THE EFFECT OF WIVES’ EMPLOYMENT ON THE MENTAL HEALTH OF MARRIED MEN AND WOMEN*

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Evidence from a large national survey indicates a significant positive relationship between spouse’s employment and psychological distress among married men in this country. Employment outside the home is associated with improved mental health among married women. Investigating the determinants of these effects shows that the mental health advantage of employment for women is due to objective changes in their life situations as they move out of the home and into the labor force. We have a less clear understanding of the relationship between spouse’s employment and psychological distress among men, but inferential evidence suggests that traditional sex role orientations explain part of this effect. There is no evidence that objective burdens associated with increased housework or childcare responsibilities play a part in the elevated rates of distress reported by husbands. These conclusions are brought together in a discussion of trends in the relationship between sex and psychological distress.

To the extent that sex roles are implicated in the higher rates of psychological distress among women than men, this sex difference should attenuate as the roles of men and women become more alike. A recent analysis of trends in distress shows that this has occurred over the past two decades (Kessler and McRae, 1981). Curiously, though, the convergence resulted from greater increases among men than women, not from an improvement in the mental health of women. This could be due to counterbalancing effects of the stresses of modern living, which have deleterious effects on both men and women, and changing female roles. This interpretation is consistent with current thinking about the relationship between sex roles and mental illness, according to which the greater psychological distress among women is due to their more stressful and less satisfying roles (Gove and Tudor, 1973; Gove, 1978).

Over the past two decades, women have increasingly combined paid employment with family roles. There is some evidence that this change has resulted in their better mental health (Gove and Geerken, 1977; Welch and Booth, 1977; Kessler and McRae, 1981), although this evidence is by no means consistent (Pearlin, 1975; Radloff, 1975; Wright, 1978). Given this inconsistency, it is unlikely that trends in female employment account entirely for the closing gap between female and male rates of distress. Trends in other characteristics—intactness of marriage, age at marriage, fertility, age at first birth, educational attainment—are not responsible because they do not statistically explain any of the convergence (Kessler and McRae, 1981). However, it is conceivable that recent role changes have led to convergence not only by improving women’s mental health but also by increasing distress among men.

Three studies have systematically examined this issue. Burke and Weir (1976) and Rosenfield (1980) found husbands of employed women in poorer mental health than husbands of full-time homemakers, but these results are based on small, unrepresentative samples. Burke and Weir examined 189 married couples in which the husbands were engineers or accountants active in professional associations. Rosenfield considered only 30 married couples. Furthermore, Booth (1977, 1979) analyzed data from 329 young couples in Toronto with children and found that husbands of homemakers were in worse mental health than husbands of women employed outside the home.

In this paper, we attempt to resolve this inconsistency by presenting evidence from a large, representative, national survey which shows a negative effect of wives’ employment on husbands’ mental health and a positive effect of employment on women. We then investigate the determinants of these effects and
speculate on their implications for trends in the relationship between gender and emotional well-being.

DATA

The sample

The data come from a survey of 2440 U.S. adults, 21 years and older, administered in 1976 by the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan (Veroff et al., 1981a, 1981b). We restrict our attention to white members of married couples in which the husband is currently employed, since issues concerning women’s employment are probably somewhat different for members of minority groups and couples where the husband is not employed. We also delete women who are temporarily unemployed or retired in order to obtain a clean distinction between working women and full-time homemakers. This leaves a sample of 1086 respondents. Since our sample is substantially larger and more representative than those studied by Burke and Weir, Rosenfield, or Booth, we can obtain more reliable estimates of the effects of women’s employment and investigate a variety of hypotheses about differential effects that were not considered in the earlier studies.

Psychological distress

Five measures of distress, presented in Table 1, are used in the analysis. Gurin (Gurin et al., 1960), a twenty-item scale, consists of statements about bodily feelings that indicate moods of depression or anxiety. Ill Health and Psychological Anxiety are subscales of Gurin derived on the basis of exploratory factor analysis (Veroff et al., 1981a: Chapter 7). Depression and Low Self-Esteem are shortened versions of the Zung (1965) Depression and Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem scales.

The scales were formed by recoding the items so that a high score indicates distress and by summing the responses.1 Scores were then standardized to a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1, using the mean and standard deviation of the total sample.

None of these composites is intended to measure clinical disorders when administered in normal populations such as this one. Clinical definitions require making qualitative distinctions between “cases” and “normals.” No such distinctions are made here. Rather, the scales

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Table 1. Symptom Screening Scales Used in the Analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Reliability</th>
<th>Items*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Gurin</td>
<td>.85</td>
<td>(1) trouble getting to sleep (2) nervousness (3) headaches (4) loss of appetite (5) upset stomach (6) difficult getting up in morning (7) ill health affects work (8) shortness of breath (9) heart beats hard (10) drinking too much (11) dizziness (12) nightmares (13) loss of weight (14) hands tremble (15) hands sweat (16) can’t get going (17) bothered by pains and ailments (18) feel healthy (19) felt like you would have a nervous breakdown (20) physical health problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Ill Health</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>Items (7)–(9), (17)–(18), and (20) from Gurin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Psychological Anxiety</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>Items (1)–(5) from Gurin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Depression</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>(1) mind is as clear as it used to be (2) easy to do things I used to do (3) life is interesting (4) feel useful and needed (5) life is full (6) hopeful about future.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Low Self-Esteem</td>
<td>.69</td>
<td>(1) I am a person of worth (2) I can do things as well as most people (3) I feel good about myself.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* For complete documentation of the question wording and question order in the interview schedule, see Veroff et al. (1981a).

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are used as continuous measures of subjectively experienced distress.

EVIDENCE FOR AN EFFECT OF WIVES' EMPLOYMENT ON MENTAL HEALTH

Table 2 reports associations between female labor force participation (coded 1 for employed wives and 0 for homemakers) and the screening scales for men and women. The gross effects are zero-order regression coefficients. All of the distress indicators show employed wives to have significantly lower distress scores than homemakers. Among husbands, wife’s employment is associated with consistently higher levels of distress. Only two of the five coefficients are statistically significant, but these are for two critical dimensions of mood: Depression and Low Self-Esteem.

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1 It is of some interest that women gave more distressed responses than men to all questions in these scales but one—drinking too much. This is also the only item on which working women appear more distressed than nonworking women.
These patterns might well be spurious. Mothers of preschoolers and of large numbers of children experience comparatively poor mental health (Radloff, 1975; Gove and Geerken, 1977), and these women are also less likely to work outside the home (U.S. Department of Commerce, 1979). Therefore, the association of mental health with employment among married women might represent an effect of children.

Since children are known to have less effect on the mental health of fathers, spuriousness should be less of a problem among men. At the same time, though, wife's employment could result from the husband having a low salary, and there is a strong negative relationship between earnings and distress among men (Dohrenwend et al., 1980).

To determine the importance of these influences, multiple regression equations were estimated in which we controlled husband's earnings and the number and ages of children. We also controlled age of respondents, as age is associated with the likelihood of women working outside the home (Duncan, 1979), and earlier analysis showed significant effects of age on some of the distress indicators.

The net effects in Table 2 are regression coefficients of distress on wife's employment, net of income, children, and age. The net and gross effects are very similar. Indeed, among women, four of the five coefficients become more strongly negative when controls are added.² Although most coefficients for men are smaller when controls are introduced, the effects on Depression and Low Self-Esteem remain significant. We conclude that the simple zero-order relationships reflect real associations between female labor force participation and psychological distress.

### Table 2. Gross and Net Effects of Wife's Employment on the Psychological Distress of Married Respondents*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A. Wives</th>
<th>Gurin</th>
<th>Ill Health</th>
<th>Psychological Anxiety</th>
<th>Depression</th>
<th>Low Self-Esteem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gross</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>-.193**</td>
<td>-.204**</td>
<td>-.256**</td>
<td>-.230**</td>
<td>-.266**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>.085</td>
<td>.084</td>
<td>.084</td>
<td>.085</td>
<td>.086</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n)</td>
<td>(532)</td>
<td>(532)</td>
<td>(532)</td>
<td>(530)</td>
<td>(532)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>-.255**</td>
<td>-.241**</td>
<td>-.318**</td>
<td>-.226**</td>
<td>-.324**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>.090</td>
<td>.085</td>
<td>.090</td>
<td>.090</td>
<td>.093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n)</td>
<td>(493)</td>
<td>(493)</td>
<td>(492)</td>
<td>(491)</td>
<td>(492)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Husbands</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gross</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>.131</td>
<td>.025</td>
<td>.107</td>
<td>.176**</td>
<td>.248**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>.088</td>
<td>.089</td>
<td>.089</td>
<td>.088</td>
<td>.088</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n)</td>
<td>(518)</td>
<td>(518)</td>
<td>(518)</td>
<td>(517)</td>
<td>(516)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>.107</td>
<td>-.012</td>
<td>.051</td>
<td>.184**</td>
<td>.212**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>.091</td>
<td>.090</td>
<td>.092</td>
<td>.091</td>
<td>.089</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(n)</td>
<td>(496)</td>
<td>(496)</td>
<td>(496)</td>
<td>(495)</td>
<td>(494)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Effects are net of husband's income, the square of husband's income, respondent's age, and the square of respondent's age. A set of 16 variables describing the number and ages of children were entered, stepwise, as additional controls. Only the ones that entered with an R² increment significant at the .05 level have been retained in the net models.

** Significant at p = .05.

² Although preschool children in the home and age are both positively associated with distress and negatively associated with labor force participation among women (thus reducing the estimated effect of labor force participation on well-being), both these effects are overshadowed by the fact that husband's income is negatively associated with wife's distress and with the probability that the wife is employed outside the home. This common correlate suppresses the negative association between labor force participation and distress among women in the gross models.
causal influence on the decision to enter the labor force but not on mental health. Or the variable would have to influence mental health directly but not the decision to enter the labor force. We cannot imagine a variable of this sort.

Two sorts of data suggest that the impact of mental health on the wife’s labor force participation is negligible. The first involves a question posed to full-time homemakers: “Are you planning to go to work in the future?” Assuming some association between answers and subsequent employment, selection of mentally healthy women into the labor force should yield a negative association between future work plans and distress. However, we find no meaningful association between responses to this question and Gurin, Anxiety, Depression, or Self-Esteem. Only for Ill Health are women who plan to work significantly less distressed than those who plan to remain at home. It seems likely that physical incapacity is at least partially responsible for this association. That none of the other scales is associated with plans for employment in this way argues that female mental health has little effect on the decision to work outside the home.

Another inferential test of the reciprocal causation possibility is based on the reasoning that if selection is an important element of the observed association, the relationship between employment and mental health will be stronger in subsamples where the decision to work is more a matter of personal preference than economic necessity. Therefore, we would expect an interaction between husband’s income and wife’s employment with the negative association between employment and distress more pronounced among wives whose husbands earn a great deal of money (where women’s employment is presumably elective) than among those whose husbands do not earn as much (where female employment is more likely to be a matter of economic necessity). Regression equations were estimated but no support was found for this expectation.³

Neither of these evaluations is rigorous. But, if the mental health of women strongly influenced the likelihood of employment, we would surely have found some evidence of this. We consequently proceed on the assumption that selection effects are negligible and that the main determinant of the relationship between labor force participation and distress is employment influencing psychological functioning.

### ADJUSTMENT TO A DUAL EARNER FAMILY PATTERN

Several different interpretations of the effects of employment can be found in the literature (Blood and Wolfe, 1960; Burke and Weir, 1976; Weintrob, 1980; Yankelovich, 1974). Some imply that the benefits of employment for women will fade with time because they are tied to transient feelings of liberation from traditional female roles. Others imply that objective improvements in the life situations of women cause these benefits, which means that they should be permanent. There are also different interpretations of the negative effects among men. One position is that these are tied to traditional sex role orientations and will disappear as sex role norms change. Another is that the traditional role of men as family heads is altered so fundamentally by the dual earner pattern that the mental health of men will be permanently impaired (Gilder, 1973). In the next two sections we investigate these different interpretations, first for women and then for men.

### THE EMOTIONAL BENEFITS OF EMPLOYMENT FOR WOMEN

Although one might classify the conditions of life as a homemaker on many dimensions, none is so obviously important as the presence of children in the home. Most epidemiological work has found that psychological distress is higher among women who have young children than among others (Gove and Geerken, 1977; Brown and Harris, 1978). But it is not clear whether employment has a larger or smaller emotional effect among mothers than other women. To the extent that employment functions as a release from the duties of housework and childcare responsibilities, it should have a positive emotional effect. But time pressure, anxieties about role performance, and work overload are probably greater among mothers, and working outside the home could exacerbate these problems.

To analyze these possibilities, we estimated a number of regression models, in each of which a measure of the number/age(s) of child(ren) was included as a predictor of distress and as a modifier of the relationship between employment and distress. Fifteen different measures of the presence of children

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³ Indeed, the only significant interaction is curvilinear. While employed wives are much less likely to experience ill health than homemakers among women whose husbands have low earnings, at approximately $20,000 husband earnings the average levels of Ill Health are the same for homemakers and working wives. And at higher incomes, the Ill Health of employed wives is actually higher than that of homemakers. Why this should be so is unclear. Indeed, the result is counterintuitive.
were investigated because it is not known whether age or number of children is a more important dimension in predicting mental health, nor whether their effects are additive or interactive, linear or nonlinear.  

The results are striking for the absence of meaningful interaction effects. In the set of 75 (15 measures for each of 5 distress scores) interactions estimated, only 5 are significant at the .05 level: 4 of these are for Ill Health and 1 is for Gurin. All of these show the effect of employment to be less for mothers. Were the interactions entirely random, this consistent pattern would almost certainly not appear. So we conclude that the family environment modifies the effects of employment, but the evidence is much weaker than we at first expected.

One reason for this might be that many working women share childcare responsibilities with their spouses. To determine this, parents of children no older than elementary school age were asked: "Who in your family would you say spends more time taking care of the child (children)—you, your spouse or both about equal?" A similar question was asked of all respondents about housework, and two additional questions were asked about the amount of time each marital partner devotes to these tasks. After experimenting with various ways of coding responses, we found that the most informative contrast distinguishes (a) wives who spend more time on childcare or housework than their spouses, and (b) those who spend equal or less time than their spouses.

Panel A of Table 3 shows that assistance with childcare modifies the relationship between employment and distress. For all five indicators, employment is associated with improved mental health among women whose husbands share childcare. Among women whose husbands do not share childcare, the advantages of employment are negligible. This is shown by the interaction terms. The impact of employment on the distress of women without spouse assistance is equal to the sum of the main and interaction effects. These two components are very similar in size but opposite in sign so their sum is close to zero. This means that there is, for all practical purposes, no mental health advantage of employment among these women.

The coefficients in Panel B are generally smaller than those in Panel A, and their signs are less consistent. This means that a husband's help with housework is not a central modifying influence for mothers of young children. Panel C shows that this same conclusion applies to women who do not have young children at home. The critical type of assistance is clearly with childcare.

These results paint a picture of employment as bringing benefits that can be altered by the added stresses of maintaining a household. We now turn to conditions of the job which might modify the effect of employment. One very important condition is income. It is by no means the only characteristic of the workplace that influences the mental health of workers, but it is both important in its own right and is related to many concrete features of work like interesting work and control over the conditions of one's labor.

Beginning with the regression equations in Table 3, we added a measure of respondent income coded 0 for women without income and from 1 to 35 for those with income (over $35,000 was coded 35). We reestimated the equations including income squared to capture nonlinearities in the effects of income. Next, an interaction between income and the dummy variable for spouse's assistance with childcare or housekeeping was included. Finally, we added an interaction of the square of income with assistance and estimated the equations a last time.

By keeping the dummy variable for respondent's employment and income in all equations, we divided the overall effect of employment into two parts: the difference in distress between homemakers and women who are employed at the lowest earnings level, and the average linear difference in distress among employed women for each added thousand dollars of earnings. The squared earnings term allows for some variation in the impact of earnings on distress along the range of the earnings distribution.

The interaction terms measure the relative impact of income on the well-being of women who do and do not have assistance from their spouses with childcare and housekeeping. Significant interactions mean that the influence of work conditions is a function of the conditions.
in the home. The absence of significant interactions means that the effect of job and family conditions can cancel but do not modify each other.

This analysis reveals no meaningful association between earnings and well-being. This is true for women with and without young children, for women who receive help with childcare and housework and those who do not. The major part of the employment effect reported in Tables 2 and 3 represents a difference between homemakers and women who hold even the most poorly remunerated jobs. This is consistent with Pearlin (1975) who reports that job-related strains have less effect on the well-being of female than male workers. Almost all the effects of income are insignificant. The only consistent exception to this is Psychological Anxiety, where increased income is accompanied by increased distress at the upper part of the income distribution among women who lack support from their spouses. Women who have high income (and presumably high job pressure) as well as major responsibility for childcare and housework are not depressed or subject to health problems. But they are anxious. This probably represents a work overload effect (cf. Gove and Geerken, 1977). Aside from this effect of overload on anxiety, the results are striking for how little income influences the well-being of these workers.

While we have no other objective measures of work conditions, we do have information about work satisfaction. Although responses to this question take us perilously close to confounding a modifier with our measures of distress, it is of interest to determine if this global evaluation plays a part in the benefits of employment.

The first panel in Table 4 reports a decomposition of the employment effects in terms of the extent to which employed women report satisfaction with their jobs. A significant benefit of employment is found only among those who are "very satisfied." Among those who are "dissatisfied" or "very dissatisfied" employment actually increases psychological dis-
Table 4. The Effects of Employment on Psychological Distress Among Women with Varying Orientations to Employment, Housework, and Work/Family Conflict

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Gurin</th>
<th>Ill Health</th>
<th>Psychological Anxiety</th>
<th>Depression</th>
<th>Low Self-Esteem</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A. Job Satisfaction</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Satis.</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>-2.60**</td>
<td>-2.27**</td>
<td>-3.05**</td>
<td>-3.45**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>0.13</td>
<td>0.125</td>
<td>0.131</td>
<td>0.129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.145</td>
<td>0.152</td>
<td>0.149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>-2.249</td>
<td>-0.007</td>
<td>-1.293</td>
<td>0.065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>0.236</td>
<td>0.220</td>
<td>0.231</td>
<td>0.226</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dissatis.</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>0.504**</td>
<td>0.261</td>
<td>0.343</td>
<td>0.511**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>0.260</td>
<td>0.244</td>
<td>0.255</td>
<td>0.256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very Dissatis.</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>1.062**</td>
<td>1.062**</td>
<td>0.203</td>
<td>0.694**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>0.382</td>
<td>0.354</td>
<td>0.375</td>
<td>0.364</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>B. Housework Satisfaction</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Like</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>-0.371**</td>
<td>-0.303**</td>
<td>-0.459**</td>
<td>-0.354**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>0.120</td>
<td>0.112</td>
<td>0.117</td>
<td>0.115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambivalent</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>-0.035</td>
<td>-0.046</td>
<td>0.099</td>
<td>0.026</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>0.175</td>
<td>0.163</td>
<td>0.170</td>
<td>0.167</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dislike</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>0.371</td>
<td>0.103</td>
<td>0.389</td>
<td>0.500**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>0.269</td>
<td>0.251</td>
<td>0.261</td>
<td>0.256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don't Know</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>0.333**</td>
<td>0.223</td>
<td>0.327**</td>
<td>0.330**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>0.170</td>
<td>0.159</td>
<td>0.165</td>
<td>0.162</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>C. Work/Family Conflict</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>-0.499**</td>
<td>-0.387**</td>
<td>-0.335**</td>
<td>-0.058</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>0.167</td>
<td>0.156</td>
<td>0.163</td>
<td>0.161</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>-0.448**</td>
<td>-0.303</td>
<td>-0.421**</td>
<td>-0.111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>0.203</td>
<td>0.190</td>
<td>0.197</td>
<td>0.196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>0.103</td>
<td>0.029</td>
<td>-0.052</td>
<td>-0.177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>s.e.</td>
<td>0.157</td>
<td>0.147</td>
<td>0.152</td>
<td>0.151</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* The sample size varies from 491 to 493 in these models.
** Significant at p = .05.

This result does not merely represent a comparison between the conditions of employment and the conditions of life as a full-time homemaker. This is quite clear from the second panel in Table 4, where the effects of employment are specified by responses to a question asked of employed women about their orientation to housework. The positive effect of employment outside the home is confined to women who report that they "like" housework. Among women who are ambivalent or who actively dislike housework, outside employment has either a negative or no effect.

It is possible that conflicting work and family role demands give rise to these results. But responses to a question which asked working women if they experienced conflicts of this sort are not related to job satisfaction. Furthermore, as reported in Panel C of Table 4, there is no significant damage associated with employment among women who report conflicts of this sort. Since there is significant damage among those who report job dissatisfaction, more must be involved in the latter than conflict between competing demands of the family and the job.

Although we have no direct measure of sex role orientation, it is possible that women benefit from work only if work is consistent with their conception of appropriate female behavior. We looked at this possibility by studying the modifying effects of age and education on the relationship between employment and well-being. These two modifying variables were selected because they are the two strongest sociodemographic correlates of sex role orientations found in the literature and contained in our data (Duncan and Duncan, 1978; Mason and Bumpass, 1975; Mason et al., 1976; Thornton and Freedman, 1979). If the benefits of employment are associated with sex role orientations, they will be greater for the young and well educated than for older and less well educated women.

Just the opposite is true. For Ill Health (p = .03), there is a significant interaction between age and employment in predicting distress and for Gurin (p = .11) and Depression (p = .06) interactions are near significance. In all three cases the effects of employment are more pronounced among older women. Only for Gurin is there a significant (p = .03) interactive effect of education and employment. Employment improves the mental health of women more if their educational attainment is at the high school level than if they have either more or
less education. It is not clear how to interpret this effect, but it is not consistent with the interpretation that symbolic meanings of work associated with nontraditional sex role orientations are responsible for the effects of employment.

In sum, then, the benefits of employment are tied to conditions in the home (especially childcare responsibilities) and in the workplace. Women who have few family responsibilities and who are assisted in childcare by a spouse are likely to reap maximum psychological benefits from outside employment.

The benefits of employment are also tied to job conditions, although it is not clear which conditions are important. We know that earnings are not related to the mental health benefits of work. It remains for future work to delve more deeply into the job conditions that are important.

THE EMOTIONAL COSTS OF SPOUSE'S EMPLOYMENT FOR HUSBANDS

In this section we consider whether the increased distress that accompanies spouse's employment among husbands varies as a function of the new role obligations husbands take on when their wives become employed. The analysis parallels that presented for women. We first consider the role of childcare and housekeeping responsibilities.

Using the same measures of the presence of children described earlier, 75 (15 for each of the 5 distress scales) regression models were estimated. We find no evidence that spouse's employment affects the well-being of men differently depending on the presence of children in the home. None of the interactions is significant at the .05 level and only 4 are significant at the .10 level.

We next examined the possibility that the presence of children is less important than the responsibilities husbands take on when their spouses go to work. Several different ways of operationalizing husband's involvement were considered, but the clearest interpretation is obtained with two dichotomous variables. The first discriminates (a) husbands who infrequently, or never, do housework, from (b) those who more frequently do housework. The second makes a similar distinction between infrequently or never helping with childcare and more frequent involvement.

Each of these variables was entered into a regression equation, first as a main effect and then in interaction with spouse's employment. A total of 30 equations were estimated since we followed the procedure used for women of looking separately at those who are and those who are not parents of preteens. For each of the 5 distress scales, models for both childcare and housework involvement were estimated for parents, yielding a total of 20 equations (10 for the main effects and 10 that include interactions). For the remainder of the sample, the equations were estimated only for involvement in housework, producing 10 more equations.

In none of these equations does involvement significantly affect distress. This unambiguously argues against a work overload interpretation, for distress is not associated with spending more time on tasks historically performed by homemakers.

Of the 15 interactions only 2 are reliably different from zero. This is only marginal evidence for a specification, but both of these involve childcare assistance and are positive. Furthermore, they are part of a larger pattern of positive interactions of employment and assistance with childcare. This means that wife's employment is associated with increased distress more among men who do not take on childcare responsibilities than among those who do. These interactions are more pronounced for Gurin, Ill Health, and Psychological Anxiety than for the two scales found earlier to be significantly influenced by spouse's employment: Depression and Low Self-Esteem. Thus, although they do not help account for the emotional damage that can result from spouse's employment, they raise the possibility that sex role orientations, rather than objective work overloads, are implicated in responses to spouse's employment. Men who are supportive of their wives to the extent that they take on some childcare responsibilities are apparently more comfortable with a dual earner family situation. This is a theme to which we return later.

We next considered the possibility that distress results from the husband's loss of status and power associated with the wife's bringing money into the family. We found that the mental health of husbands improves as their wives' incomes increase. This is significantly so for Depression and Low Self-Esteem, as shown in Table 5. A series of models examined the nonadditive influence of spouse's income as a percentage of total family income and spouse's income relative to husband's income. There is no evidence in these models that increased wife's earnings damages the well-being of husbands. This is not to say that the loss of sole breadwinner status is inconsequential; it may be very important. But if so, it is consequential no matter how much one's wife earns. In this sense, the qualitative fact that one's wife is no longer financially dependent is symbolically important, not concretely so.

When this set of results is coupled with our
earlier finding that involvement in family roles has no effect on the well-being of husbands, we see clearly that changes in the burdens and responsibilities of married life do not account for the adverse psychological effects of spouse’s employment. Apparently something independent of changes in role responsibilities accounts for the distress of husbands.

A natural suspicion is that uneasiness about one’s wife working is associated more with attitudes about the appropriateness of women working than with structural sources of strain. This is consistent with the one specification we reported so far for husbands—that Gurin and Psychological Anxiety are less pronounced among husbands who help with childcare. It is also consistent with our finding that the fact that one’s wife is employed, not the amount of money she earns, is associated with Depression and Low Self-Esteem. However, since no more direct measures of traditional sex role orientations are available in the survey, we have no way to investigate this suspicion directly.

We do know that threat to one’s sense of competence is not involved. Husbands had an opportunity to talk about this and other feelings of inadequacy in the interview, and there is no evidence that these feelings are associated with wife’s employment. Nor are overt conflicts about the wife’s job or about her lack of involvement in traditional family roles responsible. Husbands had an opportunity to mention these as sources of marital dissatisfaction, but there is no relationship between these types of dissatisfaction and psychological distress.

We did find one additional significant specification. As an indirect way of studying traditional sex role orientations, we examined the modifying influences of age and education. No interactions with education are significant at the .05 level, but an interaction with age significantly affects Depression, and a very similarly shaped interaction is near significance for Low Self-Esteem. Since these are the two types of distress most closely related to spouse’s employment, it is important to examine these interactions in some detail.

Figure 1 presents a graph of the significant age interactions. The values on the ordinate are the estimated impacts of wife’s employment for men of different ages. As the smoothed interaction estimates show, the least damage is found among young and old husbands. For Depression this impact increases from 21 to the mid-forties. The increase for Low Self-Esteem goes to the mid-fifties. After these peaks, the effects decrease steadily.

We know of no single modifying influence that could account for these curves. Family
role responsibilities, especially those associated with caring for children, probably follow a curve not too different from these. We have already seen, however, that the presence of children in the home does not account for the emotional damage of wife's employment. Endorsement of traditional sex role values is associated with advanced age but does not peak and then decline as the effect of wife's employment does in Figure 1. Neither can age variations in feelings of confidence and mastery account for the declining impact of wife's employment in the oldest age groups, because they decrease monotonically with age, just as traditional sex role orientations increase monotonically.

Apparently a very complicated interplay of these and possibly other influences is responsible for this variation by age. It is conceivable that from 21 to late middle age the increasing impact of wife's employment reflects increasing endorsement of traditional sex role values, while the decline in the older age groups reflects the decreasing relevance of a sex-linked division of labor as retirement approaches and children leave home. A complicated interplay between age and cohort is also possible. Objective strains associated with one's wife working outside the home might be associated with one's place in the life cycle, while year of birth is associated with resistance to female labor force participation. But without an explicit measure of the values placed on traditional sex role orientations, it is not possible to evaluate these interpretations empirically.

DISCUSSION

We began with the observation that the relationship between sex and psychological distress has decreased over the past two decades. Previous investigation documented that an important part of this decrease stems from the fact that women benefit emotionally from participation in the labor force (Kessler and McRae, 1981). In this paper we delved into this benefit in greater detail. Both conditions of work and conditions in the family play parts in the benefit of employment. It is not what women dislike about life as a full-time homemaker that makes employment outside the home emotionally beneficial. Indeed, the improvement is more pronounced among women who like housework chores. Instead, conditions of the job and demands of family life that stand in the way of participating fully in the positive aspects of work play the major parts in determining the impact on mental health.

This set of results suggests that the benefits of employment will persist through time and that the aggregate mental health of women will improve as more women enter the labor force. There is one sense, though, in which we remain unclear about this. The mental health of women is unrelated to their earnings, while among men there is a strong, positive association between earnings and mental health. Furthermore, the relationship between earnings and job satisfaction is stronger for men than women. These results suggest that the meaning of paid employment differs for men and women. Women are satisfied with less well paying jobs and draw their sense of job satisfaction from characteristics of work less directly tied to objective job rewards than do men. They have different, and perhaps lower, expectations of work.

It is possible that these differences are tied to deeply rooted sex differences in the valuation of achievement and affiliation. If so, then they might persist. It is possible, though, that women will come to tie their feelings of job satisfaction more closely to objective rewards. If this happens, there could be a decrease in the emotional benefits of employment. As documented elsewhere, there is no evidence that these benefits declined over the past two decades (Kessler and McRae, 1981). But it is important that we continue to monitor the association.

For men, the impact of spouse's employment is tied to factors we understand less well. Our only real understanding comes from what we know not to be at work. We know that childcare responsibilities do not account for this damage. We know that variations in spouse's earnings are unimportant. We know that dissatisfaction with one's ability to be a provider is not involved. Nor is overt conflict over responsibilities to the family and to the job a central issue.

There is some evidence that a positive attitude toward one's wife working reduces the emotional damage this situation can create; at least this is how we interpreted the fact that men who help most with childcare are those least distressed by their spouses working outside the home. But we know that this interaction cannot explain entirely the emotional effects, for it cannot explain the strongest specification we found—that of age.

The varying effect of spouse's employment on men of different ages is centrally important for an understanding of trends. It might represent a true "age" or life cycle effect. If so, then it probably signifies that some change in the roles of husbands, or in the relationships of husbands to their wives, caused by wives entering the labor force, creates distress. Or it
might represent a "cohort" effect, in which case it probably signifies that the value orientations of some men are in conflict with the fact that their wives work, thus creating feelings of distress.

We argued earlier that neither of these interpretations is plausible as a total explanation. It is much more likely that age and cohort effects are at work together. This makes it extremely difficult to make inferences about trends. To the extent that life cycle effects are responsible, we can expect the adverse effect of spouse's employment to persist. To the extent that cohort effects are at work, cohort replacement will, over time, reduce the effect of spouse's employment on husband's distress. We expect that this reduction will begin to appear in the near future since we think that cohort differences are implicated in the age interaction found in these data. Until data are collected with information about sex role orientations and emotional responsiveness to spouse's employment, though, we cannot estimate with any certainty the magnitude of this reduction.

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TESTING THE THEORY OF STATUS INTEGRATION AND SUICIDE RATES*

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Consistent with the theory, there is a substantial inverse relation among age groups of U.S. white women between the official suicide rate and a simultaneous measure of three dimensions of status integration (marital, parental, and labor force). Further analysis indicates that the present test and all previous tests underestimate the theory's predictive accuracy. The underestimation stems from incomplete tests, in which several dimensions of status integration are ignored; and only one procedure appears appropriate for the measurement of two or more dimensions considered together. When the three status families—marital, parental, and labor force—are cross-classified, the resulting simultaneous measure of integration explains four times as much variance in the suicide rate as does any of the three considered separately and nearly twice that explained by any version of various composite measures (e.g., simple addition of the three component measures).

In the first major publication on the theory, Gibbs and Martin (1964) reported 175 correlational tests; and, consistent with the theory, 160 or 91.4 percent of the correlations between the measures of status integration and suicide rates are negative. Several subsequent tests (e.g., Gibbs, 1969; Stack, 1978) have been no less consistent with the theory. However, Gibbs and Martin (1964:198) themselves reported 15 instances where the relation between the independent variable and the dependent variable is not in the predicted direction, and the magnitude of most of the negative correlation coefficients is not impressive (see especially Schalkuyk et al., 1979; Gibbs and Martin, 1981).

There is an obvious reason why the tests have not provided overwhelming support for the theory. In virtually all tests the measure of the independent variable has been limited to either occupational integration or marital integration, thereby ignoring several other dimensions of status integration (e.g., labor force status, parental status, household status). The limited scope of the measures stems from the use of published census data on status categories, and gathering similar data in surveys would make tests of the theory very costly. Nonetheless, published census tables rarely pertain to more than one family of achieved status categories. Thus, one table may report occupation by race, sex, and age, while another reports marital status by race, sex, and age; but no table reports both occupation and marital status by race, sex, and age, let alone a third family of achieved status categories (e.g., parental status). Consequently, as long as published census data are used to test the theory, most tests will be grossly incomplete.

Short of costly surveys or the use of unpublished census data, the only way to improve the tests is to find census tables that cross-classify two or more families of achieved status categories. One such table in the 1970 U.S. census volumes (Bureau of the Census, 1973) reports data pertaining to parental status, labor force status, and marital status of women by age. Those data provide a basis for the most complete test of the theory ever undertaken.

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The author is indebted to K. Bales, I. Berg, D. Cornfield, G. Firebaugh, B. Lee, W. Rushing, M. Stafford, and M. Swafford for comments on this paper. Criticisms by the two reviewers were truly constructive.