

MATERNAL EMPLOYMENT AND ATTITUDES TOWARD WOMEN PARTICIPATING IN THE WORKFORCE

Godwin U. Ekechuku
Department of Sociology
The Ohio State University
4240 Campus Drive
Lima, Ohio 45804

Abstract

Despite that women represent over 46 percent of the workforce, more than 30 percent of Americans disagree that women and mothers should participate in the workforce. Utilizing data from the 1996 GSS, this paper presents an interpretive model showing how agreement or disagreement over whether women should be hired and promoted is influenced by the socio-cultural attitude “mother working hurts children and/or preschool kids suffer if mother works (maternal employment effect measure),” which is affected by the socio-economic and demographic backgrounds of respondents: employment status, occupation, SES, gender and race. Multiple regression analyses reveal that disagreement with the statement that “mother working doesn’t hurt children”—(a measure of socio-cultural attitude) doesn’t explain SES, occupational status, gender and racial bias against hiring and promoting women participating in the workforce. Data show that agreement with the statement that “mother working doesn’t hurt children” is strongly correlated with agreement that women should be hired and promoted. With maternal employment effects on children intervening, employment and occupational status (especially high-trust professions and male dominated occupations), SES, gender and race are found to be associated with disagreement that women should be hired and promoted. Respondents who are self-employed and/or of professional classes, blue-collar, part time, student, and retired worker are likely to disagree that women should be hired and promoted. Particularly those with a college degree are more likely to disagree with hiring and promoting women than are those without; so are whites and males this even when majority of respondents are in agreement that “mother working doesn’t hurt children.”

Maternal Employment and Attitudes toward Women Participating in the Workforce

The rising number (over 67 percent) of working mothers with children under 17 years of age (U.S. Census, 2000b) is an epochal social cultural event and clearly indicates changing gender roles in the postindustrial economy (Beeghley, 1996; Thornton and Freedman, 1979). As a result of the change, the role of raising children has been temporarily assigned to both mother and father with subtle resentment by men who find their dominant role eroding in the family division of labor (Manke, et al., 1994). Subsequent to the new social development of women participating equally in the workforce, debate over child care is being waged between social conservatives and feminist-liberals, with the former demanding the restoration of family values and gender specific roles (Hays, 1996; Klien 1992; Marano, 1997; Wagenheim, 1995; Spretnak, 1982).

Generally, attitudes toward working women have shifted dramatically in favor of women/mothers' participation in the workforce (Beeghley, 1996); yet there are still many Americans who believe that the traditional gender roles work better for the family because of the socio-cultural view that women are good nurturers (Wagenheim, 1995). The tension that gender role change creates leads to some to ask whether mothers working hurt children or preschool kids suffer if mother works." The question that is frequently asked is generally one of cause and effect relationship, e. g., whether mother working has a harmful effect on childhood development. Such a question leads to the formulation of a hypothesis and/or an alternative hypothesis that hiring and promoting women in the workplace has a negative/positive effect on children. Recent studies do not find any strong correlation that maternal employment is harmful to children, but negative

sentiment has been expressed about the effect by some people in society at a time when as many women as are men participate in the postindustrial economy (Greenstein, 1995; Harvey, 1999; Han, et al., 2001; U.S. Bureau of the Census, 200b; Lombard, 1999).

The present study uses data from 1996 General Social Survey (GSS) to examine and analyze social cultural attitudes toward maternal employment, measured here by socio-cultural attitudes toward hiring and promoting women in the workplace. The research hypothesizes that agreement with the statement that “mother working doesn’t hurt children” and/or “preschool kids suffer if mother works” is a cause for agreement with maternal employment measured by “hiring and promoting women” in the workforce, and vice versa. The study also examines and analyzes how socio-cultural background (the explanatory independent variables: occupational status, SES and demographic) interacts with the maternal employment effect (mother working doesn’t hurt children and/or preschool kids suffer if mother works)—the intervening variable in shaping the attitudes people have toward “hiring and promoting women” in the workforce.

In the 1996 GSS survey, more than 30 percent of Americans disagreed that women should be hired and promoted. Many of the respondents in the survey disagreed with hiring and promoting women, even though they agreed that maternal employment doesn’t hurt children and that preschool kids do not suffer if mother works (see Table 1). Americans are ambivalent over maternal employment as many studies indicate. For example, Newman (1999: 212) reports on a survey that shows that a third of working women express a preference to stay at home with their children if they had a choice. Other studies reveal that working women think that children are better off if mothers take

care of them and that some of these women have as a result, withdrawn from the workplace (Hays, 2003; Crittenden, 2001; Rouse, 2002: 203; Jackson, 2003).

Despite that the two-income family has greater appeal and is more prevalent today than the traditional family with father-breadwinner and mother-caregiver (Newman, 1999), there is strong nostalgia for traditional gender roles. As a result, there is a backlash against gender equality (Shalit, 1999; Jackson, 2003). For some working mothers, combining career and motherhood is an overwhelming and disenchanting proposition to say the least, causing some of them to “opt-out” from the modern feminist movement assertion that women should “have it all,” because they were not prepared for the consequences of the dual role of motherhood and career (Belkin, 2003; Crittenden, 1999 and 2001; Akron Beacon Journal, 2001). According to Belkin (2003), women are frustrated because of what they were promised that appears now to be unattainable goal of gender equality. She argued, “Women, especially educated professional women, were supposed to achieve like men. Once the barrier came down, once the playing field was leveled, they were supposed to march toward the future and take rightful ownership of the universe, or at the very least, ownership of their half,” yet working mothers still worry about their children, expectations to perform as well as their counterparts at work are high and sometimes are forced to choose between career and family.

Is there evidence to support maternal employment effect on children?

There is research evidence that children, especially at early stage of development, suffer if mother works. These studies found that some of these children are usually socially, behaviorally and cognitively impaired. Anti-social behavior, juvenile delinquency, school dropout and lower cognitive development have been associated with children whose

mothers work. However, studies also show that there is a weak correlation between maternal employment and child cognitive development when controlled by family social class (Parcel et al., 1996; Parcel and Menaghan 1994; Blau and Grossberg, 1992; Han et al., 2001; Desai et al., 1989; Baydar and Brooks-Gunn, 1991). For middle class children, in their first year of life maternal employment has a positive effect, while it is negative for children of lower income families. The children of lower income families are found to measure lower in cognitive development and scored lower in standardized test than middle class peers (Blau and Grossberg, 1992: 477; Vandell and Ramanan, 1992). Harvey (1999) found that the longer the hours worked by mothers the more adverse the effects maternal employment has on the children's cognitive development. In The Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test—Revised (PPVT-R) study, he found that children whose mothers work scored lower than their peers and have lower social and cognitive development in preschool years and in the first and second grades.

Data and Method

Data for the study consist of 2,904 samples taken from the 1996 General Social Survey (GSS). From a subset of data of 1,436 adults, the dependent variable “women should be hired and promoted” and the main independent variable “mother working doesn't hurt children” and “preschool kids suffer if mother works” (i.e., the maternal employment effect measure) are selected and analyzed. There is a five-item measure for the dependent variable in which respondents were asked whether they agree/disagree women should be hired and promoted with responses: strongly agree (5); agree (4); neither agree nor disagree (3); disagree (2); and strongly disagree (1) (Table 1). The main independent variables have a four-item measure: strongly agree (4); agree (3); disagree (2); strongly disagree (1). The other independent variables (race, gender, education,

income, marital status, occupational and employment status) are used to create a dummy variable, e.g., female is coded 1, and male 0. Full time employment is coded 1, and unemployment 0. This approach makes it easier to examine and assess each of the new categorical variables' affect on the intervening independent variables (mother working doesn't hurt children" and "preschool kids suffer if mother works") effect on the dependent variable "should women be hired and promoted."

Findings

Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics for the variables used in the multiple regression analyses. Data show that more Americans agree (55.8 percent) than disagree (33.8 percent) with the statement that women and mothers should be hired and promoted. Almost two thirds (66.2 percent) of the respondents agree that mother working doesn't hurt children while only 33.8 percent disagree with the statement. On whether "preschool kids suffer if mother works," more than half (52.4 percent) of those surveyed disagree while 47.6 percent agree. Statistical distribution of the sample shows that over 70 percent of the respondents are white-collar, self-employed, managers, professional, salaried and socio-cultural professionals/service workers and the rest are blue-collar, semiskilled workers. The transformation of industrial labor force in the past two decades or more from manufacturing (labor intensive occupations) to high-technology, knowledge based and service oriented labor has been attributed to the strong representation of women in the workforce (Table 1; Hage and Powers, 1992).

Table 2 presents the result of multiple regression analyses. Data are entered in four-step equations, designed to measure step by step the effect of each group of independent variables on the dependent variable "hire and promote women." In equation 1, the main independent variable has a significant effect on attitudes toward "hire and

promote women.” As an intervening variable, mother working doesn’t hurt children remains significant in subsequent equations to explain agreement with hiring and promoting women. The more Americans are in agreement with the statement that mother working doesn’t hurt children the more they are likely to agree that women should be hired and promoted; that is, they endorse maternal employment.

Equation 2 tested the effect of occupational status on the main independent variables in this case “mother working doesn’t hurt children” and “preschool kids suffer if mother works,” before the dependent variable. The results of the analyses show that people with high occupational status (self-employed and professional managers) are likely to express negative attitude toward working mothers because they believe children are hurt. This attitude makes them more likely to disagree with the statement that women should be hired and promoted. Those respondents lower in occupational stratification (manual/blue-collar workers, part-time workers, students, retired workers) share the same negative attitude toward women working and the effect on children as those at the top of the occupational strata. This group is also likely to disagree with the statement that “women should be hired and promoted”

Equation 3 tested gender interactive effect on the independent variables entered in the second equation and their effects on the dependent variable—“hire and promote women.” Data show that women strongly agreed that mothers working don’t hurt children. As a result of this positive assessment/agreement with the statement that mother working doesn’t hurt children, I conclude more women than men are likely to express greater support for hiring and promoting women.

Finally, in equation 4, SES and demographic characteristics are tested to measure the effects on the intervening variable (“mother working hurts children” and/or “preschool kids suffer if mother works”) and other selected independent variables in the first three equations on agreement/disagreement with hiring and promoting women, the dependent variable. The results of the analyses show that those with college degrees are likely to agree with the statement that mother working hurts children and therefore, are very likely to disagree with the statement that women should not be hired and promoted. While those with high school diplomas are likely to disagree that children are hurt if mother works and therefore, are likely to agree that women should be hired and promoted. Data show that whites are less likely to agree that mothers working hurt children than are African Americans who are in agreement with the statement women should be hired and promoted.

Conclusion

Although women, including mothers, are more fully represented in the workforce today than they have ever been in the history of organized economic production, there remains the unresolved issue over combining career and family. The cultural contradictions of motherhood and career with attendant social antagonism over the traditional gender role versus feminist new gender role expectations are very apparent.

In this study, statistical analyses are conducted to explain why some people in society have strong disagreement in hiring and promoting women in the workplace. It examined also, how agreement with the statement that women working hurt children or preschool children suffer if mother works might affects the response that women, especially mothers, should not be hired and promoted or participate in the labor force.

The study analyzed how socioeconomic backgrounds of individuals are important and perhaps contributory to their attitudes toward mothers working. For example, are educated classes more sympathetic to mothers working than are those with less education? Using data from the 1996 GSS, an interpretative design model was constructed showing how for example, the main independent variable (mother working hurts children and/or preschool kids suffer if mother works—maternal employment effect measure) intervenes between the independent variables and the dependent variable (hire and promote women). Thus, the study concludes that Americans who disagree that mother working doesn't hurt children are more likely to disagree that women should be hired and promoted than those who agree that children are not hurt if mother works and are also likely to favor maternal employment. The study finds that those in higher occupations are likely to disagree with the statement that mother working doesn't hurt children as are those with lower occupational status and are most likely to disapprove maternal employment. Thus, occupational status is a good predictor whether an individual agrees/disagrees that women should be hired and promoted. SES, gender and race are also found to be important predictors to whether people agree/disagree that women should be hired and promoted.

Table 1

**Descriptive Statistics on Variables used in the multiple Regression Analyses
N = 1436 (1996 GSS)**

Dependent Variable:

“Should hire and promote women”

	<u>Percent</u>
5 = “Strongly agree”	17.3
4 = “Agree”	38.5
3 = “Neither agree nor disagree”	13.9
2 = “Disagree”	23.7
1 = “Strongly disagree”	<u>6.6</u>
	100.0

Mean = 3.36 Standard deviation = 1.20 N = 1436

Independent Variables:

Percent

Maternal Employment Effect on Children
Measure

Mother working doesn't hurt children

4 = “Strongly agree”	24.2
3 = “Agree”	42.0
2 = “Disagree”	26.0
1 = “Strongly disagree”	<u>7.8</u>
	100.0

“Preschool kids suffer if mother works”

4 = “Strongly agree”	8.9
3 = “Agree”	38.7
2 = “Disagree”	42.1
1 = “Strongly disagree”	<u>10.3</u>
	100.0

Employment Status of Respondents in the Survey:

Working Full Time	60.3
Working Part Time	10.5
Currently Unemployed	4.5
Students	2.6
Retired	10.6
Homemakers	9.4
Other	<u>2.1</u>
	100.0

Occupational Status of the Fulltime Employed Workers in the Survey:

Self-Employed Manager/Professional	13.6
Salaried Socio-cultural Professionals	10.0
Salaried Technical Professionals	5.3
White Collar	41.2
Blue Collar	<u>29.9</u>
	100.0

Table 1 Continued

Demographics:

Female	53.6
Male	<u>46.4</u>
	100.0
Married	49.3
Widowed	7.6
Divorced/Separated	19.9
Single/Never Married	<u>23.2</u>
	100.0

Age:

17 - 24	10.2
25 - 34	23.9
35 - 44	25.8
45 - 54	17.5
55 - 64	9.7
65 - 74	8.0
75 & Over	<u>4.9</u>
	100.0

Education:

< High School	15.0
High School Diploma	29.3
Some College	27.1
College Degree	15.6
Post College	<u>13.0</u>
	100.0

Family Income:

\$ < \$9,999	11.9
\$10,000-\$19,999	17.6
\$20,000-\$29,999	16.1
\$30,000-\$39,999	15.8
\$40,000-\$49,999	9.4
\$50,000-\$59,999	8.6
\$60,000 & Over	<u>20.6</u>
	100.0

Race:

White	82.0
African-American	12.9
Other Groups	<u>5.1</u>
	100.0

Table 2

Multivariate Multiple Regression Coefficients for “hire and promote women” on Selected Independent Variables N = 1,436 (GSS 1996)

Independent Variables	EQ1	EQ2	EQ3	EQ4
Mother working doesn't hurt children	.09*** (.04)	.09*** (.04)	.07* (.04)	.09*** (.04)
Preschool kids suffer if mother works	.03 (.05)	.03 (.05)	.01 (.05)	-.07 (.05)
Self-Employed/Professional-Managers		-.39*** (.16)	-.37*** (.16)	-.20** (.10)
Salaried Professional-Technicians		-.12 (.13)	-.12 (.13)	---
Socio-Cultural Workers		-.29 (.21)	-.19 (.21)	---
White-Collar Workers		-.08 (.13)	-.05 (.13)	---
Manual/Blue-Collar Workers		-.29** (.14)	-.37*** (.14)	-.17** (.07)
Part Time Workers		-.45** (.22)	-.48* (.28)	-.04 (.11)
Currently Unemployed		-.31 (.24)	-.25 (.25)	---
Retired Workers		-.41* (.22)	-.37* (.22)	---
Students		-.50* (.27)	-.49* (.27)	---
Homemakers/ Stay-at-home-moms		-.35 (.22)	-.42* (.22)	---
Female (Dummy)			.24**** (.08)	.19*** (.07)
Education (Dummy) < High School				.31*** (.11)
High School Diploma				.03 (.08)
College Degree				-.22** (.11)
> Post College				-.02 (.11)

Table 2 Continued

Family Income (Dummy)				
\$< \$9,999				.12 (.12)
\$10,000 - \$19,999				.16 (.11)
\$20,000 - \$29,999				.12 (.11)
\$40,000 - \$49,999				-.19 (.13)
\$50,000 - \$59,999				-.14 (.13)
\$60,000 & Over				-.06 (.10)
Race of Respondents (Dummy)				
White				-.26* (.15)
African-American				.20 (.17)
Age				.03 (.03)
Marital Status (Dummy)				
Married				-.03 (.09)
Widowed				-.03 (.13)
Never Married				-.03 (.10)
Intercept	3.07 (.12)	3.69 (.26)	3.62 (.26)	3.17 (.24)
Adjusted R-square	.01	.02	.03	.07

* P < .10

** P < .05

*** P < .01

**** P < .001

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors

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Godwin U. Ekechuku is a Lecturer in sociology at the Ohio State University at Lima, where he teaches Family, Race and Ethnic Relations, and conducts research on work and occupation.