

"Guilt is probably the number one emotion because if I didn't work, that time could be devoted to my kids or my home life or my wifely duties or whatever." (#1112F)

In sharp contrast to the women, none of the men felt "pulled in different directions," "needed," "confused," or "guilty." In fact, most admitted that when they think about combining these roles, *no* emotions came to mind at all. A psychiatrist's response was typical of the men: "I can't think of any negative emotions. It seems to me that this is just the way things are, not a question of having feelings about them." (#0949M). When asked to explain their lack of feelings about combining work and family, husbands emphasized the aspect and normative nature of this role combination for males: "It's just natural to me. That's just my responsibility. I really don't think much about it." (#1026M: controller)

In short, on the basis of respondents' beliefs about what constitutes a "good" father and husband and mother and wife, there appears to be greater perceived interdependence between work and family roles for men than for women. Although they believed that

providing economic support was not "everything," most men emphasized the negative consequences of a man's inability to contribute to his family financially. Moreover, even though there was more variability in women's beliefs about the relationship between work and family roles, most acknowledged that employment is an added responsibility and that a woman's primary obligation is to provide nurturance. Gender differences in the interrelationships between work and family roles were especially evident when respondents described their feelings. Based on these emotions, it appears that most women perceive employment as competing with their ability to meet family obligations, whereas men perceive employment as allowing them to fulfill part of their obligations to their family and is something which comes "naturally."³

Role Conflict

Next, I examine whether individuals who view work and family roles as independent (most women) are more likely to experience role conflicts than persons who view these roles as interdependent (most men). To answer this question, respondents were asked if they experience conflicts between their obligations to their jobs and children, or between their jobs and their spouse. Additional data on role conflict were obtained when respondents described the difficulties of combining all three roles. I found that, while there were some similarities between men's and women's responses, there also were several important differences.

The Nature of Work-Parent Conflict. The greatest sex difference in role conflict was between work and parenthood. Consistent with previous research, more women (75%) than men (40%) experienced work-parent conflicts. However, in addition to the typical finding reported in other qualitative studies regarding sex differences in the *extent* of work-parent conflict (e.g., Hochschild 1989), I also found subtle differences in the *nature* of the conflict men and women experienced. The conflict husbands described was limited in scope and specific, whereas the conflict wives described was diffuse, nonspecific, and pervasive. According to women who perceived work and family roles as independent, work conflicts with parenting because their

jobs prevent them from "being there" for their children. The following nonspecific response from a district manager was typical for women.

"I'm not here. I'm not watching my kids grow. I'm just getting pieces of their lives. I tell them I love them and hug and kiss them all the time, but I don't think that's enough. Maybe it's just being in the living room when they come in." (#0903F)

In contrast to women's nonspecific and pervasive feelings of work-parent conflict, men's conflict was specific and delimited. According to the conflicted men who perceived work and family roles as interdependent, work interfered with parenthood because they were unable to attend their children's extracurricular activities. A technician explained:

"I've missed a lot of my daughter's after-school activities due to my work hours. For me it is stressful. I'm sure that it's important to my daughter that both of us show up to these things, and a lot of times I'm just not able to." (#0072M)

Attributions of Responsibility for Marital Problems. Although men and women were less likely to perceive conflicts between work and marriage than between work and parenting, work-marriage conflict was nevertheless considerable; 45 percent of the women and 30 percent of the men experienced conflicts between these two role domains. Like this next teacher, the conflicted wives focused on marital problems from taking work home with them.

"... at night when I feel obligated to grade papers and he wants my attention. Those papers have to be ready by morning, but he's also real important and your marriage is on the line if you're not taking care of him. So I feel torn there." (#0092F)

Moreover, several wives felt that *combining* work and parenthood had adverse consequences for their marriage. Fifty-five percent of the women indicated that an unintended consequence of holding all three roles was that they put their marriages on the "back burner." These wives said that, given their lack of time and energy, they prioritized their children's needs over the needs of their husband. The next wife discussed her priorities: "It seems like priority-wise, what always

happens is that I give my daughter my first attention. Then there's my job. Then I have volunteer groups. Then, any time that's left over I spend with my husband." (#1100F: teacher) When asked how she felt about her priorities, she added: "It makes me feel guilty and I would say it makes him feel neglected." (#1100F)

It is noteworthy that, with the exception of two women, these wives did not mention that they do not get "enough" attention from their husbands or feel "neglected." On the contrary, wives assumed responsibility for marital problems that stem from combining work and family (see Chodorow 1978). Although they recognized that their husbands also subordinate the needs of the marriage to the needs of the children, wives believed that *they* were personally *responsible* for the situation. A clerk explained that she is more "selfish."

"At this time in my life, being a mother is number one and being a wife is number two. He feels the same way. I think that causes problems. If it's for him, I'm more selfish. It's easier for me to say no to something he wants than it is for me to say no to something the kids want. I don't think he is as much that way as I am." (#1112F)

In contrast to the conflicted wives, the six husbands who perceived work-marriage conflicts emphasized marital problems caused by their particular work schedules, especially their long work hours. A deputy fire chief explained: "I think it falls back on my work schedule. I can't always be there when she would like me to be there." (#0102M)

Interestingly, a similar proportion of men (55%) also felt that *combining work and parenthood* had adverse consequences for marital relationships. These men said that their marriages often take a "back seat" to their children, and that they also prioritize their children's needs over the needs of their marriage. According to a program analyst: "It's usually the adult relationship that suffers. That's what gets put on the back burner for us. We subordinate our couple activities for the children." (#0081M)

However, not one man mentioned that he neglected his wife or felt responsible for placing his marriage on the "back burner." Rather, these husbands held their *wives* (rather than themselves) *responsible* for marital problems created by *the wife's*

combining employment and parenthood with marriage. For these men, marital problems stem from their feelings that their wives neglect them. Although no longer feeling that his wife overlooks him because his children are older, a husband reflected on the emotions he had when they were younger.

"When the kids were young I felt that I was low on the pole. You feel like you are last when you have kids. Mom's worn out and she's given everything she's got to the kids. It's not her fault, but . . ." (#0073M: hair stylist)

The area of marital life where neglect was most keenly felt was in the sexual life of the couple. Several husbands attributed the perceived infrequency (or absence) of sexual intimacy in their marriages to their wives' (rather than their own) lack of time and energy.

"The sex life of the couple suffers when you're combining all these things. It's a strain, especially for my wife. If we're watching T.V. in bed, she drifts off between 9 and 9:30. By 10 o'clock, she's gone. That causes problems." (#1026M: controller)

Taken together, those viewing work and family roles as independent (most women) are more likely to experience role conflicts, especially between work and parenthood, than those viewing these roles as interdependent (most men). However, in addition to the often-reported finding that women experience more work-parent conflict than men, I found that their conflict is nonspecific and pervasive (rather than specific and delimited). It also appears that the combination of work and parenthood results in marital problems for men and women. In the absence of enough time and energy, husbands and wives prioritize their children's needs over their spouse's. Yet, wives are ultimately held responsible (by themselves *and* their husbands) for neglecting their marriage. Pervasive nonspecific feelings of work-parent conflict, coupled with attributions of personal responsibility for marital problems, are stressful, may erode self-esteem, and are likely to lead to negative self-evaluations.

Self-Evaluations of Role Performances

To assess their evaluations of themselves as parents and spouses, respondents were asked

how good a parent and spouse they thought they were, and if being employed adds to, or takes away from, their ability to be the type of parent and spouse they would like to be. Additional role performance data were obtained when respondents evaluated how good they are at *combining* all three roles. These data were especially insightful.

The Implications of Combining Multiple Roles² for Women's and Men's Identities. Seventy percent of the women indicated that they often feel inadequate as mothers and wives. According to the wives for whom work and family roles are independent, employment is a threat to their identity as a "good" mother and/or wife because they do not have *enough* time and energy for their children and spouse. A secretary's response captures this theme:

"I'd have more time to love them and bring them up the way I think they ought to be brought up. I would just as soon be at home and be a good mother and be there for my kids. That's the most important thing, but I can't afford it." (#0952F)

In addition, many women mentioned that their lack of time and energy affected their role as wife. Possibly expressing the reflected appraisals of their husbands, several wives felt they were particularly lacking as a sexual partner, as this operations clerk implied.

"If I didn't work, I think that there would be more time to cover some of the things I need to do as a wife. I wouldn't be so tired in the evening, obviously." (#1112F)

Feelings of inadequacy were especially evident when women assessed how good they were at combining all three roles. The next wife described her overall sense of deficiency:

"I don't think I'm very good at it because so far there's always been one place that has suffered. I feel like I'm pulled in so many different directions that I'm not giving 100 percent anywhere. I feel like I'm a less-than-average woman trying to fill a superwoman's shoes and not succeeding at anything." (#0888F: clerk)

Women also had feelings of self-doubt and questioned whether they were "doing the right thing." While this wife worries about combining work and family, she said that her husband does not worry about combining

these roles because "he takes life as it comes."

"Sam just takes life as it comes. He knows what he has to do and doesn't worry about it. I worry if I'm doing the right thing for my kid. I worry that people at work think that I'm not giving my all. I worry if the house isn't clean." (#0980F)

However, rather than attributing their feelings of inadequacy to a division of family labor which requires women to be *continuously* available to their children and husbands, or to a culture which equates women's family roles with the provision of *round-the-clock* nurturance, the women attributed their negative emotions to their *own* lack of organization. A childcare worker commented: "not budgeting my time better is probably my biggest problem." (#1063F)

In contrast to the women, 90 percent of the men evaluated themselves as successful fathers and husbands. According to the men who viewed work and family as interdependent, employment contributed to their identity as a "good" father and husband since it enabled them to maintain a sense of self as family provider. An electrician explained: "It adds to it because if I wasn't employed, I couldn't provide for them." (#0028M)

Like women, some men perceived that a lack of time was a problem. However, with two exceptions, a lack of time did not negatively affect their perceptions of themselves as fathers and husbands. Although an executive feels he could spend more time with his son, he nevertheless evaluates himself as a good father. "I'm a good father. The only thing is that I don't have much time to spend with him." (#1061M)

The positive effects of employment on men's self-perceptions as fathers and husbands were particularly evident when they described how good they were at *combining* all three roles. In contrast to the women, combining work and family roles did not result in feelings of inadequacy as parents and spouses or in self-doubt. None of the men questioned whether they "ought" to be employed or if they were "doing the right thing." Rather, combining work and family roles results in positive self-evaluations and feelings of happiness, self-satisfaction, and self-worth. According to a battalion chief: "Being both feels good because you're holding up your end of the deal." (#1108M)

Whereas women emphasized the personal costs associated with "having it all," combining work and family roles makes men, like this pharmaceutical operator, feel "happy." "I'm happy that I'm able to keep it all working together and keep my schedule going. I'm happy with the way everything's working out." (#1075M)

It is noteworthy that this next respondent attributed his success to his organization: "I think I am successful at that. I don't see any conflict between the three. I think my life is organized and arranged so that everything runs fairly smooth." (#0028M; electrician)

The Implications for Men's Identity of Having a Wife Who Combines Multiple Roles. Although the combination of work and family roles resulted in positive self-evaluations and feelings of happiness and self-worth for most men, a subset of husbands (35%) (those whose wives were employed primarily for economic reasons, but who preferred that their wives not work outside the home and whose wives also preferred not to be employed) indicated that their wife's employment makes them feel inadequate as fathers and husbands. For these men, their wife's employment is an indication that they are unable to live up to their end of the "bargain" with their wife and children—something about which they felt guilty. An accountant expressed his feelings of inadequacy and other negative emotions:

"It makes me unhappy that she has to work because I don't feel like I'm able to provide enough to allow her to be at home. I'm really sad that she has to work and I'm really guilty that she has to work because I can't provide enough." (#0256M)

These findings not only are consistent with, but they provide direct support for, previous conceptual and empirical work (e.g., Bernard 1981; Hochschild 1989; Rosenfield 1992; Ross et al. 1983). Having an employed wife is a threat to some men's *identity* as a husband and father because it makes them feel inadequate as a "provider," which continues to be a central component of their family roles. Insofar as family role-identities are important for men's and women's self-conceptions, negative self-evaluations in these salient role domains undermine feelings of self-worth and are likely to be distressing (Simon 1992; Thoits 1991).

Overall, these findings suggest that wives'

employment results in feelings of inadequacy for most women (and for some men) as parents and spouses. However, men and women feel inadequate for different reasons. Women feel inadequate because, as a result of their employment, they are not continuously available to their children and husbands. In contrast, some men feel inadequate because they think that if they were better breadwinners their wives would not be employed in the first place. Yet, while having an employed wife is associated with negative self-evaluations and feelings for a subset of men, most men do *not* feel inadequate as fathers and husbands. Rather, combining employment with parenthood and marriage for men results in positive self-evaluations and feelings of accomplishment, satisfaction, happiness, and self-worth. Sex differences in self-evaluations in these highly-important role domains may play a crucial role in sex differences in mental health among employed married parents.

As a final step in the analysis, I returned to the quantitative data. Additional *t*-tests were conducted on the follow-up sample in order to compare the psychological well-being of the different groups of women identified earlier with that of the men. While only suggestive, results of these analyses (not reported here) are in line with the findings discussed. When the five women who perceive work and family roles as *interdependent* are compared to men, there are no significant gender differences in symptoms. However, when the women for whom work and family roles are *not* interdependent (which was the larger group of women) are compared to men, these wives are significantly more anxious and distressed, and have significantly more somatic complaints, than men.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper examined gender differences in the consequences of combining spouse, parent, and worker roles for mental health. Drawing on previous research, I suggested that work and family roles have different meanings for males and females, and that these differences may be partially responsible for why the mental health advantages of combining multiple roles are fewer for women than for men. Based on data from follow-up, in-depth interviews, I found that

gender differences in the perceived relationship between work and family roles may help account for gender differences in distress by contributing to male-female differences in the *extent* and *nature* of work-parent conflicts, attributions of *responsibility* for marital problems, feelings of *guilt*, and *self-evaluations* as parents and spouses.

One clear difference that emerged was between men's and women's feelings about combining work and family. The majority of wives felt that employment prevents them from fulfilling their primary responsibility to nurture their children and husbands. In contrast, the majority of husbands felt that employment is the cornerstone of their family roles, which enables them to fulfill an important component of their marital and parental role obligations.

Gender differences in the perceived interrelationships among roles were associated with differences between men's and women's feelings of role conflict, especially between their jobs and children. However, not only were women more likely to experience work-parent conflicts as others have shown, but I also found that men's and women's conflict differed in nature and in scope. Whereas men's conflict was highly specific and delimited, women's conflict was nonspecific and pervasive. I also found that wives feel responsible (and husbands hold them accountable) for marital problems that are created when both spouses combine multiple roles.

Finally, analyses revealed that sex differences in the nature of work-parent conflicts and feelings of responsibility for marital problems were associated with differences between men's and women's evaluations of themselves as parents and spouses. Combining multiple roles appears to result in negative self-evaluations and feelings of inadequacy as parents and spouses among women, and positive self-evaluations and feelings of self-worth among men.

Yet, while combining work and family roles was associated with a configuration of negative emotions for women and positive emotions for men, I also found that having an employed wife was associated with negative self-evaluations and emotions for a subgroup of husbands. For these men, having an employed wife was an indication to themselves and others (e.g., their wives) that they were inadequate providers. This finding

provides insight into why research indicates that wives' employment is distressing for some husbands.

Because women's family roles continue to involve providing *round-the-clock* nurturance, it is understandable that the emotional benefits of combining spouse, parent, and worker roles are fewer for women. Employment for women *means* they are not adequately meeting normative behavioral expectations as wives and mothers—roles to which females have historically been highly committed. Although I can only speculate at this point, it is reasonable to interpret employed wives' higher symptom levels as a normal and predictable response to their failure to meet highly-important and deeply-valued family role obligations. The implications of this research is that *cultural* as well as *structural* changes in both men's and women's roles are necessary to reduce sex differences in the psychological advantages of multiple role occupancy.

Due to data limitations, I cannot determine whether gender differences in the meaning of roles help *explain* the gender gap in mental health among the married. Because of the time sequence involved in data collection, I also cannot rule out the alternative hypothesis that sex differences in distress (assessed in the survey) are responsible for sex differences in role meaning, role conflicts, guilt, and self-evaluations that were evident in the follow-up interviews. The qualitative data are, however, very useful for directing our attention to the importance of examining both the *structure* and *meaning* of roles in future research (see Pearlin 1992). My findings suggest that it is important to reconsider the almost exclusive focus on the structural characteristics of men's and women's roles (such as the division of household labor and labor market inequality) in current theory and research. Studies which overlook the meanings that individuals attach to their roles may not bring us any closer to an understanding of the factors which underlie the persistence of sex differences in the consequences of multiple role involvements. The concepts of interdependence and independence help us understand the different meanings of roles to males and females, and provide insight into why this role combination is less protective of women's well-being than of men's.

This research points to some questions to incorporate into future surveys which would

allow us to test the generalizability of these relationships with longitudinal data for a broad range of people. In addition to the need to develop nuanced measures of role meaning, role conflicts, and role performance, employed persons should be asked if their jobs prevent them from giving their children and/or spouse enough attention. Husbands and wives should be asked if they feel responsible for marital difficulties that are created when both spouses combine work and family. They also should be asked about the emotions they experience from combining multiple roles as well as from having a spouse who holds multiple roles. Finally, husbands should be asked if their wife's employment affects their self-evaluations as providers. The inclusion of such questions in panel studies would further our understanding of the development of distress among women and men in community and national samples.

In this research, I have attempted to go beyond structural explanations of sex differences in distress by developing a theoretical approach which includes role meaning. In addition to its advantages for elaborating role conflict and self-evaluation processes among the married, this approach may help explain marital status differences in well-being among women and men. The next step is to examine the meaning of roles to divorced mothers and fathers. Because divorced women often assume financial responsibility for children, there may be greater interdependence between work and family obligations for divorced mothers than for married mothers, and perhaps less interdependence for divorced fathers than for married fathers. By emphasizing the perceived relationships among roles, this approach may also help explain sex differences in vulnerability to work and family stress across different constellations of social statuses.

Finally, by explicating the meaning of work and family roles to males and females, this study offers potential interpretations of two related, but little-understood, findings in the literature on gender differences in the consequences of multiple role occupancy. First, while sex differences in distress persist in spite of increases in women's employment, distress differences between employed married fathers and mothers are not due to wives'

very *high* distress levels, but to the very *low* distress levels of husbands (Gore and Mangione 1983). My findings suggest that employed married fathers have relatively low levels of distress because of the stronger *interrelationships* between work and family roles for men.

Second, while employed wives report lower (or equivalent) levels of distress than homemakers, husbands of employed wives report higher distress levels than husbands of homemakers (Kessler and McRae 1982; Rosenfield 1980). Under some conditions, (e.g., when the wife is in the labor force but neither spouse prefers that she work outside the home), husbands of employed women exhibit higher levels of distress than their partners (Rosenfield 1992; Ross et al. 1983). My findings suggest that husbands of employed wives are more distressed than husbands of homemakers because a wife's employment represents a threat to some men's identity as a "good" provider. In short, in addition to elucidating the meaning of work and family roles to males and females, this study provides insight into the *meaning of a wife's employment* for the mental health of *husbands*.

NOTES

1. Attrition analyses (Thoits 1994) indicate that the panel has a middle-class bias. Because previous research suggests that *higher* status persons have *less* traditional beliefs about men's and women's roles (Ulbrich 1989), my sample probably *underestimates* the themes I discuss.
2. Distress was measured by subscales from the Brief Form of the SCL-90 (Derogatis and Cleary 1977). Quantitative analyses were based on variables assessed at T2 because the second wave of interviews was conducted closer in time to the follow-up interviews and because I am interested in the mental health effects of *stable* role involvements, rather than in *change* in distress over time.
3. An alternative interpretation is that husbands *have* negative feelings from combining work and family roles which they do not *express* because men find it difficult to disclose negative affect. However, the negative emotions men said they *would* have if they did not work indicates that sex differences in these feelings do not simply reflect "differential expressivity."

Appendix.
Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Larger Employed-Married-Parent Sample and the Follow-up Sample by Gender

Characteristics	Employed-Married-Parent Sample			Follow-Up Sample		
	Total (N = 92)	Male (N = 37)	Female (N = 55)	Total (N = 40)	Male (N = 20)	Female (N = 20)
Age, Mean Years	37.8	39.7	36.6	38.0	40.0	36.0
25-34	33.7%	24.3%	40.0%	35.0%	25.0%	45.0%
35-44	51.1%	56.8%	47.3%	42.5%	45.0%	40.0%
45-54	14.1%	16.2%	12.7%	20.0%	25.0%	15.0%
55-64	1.1%	2.7%	0%	2.5%	5.0%	0%
Race						
White	93.5%	89.2%	96.4%	100%	100%	100%
Black	3.3%	8.1%	0%	0%	0%	0%
Other	3.3%	2.7%	3.6%	0%	0%	0%
Education						
Less Than High School	2.2%	0%	3.6%	0%	0%	0%
High School Graduate	29.3%	29.7%	29.1%	25.0%	25.0%	25.0%
Some College	39.1%	40.5%	38.2%	45.0%	45.0%	45.0%
College Graduate	20.7%	16.2%	23.6%	15.0%	15.0%	15.0%
Graduate Degree	8.7%	13.5%	5.5%	15.0%	15.0%	15.0%
Household Income						
Under \$12,000	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
\$12,000-19,999	1.1%	2.7%	0%	0%	0%	0%
\$20,000-31,999	8.8%	8.1%	9.3%	7.5%	5.0%	10.0%
\$32,000-39,999	17.6%	24.3%	13.0%	15.0%	15.0%	15.0%
\$40,000-51,999	34.1%	32.4%	35.2%	40.0%	40.0%	40.0%
\$52,000-59,999	15.4%	10.8%	18.5%	15.0%	10.0%	20.0%
\$60,000-71,999	9.9%	8.1%	11.1%	10.0%	10.0%	10.0%
\$72,000 or more	13.2%	13.5%	13.0%	12.5%	20.0%	5.0%
Children < 18 Residing in the Household, Mean	2.1	2.2	2.1	2.0	2.1	1.9
Employment						
Employed	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Employed 35hrs. +/wk	78.3%	94.6%	67.3%	100%	100%	100%
Spouse Employed	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Spouse Employed 35hrs. +/wk	88.0%	78.4%	94.5%	100%	100%	100%

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