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## Personal Sketches: The Experience of Role Strain for Fifteen Married, Full-Time Employed Women with Children

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PERSONAL SKETCHES: THE EXPERIENCE OF ROLE STRAIN  
FOR FIFTEEN MARRIED, FULL-TIME EMPLOYED  
WOMEN WITH CHILDREN

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A Culminating Project Presented to the Faculty of the  
Graduate School of Lindenwood College in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
Degree of Master of Art

1992

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For Chuck Linsenmeyer

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## CHAPTER I

### Introduction

#### Overview

This culminating project begins with a review of the literature on the psychological effects of employment on married mothers with children. A presentation of Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan and Mullan's (1981) model of the Stress Process follows. In this study the authors discuss the interconnections between three components of the stress process: 1) the sources of stress, 2) the mediators of stress and 3) the manifestations of stress. This model will serve as the framework for subsequent sections of this project.

Second, Ross and Mirowsky's study "Explaining the Social Patterns of Depression: Control and Problem Solving - or Support and Talking?" (1989) is reviewed. These researchers examined findings that indicate that women tend to have higher levels of depression than men and also explored some of the reasons why married persons have been shown to have lower level of depression than unmarried persons. Ross and Mirowsky's examinations and findings contribute to the development of the thesis of this project.

Using the above framework and findings, this culminating project examines the experience of role strain in seven married full-time employed women with children. The last section reviews possible explanations for the finding that the seven married, full-time employed mothers who participated in this study experience role strain. This section ends with a discussion that focuses on power differences between women and men in this society and outlines possible changes that women can make to reduce role strain.

#### Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this culminating project is to relate and discuss some of the constraints and benefits experienced by fifteen full-time employed married, women with children.

#### Statement of Objectives

The first objective of this project is to explore the development of role strain and its role in the Stress Process. Second, several theories which can be used to explain the development of role strain in married full-time working mothers will be presented and discussed.



Third, recommendations are made, based on the research findings.

## CHAPTER II

### Literature Review

In 1959, 37.1% of American women 16 years and over were in the labor force. Fifteen years later, the number of employed women increased to 46.3%. By 1991, the percentage of women 16 years and over in the U.S. labor force rose to 57.3. More specifically, 74.4% of today's women between the ages of 25 and 54 are employed outside the home (U.S. Department of Labor, 1992). This increase in the number of employed women has prompted many researchers to study the effects of multiple roles on employed, married mothers who simultaneously enact roles that demand responsibility and commitment (Pietromonaco & Frohardt-Lane, 1986; Walker & Best, 1991; Zappert & Weinstein, 1985; Voydanoff, 1987). Voydanoff explains: "Since women are increasing their relative commitment to work outside the home, thereby changing their balance of commitments, the issue of the effects of multiple roles is salient" (p. 80).

Some researchers have found that for employed women, having multiple roles may enhance psychological well-being (Pietromonaco and Frohardt-

Lane, 1986; Thoits, 1983; Voydanoff, 1987). However, Zappert and Weinstein (1985) investigated sex differences in the impact of work on the physical and psychological health in a sample of women and men and found that women demonstrated significantly more psychological and physical manifestations of stress than their male counterparts. Significant differences were found between the two sexes in job tension, health status and role strain. Other researchers have found that for the population of full-time employed, married mothers, employment is related to enhanced personal well-being *only if* their husbands share family work (Kessler & McCrae, 1982; Kraus & Markides, 1985). One possible explanation for this finding is that employed mothers do more family work than employed fathers. In fact, most employed wives do three times more family work than their employed husbands (Berk, 1985). Douthitt (1989) also examined the division of labor in the home and found that the minimal family work that many husbands do is limited primarily to weekend days and invariant of wives labor force participation. Researchers have found that husbands whose wives work outside the home do the same number of domestic tasks and spend the same amount of time doing housework as husbands whose

wives are full-time homemakers (Berk, 1985; Miller and Garrison, 1984; Pleck, 1985).

This unequal division of labor between working parents has been shown to negatively affect employed mothers' mental health. Notably, low levels of husbands' participation in child care are associated with increases in reported symptoms of depression in employed wives (Lennon, Wasserman and Allen, 1991; Ross and Mirowsky, 1988; Anderson-Kulman and Paludi, 1986). In addition, Gray, Lovejoy, Piotrkowski, Bond's (1990) found that husbands' participation in family work and psychological support were most strongly associated with the wives' ability to cope with the stress of having multiple roles (employee, mother, wife).

Women who have multiple, demanding roles may experience role strain, which may occur if "the total demands on time and energy associated with the prescribed activities of multiple roles are too great to perform the roles adequately or comfortably... or when conflicting demands make it difficult to fulfill the requirements of multiple roles" (Voydanoff, 1987, p. 83). Working, married mothers may be especially vulnerable to experiencing role strain resulting from employment and domestic work overload. They may feel frustrated,

discouraged and inadequate because they feel that they are unable to fulfill requirements at home and at work.

Factors in work and home environments, such as job satisfaction and the degree of conflict in their families,

may affect the experience of role strain in working

mothers (Anderson-Kulman and Paludi 1986). If

demands at work and at home are strong and conflicting,

employed mothers may experience role strain. Googins

and Burden (1987) found that

work place - family role strain is strongly associated with

decreased physical and emotional well-being. Greenhaus

and Beutell (1985) suggest that work-family conflict, which

can result in role strain, exists when (a) time devoted to

the requirements of one role makes it difficult to fulfill

requirements of another (b) strain from participation in

one role makes it difficult to fulfill requirements of

another; and (c) specific behaviors required by one role

make it difficult to fulfill the requirements of another.

Moen and Dempster-McClain (1987) found that perceived

work-family interference was related to a desire for

mothers working full-time to have a reduced work

schedule.

### A. Framework: The Stress Process

This section provides a more in-depth view of the factors influencing the development of role strain.

According to Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan and Mullan (1981), sociodemographic characteristics such as marital status, gender, income, education, age, and religion have been shown to affect the development of stress. Some individuals experiencing high levels of stress become depressed:

Events create stress not only-or even primarily-through their direct demand for readjustment, but also through their indirect exacerbation of role strains...when people experience intensified strains they also become more vulnerable to an intensified depression (p. 343).

In "The Stress Process" (1981), Pearlin et al. discussed the interconnections between three identified components of the stress process: 1) the sources of stress, 2) the mediators of stress and 3) the manifestations of stress. The introduction reveals that before the publication of the stress process, stress research focused on one or two of the components of the stress process. For example, research on the sources of stress focused on the effects of the two main sources of stress on individuals, namely, stressful life events and chronic life strains. Research on the mediators of stress focused on coping

behavior and the existence of social support systems, which are considered the two most influential mediators.

Rather than restricting their research to the sources, mediators, and the manifestations of stress, the four authors focused on the interconnections linking these three components. This focus led to the development of the model of the stress process.

Figure 1: The components of the stress process

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SOURCES OF STRESS	MEDIATORS OF STRESS	ONE MANIFESTATION OF STRESS
eventful experiences <u>life strains</u> self-concepts	social support coping	depression

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The Sources of Stress: Eventful Experiences, Life Strains and Self-Concepts

When discussing the sources of stress it must first be clarified that Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan and Mullan (1981) reject the assumption that a change in an organism's internal and/or external environment (homeostasis) and the organism's ensuing effort to reestablish homeostasis, *necessarily* results in stress. The authors agree that readjustment resulting from change

"can be wearing and exhausting...under these conditions the organism becomes outstandingly vulnerable to stress and its physical and psychological consequences" (Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan and Mullan, 1981, p. 339).

However, change is not in and of itself undesirable.

In order to measure the impact of change, be it positive or negative, life events and the changes they entail are viewed in terms of 1) their desirability 2) the degree of control individuals have over the occurrence of these changes and 3) whether or not they were scheduled life-cycle transitions. In other words, the quality of change must be included in the analysis of the sources of stress.

What factors make the experience of change stressful? A combination of the three sources of stress - eventful experiences, life strains, and diminishment in self-concept - can contribute to transforming simple change into stressful change.

Three propositions are made: first, life events coupled with chronic life strains can result in stressful change. Under these circumstances, life events "can function to bring into focus the unfavorable implications of life problems, and it is the new meaning of old problems that creates distress" (p. 339).



Second, life events may create stress by creating new role strains or by intensifying pre-existing strains.

Thus far, then, we have suggested that certain life events can intensify the more persistent role strains and, in this way, the events and the ensuing strain combine as sources of stress (p. 339).

Third, an individual's self-concept can influence whether or not life events and role strains result in stress. Stress is likely to develop if the events and role strains an individual experiences result in the diminishment of self, specifically in terms of mastery and self-esteem. Mastery, is defined as the "extent to which people see themselves as being in control of the forces that importantly affect their lives" (p. 340). Pearlin, Lieberman, Menaghan and Mullan constructed a seven item scale (listed below), in order to assess an individual's sense of mastery. The concept of self-esteem, defined as one's judgment about one's own self-worth, was investigated by using the Rosenberg scale, also listed below.

Mastery Model: A measure of control

How strongly do you agree or disagree with these statements about yourself?

1. There is really no way I can solve some of the problems I have.

2. Sometimes I feel that I'm being pushed around in life.
3. I have little control over the things that happen to me.
4. I can do just about anything I really set my mind to.
5. I often feel helpless in dealing with the problems of life.
6. What happens to me in the future mostly depends on me.
7. There is little I can do to change many of the important things in my life.

Rosenberg Scale: A measure of self-esteem

How strongly do you agree or disagree with these statements?

1. I feel that I'm a person of worth, at least on an equal with others.
2. I feel that I have a number of good qualities.
3. All in all, I am inclined to feel that I'm a failure.
4. I am able to do things as well as most other people.
5. I feel I do not have much to be proud of.
6. I take a positive attitude toward myself.
7. On the whole, I am satisfied with myself.
8. I certainly feel useless at times.
9. I wish I could have more respect for myself.
10. At times I think I am no good at all.

These two elements of self, the sense of mastery and self-esteem, are especially vulnerable when

individuals experience eventful change and role strains. This diminishment of mastery and self-esteem is an important element in the process which leads to an individual's experience of stress.

Persistent role strains can confront people with dogged evidence of their own failures--or lack of success--and with inescapable proof of their inability to alter the unwanted circumstances of their lives (p. 340).

#### The Mediators of Stress:

##### Social Supports and Coping

The presence of the above sources of stress does not necessarily result in the experience of stress by an individual. Mediating resources can intervene to diffuse stress. Thus, the second component of the stress process is comprised of individuals' mediating resources. Perceptions, behaviors and cognitions in face of potentially stress-provoking conditions can serve to alter the conditions themselves or perhaps mediate the impact of the noxious conditions.

Among the elements having a crucial place in the stress process, therefore, are those that can be invoked by people in behalf of their own defense (p. 340).

The first mediating resource, social supports, consists of the access to and the use of individuals, groups and organizations which can help people deal with

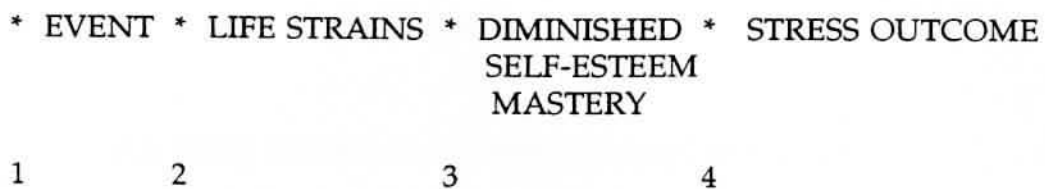
circumstances that could become stressful. Whether or not social supports can function effectively as mediating resources depends upon the quality of the relationships an individual has developed with others in his or her social network. The quality of these relationships, in turn, is based on the presence of solidarity and trust which evolve from frequent and intimate communication (p. 340).

The second mediating resource is coping. Coping behavior has three functions: 1) to modify the situation resulting in stress, 2) to modify the *meaning* of problems in order to reduce the threat that the problem represents and in order to reduce the resulting stress, 3) to *manage* the symptoms of stress. These behaviors vary according to the situations that people face.

Both mediators (social supports and coping), if existent, mobilized and used, have the capacity to regulate the effects of conditions or situations which could otherwise result in stress. In addition, these mediators can intervene at various points within the stress process.

The four points of potential intervention by social supports and coping lie 1) prior to an event, 2) between an event and the life strains it stimulated, 3) between the strain and the resulting diminishment of self-esteem, and lastly, 4) prior to the stress outcome.

Figure 2: Four points of potential mediator intervention



The following chapter relates and discusses some of the constraints and benefits experienced by seven full-time employed married, women with children.

## CHAPTER III

### Basic Design

This study focuses on the effect of employment on the personal and family-life experiences of fifteen full-time employed, married mothers. Their personal accounts explore the question: What kinds of benefits and difficulties do I experience as a result of having multiple roles (mother, wife, full-time employee)? The women's personal narratives will illustrate in more detail the experience of role strain.

In order to more fully explore this question, the survey used in this study focused on four areas: basic data, employment, family life and multiple roles (see Appendix B). The survey questions can be summarized as follows:

1. Basic data on family (number of children, employment status of husband, ideal employment status).
2. Employment (benefits and constraints associated with full-time employment).
3. Family life (division of labor within the home, impact of full-time employment on family responsibilities).
4. Multiple roles (rewards/conflicts associated with being a mother, wife, full-time employee; how to reduce conflict, comments).

### Subject selection

A preliminary list of sixteen women fitting the criteria for this study (full-time employed, married, mothers) was obtained. Potential participants were individually contacted and briefed, in person, on the nature and requirements of this study. After this overview, potential participants were asked to participate in the study. Initially, seven women agreed to participate and complete the survey. In order to increase sample size, subsequent contact of women fitting the criteria for this study resulted in a total of fifteen participants. Although the marital and employment status of all of the participants was known, the surveys remained anonymous.

### Sample

All of the women involved in this study are employed full-time by a community hospital. All of the participating women are white and have at least a high school education. All of the women have either administrative positions at the hospital or its clinic (i.e., accounting, admitting, billing, clerical, dietary, medical records) or nursing-related positions (i.e., certified nursing assistants, licensed practical nurses, nurse practitioners,

registered nurses). They are married to full-time employed husbands and have children between the ages of 0 - 18 years.

### Method

After identifying the interested and willing participants, I distributed the survey individually to each woman. The participants placed their completed surveys in a designated folder. The content of these surveys will be reviewed and discussed below.

### Survey Findings

#### I. Basic Data

1. Number of Children: Fourteen of the respondents have between one and three children. Five respondents (thirty-three percent) have one child, six (forty percent) have two children and three women (twenty percent) have three children. One respondent (seven percent) has four children.
2. Ages of Children: Most of the respondents have young children: Fourteen (ninety-three percent) have one or more children 0-10 years old. Fifteen (one-hundred



percent) have one or more pre-adolescent child 11-14. Seven (forty-seven percent) of the respondents have a combination of young and pre-adolescent children 0-14 years old. Four (twenty-seven percent) of the surveyed women have one or more adolescent children, between 15-18 years. Finally, four (twenty-seven percent) of the women have a combination of pre-adolescent and adolescent children, between the ages of 11-18 years.

3. Spouses' Employment Status: Fifteen (one hundred percent) of spouses are full-time employed.

4. Ideal employment status (full-time, part-time, less than part-time, only in the home): Fourteen (ninety-three percent) of the full-time employed mothers would ideally switch to part-time employment. One respondent (seven percent) stated a preference for full-time work.

## II. Employment

1. How do you personally benefit from working outside the home?

The responses to this question were twofold, financial gain and enhanced well-being. These two categories of responses are listed below.

Financially. All of the respondents state that they benefit financially from working outside the home. For some families, the women's incomes are necessary for the maintenance of the family's lifestyle.

Responses describing financial benefits include, "Money to maintain lifestyle," "It [also] makes it possible to work financially toward goals we have set," "The need of a second income," "The little extras I get to give my kids & myself & spouse," "I also benefit financially. Some of my friends who have chosen to stay at home are struggling financially. We have reasonable (\$wise) and dependable and loving childcare so I feel fortunate that I am able to contribute financially to my family," and "We would not be able to afford the life-style we have chosen to adopt if I were not working full-time." "We need the money," "Extra, necessary, income," "Money to spend on incidental things and to send the kids to college," "We need the extra income," "Money (3)," "My income is necessary to pay the bills each month," "My husband and my incomes combined enable us to live the way we want to live."

Enhanced well-being. Other benefits from working outside the home include gaining feelings of satisfaction at work, feeling a sense of control, confidence and

independence, enjoying interaction with co-workers in a professional atmosphere, enjoying helping others.

Responses include: "Enjoyment of doing a job I like," "Working with people I care for," "Satisfaction from being able to help other people," "It is how I achieve a feeling of satisfaction. At work you can tackle a project, & finish it, at home you tackle a project, finish it, & then it needs to be done again," "I enjoy having an arena in my life where I can develop skills and gain recognition from peers; I like being involved with other professionals and being in that world," and "I need the professional atmosphere in order to periodically break from the 'Mommy' track. There are days when it is satisfying to leave my daughter and come to work where I can be 'in charge,'" "I gain knowledge, independence and self-confidence," "I enjoy working with people I like and being out of the house!" "Productive and successful," "I need the challenge that my job provides and the feed-back from peers," "It would drive me crazy to be at home full-time. I enjoy the change of pace and adult interaction," "I benefit from interacting with staff members and from contact with patients," "The activities I participate in at work are very different from what I do at home. I guess I really like the variety," "I like my work - it makes me feel confident

and independent," and "Interacting with other professionals and peers."

2. What constraints do you experience from working full-time?

Time constraints. All of the respondents state that they feel that they do not have time to do the things they would like to do, or feel they need to do. Some add that they are not able to do things as well as they would like because of time constraints.

Responses include, "No time with children, no time to maintain the home, no time with husband," "I feel like I never finish everything I need to get done in one day. If my child needs me it doesn't matter, work takes precedence. There isn't the time to give my family that I would want to," "The demands at work and at home are a lot to handle, especially when special events are scheduled or one of the children (or me) is sick" "It is hard to try to do it all, find time for kids, mom, find time for husband, wife, keep a clean house, cook, pay bills, wash clothes, school meetings, medical care for kids, work outside and find any time for myself," "Sometimes things get so busy that I feel like I need three more arms to get things done," "It is awful to have to leave your kids when

they are sick-I would say that is the #1 guilt trip for a mother that works outside the home," "I feel like the time I have is spread out very thinly. Actually, too thinly. I don't feel that I am able to do the things that are important to me as often or as well as I would like," "Other than never having time to get everything done, I feel that I am missing out on certain things because of working full-time. Baby water classes on Tuesday and Thursday mornings, middle-of-the-day lunches with my friends and their babies," "Lack of time!" "I often feel unorganized and harried because I have so much to do at home and at work," and "I need more hours in each day in order to do the work that needs to be done."

### III. Family Life

1. Approximately what percentage of each of the following types of family work do you and your spouse do, each week, in your home?

Thirteen (eighty-seven percent) of the respondents state that they do 60% or more of the following family work: childcare, household chores, school meetings, social obligations (correspondence, card/gift purchases, special occasions). Thirteen (eighty-seven) state that they do most

of the shopping and food preparation. Two respondents (twenty-nine percent) share shopping and food preparation equally with their spouses. Managerial tasks were also shared equally between spouses in four of the respondents' cases. Family work done primarily by the spouses (60% or more of the work) included yard work, maintenance, and home remodeling.

2. How does your outside employment impact on your roles and responsibilities at home?

Responses focus on the lack of time and energy to do the things that the respondents enjoy doing, or feel they need to do.

For example, "After working outside the home, you are tired when you get home, and sometimes you wished you could just be left alone, but your day is far from over. I clean house, make dinner, spend time with the kids, wash clothes, visit with husband, clean up dinner dishes, make sure kids are clean before they go to bed, talk to my mom and sister on the phone once during the evening, and by about 10 pm - I have some time for myself and then it's time for bed," "I have too many things to do and too little time to do them," "I still do everything I did before the baby was born, I now just work it in around the

baby and my job. My role hasn't changed, my responsibilities have just increased," "I find it hard to give 100% in both areas. I have had to learn to let go certain standards at home," "It [outside employment] takes up most of my time and thoughts so I seem to have very little time to spend doing anything at home. When I do have time I'm too tired." "Although I enjoy my job, I really feel rushed once I get home," "Once my work here ends, I have to start my second job at home," "When I get home from work, I'm usually tired and sometimes pretty tense, so my mood is not as good as it could be, and I'm not as energetic as I would like to be when I see my children and my husband," "My employment impacts on my roles and responsibilities at home by making me feel tired and grouchy and making me wish that I had a maid and cook at home!" and "I usually leave work hoping to sit down and relax. But when I get home, I have so many things to take care of that I'm usually unable to relax."

#### IV. Multiple Roles

1. Please describe some of the rewards associated with performing outside work and family roles.

Answers focus on several areas: outside work provides feelings of self-worth, independence, satisfaction (from

the work itself and the money it brings into the family). Rewards associated with family roles include, feeling needed and loved, gaining self-confidence and satisfaction.

Respondents explain, "I have a work life other than just mom and wife," "I think [that] working here makes me a more interesting person and the extra money earned from a second income gives the family extras we wouldn't have otherwise," "I feel I am a more knowledgeable and interesting person because I do have outside interests," "A lot of the rewards from being a working mom aren't always immediately apparent. Seeing your child share his toys with another child is not something that I could teach him at home (because he's an only child). He benefits from the instruction as much as I benefit from the time away from him," "Outside work gives you a feeling of self worth and independence. It is nice to support the family financially. I feel like I am a good role model for my daughters to show them that they can become anything they want to be," "I like having both outside, professional work and raising a family. I like the variety, the intellectual and emotional stimulation," "I feel that I receive a great deal of satisfaction from working. You are able to tackle a job and finish it. However, the love of a



child and the warm fuzzies you receive from them are also a big reward," "I love being a mother and wife but I also enjoy outside work," "I gain self-confidence and satisfaction from both my employment and motherhood," "From employment: money, self-confidence. From being a wife and mother: I feel needed and loved," "It's important to me to contribute financially to my family," and "I am glad that I did not have to choose between having children and having a profession because I enjoy both immensely. I feel good about the fact that I am a responsible employee and loving mother."

2. What conflicts do you experience as a result of being a mother, wife and full-time employee simultaneously? Responses emphasize the feelings of guilt, inadequacy and frustration they experience as a result of having a limited amount of time to divide between outside employment, family members and self.

For example, "Feelings of being an inadequate mother because your [sic] not with your children enough. Feelings of being an inadequate wife because the time your [sic] off work you want to spend it with your children and you end up with no time or energy for your husband. Feelings of being inadequate at work because your

thoughts aren't fully on your job. Because you are thinking about your family & home," "I have too many responsibilities, too little time." "Childcare arrangements fall totally on me," "Time constraints continue to be a problem. I need to be devoting extra time to my job in order to complete badly-needed projects, yet I feel torn because that ultimately would be taking time from my daughter. I then leave work, collect my daughter and go home where I am faced with household chores needing my attention," "Spending time with my husband (alone), I am so busy with work and my daughter that I don't even have time to feel guilty. When the day to day stress builds up, I find myself taking it out (verbally) on my husband. Fortunately I am in a loving and caring relationship with a man who understands me and my stress level," "The hardest conflict I have is leaving my child in the hands of another person 10 hrs. a day. Often my child has not wanted me to leave him. I miss being able to have time to sit down and spend time playing with him. He seems to go through stages where it is harder for him to have me leave him with someone else which starts the guilt all over again," "Can't be everywhere at once!" "Not enough time for everybody and myself. I like going on walks - but I can't always fit it in during the week," "Too many things

need to be done," "I wish I had more time with my husband and son," "I sometimes feel that I am failing at everything I do because I don't have the time to do things right," "The main conflict for me is that I feel like I am letting my children down because I have outside obligations," and "I have too much to do and too little time."

3. What would help reduce this conflict?

Responses focused on four areas, reducing the amount of time spent at work, reducing the number of days spent at work (working longer shifts to compensate), dividing the time spent on family work more equitably between respondent and spouse, time/stress management classes.

Responses include: "I have tried working less days a week and having a special day for him. This has helped but not eliminated the problem," "I would work part-time if I could, but since I can't I should train my husband to do as much work in the home as I do," "Help with household chores...I feel that my husband does less than he should as far as housework is concerned," "Not working as many days a week, but working longer shifts when I am here," "Have an 8 to 5 job, no weekends, no holidays," "Working less outside or inside the home," and "Time management, stress management," "If I

worked part-time, a lot of the frustrations I experience would be reduced but, unfortunately, financial strain would be added," "I have thought about working four 10 hr./wk. shifts per week so that I could have an extra day to catch up at home," "Make sure my husband does more work at home," "I would prefer to work part-time rather than full-time," and "Things would be easier if my husband did some of the work which I do now so that I could have more time to do things I enjoy."

#### 4. Comments

Three respondents added the following comments transcribed in their entirety:

"All in all, I am happy with my work and private life except for two areas:

1) I would like to be able to work part time but that is not an option at this point and 2) I would like more help with the house and childcare from my husband. As I said before, this is an ongoing issue between us. One of the major points of contention is the fact that my husband feels like anything he does is to 'help me out' as if the entire house is my responsibility and he's my assistant. I look at my in-laws' relationship (I'm sure my father-in-law has never washed a dish or changed a diaper in his

life!) and I realize that I am more of a partner in our household than my mother-in-law is in hers, but it still isn't an equal relationship. You can bet that I'm raising my children differently...with my husband's help!"

"You know, until I filled this out - I didn't even really stop to think of all that is expected of me each day!"

"I enjoy my work and I love being a mother. However, I think that things would be a lot easier for me (and probably more pleasant for my husband and child) if my husband had a larger share of the responsibilities at home. I find myself doing things automatically because I feel they need do be done, whereas he seems to feel that he has more of a right to relax after work than I do."

As a result of completing the survey, many of the respondents became aware that the amount of time which they devote to family work exceeds the amount of time which their husbands devote to these necessary tasks. In fact, unequally divided family work exists in the homes of thirteen (eighty-seven percent) of the survey respondents. The following chapter discusses one explanation for the

inequality in the division of family work between wives and husbands more fully.

## CHAPTER IV

### Discussion

This chapter is subdivided into four sections which focus on the following topics: role strain, gender roles, women and power, and the final section, implications for therapy.

#### Role Strain

The responses of the full-time employed married mothers who participated in this study reveal that all of the women enjoy some aspects of working outside the home. For example, they feel productive and are able to provide financially for their families. Their well-being is enhanced, in some ways, by this additional role - they feel interesting, successful, satisfied as a result of being employed outside the home. It is not surprising, therefore, that none of the surveyed women stated a preference for working only in the home (given the choice, ideally, of working full-time, part-time, less than part-time or only in the home).

However, fourteen out of fifteen of the surveyed women (ninety-three percent) stated a preference for working part-time rather than full-time. Some of the

cited constraints of full-time employment shed light on their preference for part-time work. For example, all of the respondents stated that they felt that they lacked the time to properly fulfill perceived responsibilities or to do the things they enjoyed. Others stated that they had to lower their standards as a result of the lack of time to properly complete tasks.

Due to limited time and conflicting responsibilities, many of the respondents stated that they felt inadequate, guilty and frustrated - i.e., they experienced role strain. According to Voydanoff (1987), role strain can result when "the total demands on time and energy associated with the prescribed activities of multiple roles are too great to perform the roles adequately or comfortably... or when conflicting demands make it difficult to fulfill the requirements of multiple roles" (p. 83). Indeed, the full-time working women with children in this survey juggle many roles, each with high demands. Not surprisingly, the respondents suffer from role strain.

How can the role strain experienced by the surveyed women be reduced? As previously stated, some of the respondents suggest that if they worked part-time, instead of full-time, they would be able to reduce the number of conflicting demands they experience as a result



of juggling the responsibilities of outside work and family work. Working fewer hours outside the home would enable them to fulfill their family-work duties more effectively, while continuing to enjoy some of the benefits offered by employment.

Other respondents suggest that the conflict between family and employment responsibilities could be reduced if responsibilities within the home were divided more equitably between them and their husbands. One of the respondents' comments illustrates the inequality in the division of labor between her and her spouse: "I would like more help with the house and childcare from my husband. As I said before, this is an ongoing issue between us. One of the major points of contention is the fact that my husband feels like anything he does is to 'help me out' as if the entire house is my responsibility and he's my assistant...and I realize that I am more of a partner in our household than my mother-in-law is in hers, but it still isn't an equal relationship." Most of the women who participated in this study experience similar inequality in the amount of family work they do compared with their husbands' family work. In fact, inequality in the division of family work exists in the homes of thirteen (eighty-seven percent) of the survey respondents. Respondents

noted that they do most of the childcare, household chores, shopping, and food preparation; they also participate in a majority of the school meetings and social obligations.

Sanford and Donovan's (1984) description of employed women's family work concurs with the findings in this study:

Despite the dramatic changes for women in the paid work force in recent years, there has been little change in the fact that child care, cleaning, shopping, cooking and all the other household tasks are seen as women's responsibility. The married woman...who works outside the home has typically not one but many jobs (p. 219).

The never-ending nature of housework, the relentless demand that shopping be done, that food be bought and cooked, that the home be cleaned and maintained, contributes to the sense of being overwhelmed and to the development of role strain.

#### Gender Roles

Why does an unequal division of labor exist in the homes of eighty-seven percent of the surveyed women who work full-time outside of the home? One answer may be found by reviewing in more detail:

1) gender inequalities which exist on a societal level;

2) gender roles and power discrepancies which exist in the traditional female/male marriage

One basic assumption underlies the discussion of the gender inequalities which exist on a societal level and in the traditional male/female marriage, namely, in this society, gender is organized hierarchically; men are in a dominant position and women in a subordinate one.

In Toward a New Psychology of Women (1986), Jean Baker Miller discusses these power and status inequities which she believes fundamentally define male/female relationships. Miller's description of the dominant/subordinate system in which we live may shed some light on why the women in this study and their husbands do not share family work equally, despite the fact that they are both full-time employees.

According to Miller (1986), men comprise the dominant group in this society and women comprise the subordinate group. The dominant group "holds all of the open power and authority and determines the ways in which power may be acceptably used" (p. 9). More specifically, the dominant group defines the subordinate groups' roles which typically include taking care of the

dominants' needs and doing the work that the dominant group does not want to do. Highly valued activities remain in the domain of the dominant group - less valued activities are relegated to the subordinates. The subordinates generally focus on pleasing the dominants and in doing so, they neglect to concentrate on and learn about themselves. One result of the hierarchical structure of our society may be that women have focused away from attending to their own needs and toward focusing their energy on satisfying others' needs. The women's responses in this study echo this tendency, which may contribute to the development of the role strain which they experience.

Rosenfield (1989) also discusses gender roles and power discrepancies and offers an explanation for her finding that full-time employed married women with children consistently have higher rates of psychological distress and depression than full-time employed married men with children. Rosenfield explains that the difference in rates of psychological distress in married women and men is due to the power differences between wives (lower power) and husbands (higher power).

Low power implies less actual control over the environment and thus lower perceptions of personal control. With diminished assessments

of their ability to act on and affect their social world, individuals experience greater psychological distress (p. 78).

Interestingly, one of the ways married women have tried to reduce the power discrepancy between themselves and their husbands has been to work outside the home. While this has increased women's decision-making power, Rosenfield (1989) cites research which has shown that employed women with children show more symptoms of stress than unemployed married women with children. Rosenfield proposes that power explanations—specifically, women's positions of low power—can again be used to explain the higher rates of stress in full-time employed, married women with children.

We may find something about women's employment that places a heavier burden on women, although it involves greater power. Employment also involves increased demands; I suggest that just as the greater power associated with employment may increase women's sense of personal control, the demands associated with employment may diminish their sense of control (p. 78).

The increase in power resulting from employment is accompanied by an increase in demands which effectively off-sets the sense of control or mastery which was gained by securing employment outside of the home. This

results in an overall reduction in the sense of mastery, and an increase in role strain.

The women in this study have primary responsibility for child-care and housework, despite the fact that they are employed full-time. This responsibility is the important distinguishing factor, in terms of the development of role-strain, between full-time, married, employed women with children and their husbands. Rosenfield (1989) stresses that individuals with the most demands have the most symptoms. "When perceived demands are held constant, sex differences [in terms of the experience of role strain] between full-time employed women with children and men disappear" (p. 85). Horwitz (1982) concurs, "People who occupy powerful roles have fewer symptoms of distress than those who are powerless" (p. 619).

Clearly, the full-time employed respondents, and full-time employed women in general, need more help in the home if role strain is to be reduced. As stated above, one way to reduce the occurrence of role strain in married working mothers is to revise the division of labor based on gender which can be detrimental to their psychological well-being. For example, fathers' and mothers' household duties and child-raising responsibilities could be shared equally.

Fortunately, this revised division of labor already exists to a limited degree in this society and has resulted in a different marriage pattern which is slowly beginning to appear. The complementary marriage, in which the father is employed outside the home and mother cares for the household and children, is slowly being replaced by the symmetrical marriage in which "breadwinning and homemaking roles are shared by both spouses" (Ulbrich, 1988). Nevertheless, according to Ulbrich's findings, which were echoed in this study, although some homemaking roles are being shared by both spouses, these roles are not being shared equally. The women in this study and their husbands are still guided by the norms and values which defined gender relations in complimentary marriage some of them are aware of the need to transition from the complimentary marriage pattern to the shared role pattern. Ulbrich states:

Until the historical transition from the complementary to the shared role pattern is complete, however, marriage is likely to be experienced as stressful and emotionally disturbing for both husbands and wives (p. 121).

Hopefully, when the transition is complete, the power discrepancies found to exist between the wives in this study and their husbands will decrease. Women in

general will have more power, family work will be shared equally between themselves and their spouses and role strain among married, full-time working women with children will decrease.

### Women and Power

What process must the women in this study, and other women, undergo to change the norms and values which still define gender relations, and are at the basis of the power discrepancies found between themselves and their husbands? In "Women and Power" (1987), Jean Baker Miller discusses the stress associated with change, our culture's views of women's roles, and how women's internalization of these views has made it difficult for women to seek and gain power. Baker defines power as:

The capacity to produce a change...This can include even moving one's own thoughts or emotions, sometimes a very powerful act. It also can include acting to create movement in an interpersonal field as well as acting in larger realms such as economic, social, or political arenas (p.2).

According to Miller (1987), in our culture and in many others, it is generally held that women should use their powers to empower others, to foster growth in others, to increase "the other's resources, capabilities,



effectiveness, and ability to act" (p. 3). Miller argues that women could learn to use precisely these skills to empower themselves.

It is clear that women face tremendous societally imposed obstacles to gaining power, be it in economic, social or political arenas. But what personal obstacles do women face when they make efforts to gain a sense of mastery and and increased self-esteem? Miller states that the fear of defying culturally imposed gendered role expectations is an important obstacle. She has identified three common reasons for which women may fear confronting power:

1. A woman's using self-determined power for herself is equivalent to selfishness, for she is not enhancing the power of others (Miller, 1987, p. 8). Women have traditionally played the roles of nurturers and caretakers. Ideally, in this traditional frame, they have used their energy to ensure and promote the well-being of others. For many women it is therefore difficult to focus their energy on promoting themselves. The women in this study emphasized that they fulfilled employment and family work responsibilities at the expense of their leisure time, thereby focusing their energy on others rather than promoting themselves.

2. A woman's using self-determined power for herself is equivalent to destructiveness, for such power inevitable will be excessive and will totally disrupt an entire surrounding context (Miller, 1987, p. 8).

Power, as it is conceived in this society, is gained and maintained at the expense of others. For this reason, gaining power (defined in this way) conflicts with a woman's sense of the role she should play in this society. "The equation of power with destructiveness and selfishness seems impossible to reconcile with a sense of feminine identity" (Miller, 1987, p. 8).

3. A woman's use of power may precipitate attack and abandonment; consequently, a woman's use of power threatens her safety and a central part of her identity, which is based on feeling that she needs others (Miller, 1987, p.8). Men in this society also need others, but according to Miller (1987), they have been encouraged by this culture to deny this fact, whereas cultural conditions have led women to incorporate the notion that "I exist only as I need" in an extreme form (p. 8).

Most women have been encouraged to experience these needs as a predominant, central, almost total definition of their personalities. And their experience tells them that change can occur only at the cost of destroying one's place in the world and one's within a context of relationships. I

believe this this reflects accurately the historic and cultural place, and the definition of women (p. 9).

### Implications for Therapy

While Miller (1987) exposes the cultural forces which underlie some women's reluctance to seek and gain power in this society, therapist Gretchen Grinnell (1987) makes it clear that these same cultural forces are responsible for women's lack of power in the first place. This final section reviews some of Grinnell's strategies for empowering women thereby balancing the power differences between women and men.

First, Grinnell believes that helping clients become more aware of the dominant/subordinate system in which men and women live in this society can be a useful way of empowering women. The therapist makes it clear to her client that she is following societal rules, to her own detriment. She is not fully responsible for her own suffering. "Rather she acts obediently: she is a satellite revolving around dominants who have their own interests rather than hers at heart" (p. 54). This recognition usually gives the client a sense of relief from continual self-blame for not being able to juggle the numerous and overwhelming tasks she is required to

perform. This insight would no doubt be helpful to many of the respondents in this study who feel guilty, inadequate and frustrated by the conflicting responsibilities of full-time employment and family work.

Second, The client is encouraged to "plot a different course emphasizing that others do not intend either to help her or to change their own behavior" (Grinnel, 1987, p. 54). The client is urged to begin to act on her own behalf; she is reminded that "whatever she is doing is legitimately an attempt to save herself--to survive - even if she is told - pressured--that she is 'hurting' others in doing whatever she needs to do on her own behalf" (p. 55). This instills a renewed sense of self-protectiveness which has been diminished as a result of role-strain.

Third, the client is encouraged to become aware of her own needs; she is encouraged to become more self-nurturing. The client can slowly become her own agent of change. This sense of being able to create change can be a powerful force countering the lack of a sense of power which is at the root of role strain (p. 55). The responses of the women in this survey indicated that they are aware of their own needs, but that they are often unable to satisfy them due to conflicting demands from home and work. Encouragement to become more self-nurturing could

further the goal to reduce role strain by splitting family work equitably between wife and husband.

Fourth, The client is encouraged to find and spend time with people who do not influence her to act against her own self interest. According to Grinnell (1987), women are often discouraged by their "inductors" from socializing with people who influence her in a positive way (p. 55). The fifth strategy would be to help the client "learn to read and to honor her body signals" (Grinnel, 1987, p. 56). The client will learn to recognize situations or people which have a relaxing effect on her and those which do not.

If she is to be healthy, she too can learn to move away from situations or people who sabotage her personhood, even if these same people tell her she is "off the wall" or "sick," "stupid," "crazy" or unfeminine (p. 56).

The end result of the empowerment of women, however, would clearly not be that women simply learn to identify and move away from "situations or people who sabotage [their] personhood." Rather, empowered women could continue contributing their energy to produce changes which help make this society one that strives to create conditions in which members can grow and contribute, in a self-defined and positive way.

Appendix ALetter submitted with Survey

Dear XX,

Thank you for agreeing to fill out the attached survey. As you know, you have been asked to fill out this survey because you are a full-time employed married mother. The survey focuses on the constraints and benefits you experience as a result of juggling those three roles. Your responses will be used as data in my master's degree culminating project for Lindenwood College. Otherwise, your identity and the information you provide will be strictly confidential.

Sincerely,

Monika Bilger

## Appendix B

### Survey

The purpose of this survey is to gather information on some of the constraints and benefits you experience as a result of juggling the roles of mother, wife and full-time employee. Please answer the following questions and feel free to add comments.

- I. Basic Data:
  1. How many children do you have?
  2. What ages are your children?
    - a. 0-10 yrs.
    - b. 11-14 yrs.
    - c. 15-18 yrs.
  3. Does your spouse work full-time?
  4. Ideally, would you prefer to work:
    - a. full-time
    - b. part-time
    - c. less than part-time
    - d. only in the home

## II. Employment

1. How do you personally benefit from working outside the home?
2. What constraints do you experience from working full-time?

## III. Family Life

1. Approximately what percentage of each of the following types of family work do you and your spouse do, each week, in your home?

yourself                      spouse

- a. childcare
- b. household chores
- c. yard work
- d. maintenance
- e. food preparation
- f. shopping
- g. managerial tasks
- h. other (please list)

2. How does your outside employment impact on your roles and responsibilities at home?



#### IV. Multiple Roles

1. Please describe some of the rewards associated with performing outside work and family roles.
2. What conflicts do you experience as a result of being a mother, wife and full-time employee simultaneously?
3. What would help reduce this conflict?
4. Comments

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