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The Socio-cultural Context of New Mothers’ Mental Health

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One of the most dramatic demographic changes of the past half century: Women’s employment rates.

- **72%** of unmarried women with children are employed.
- **62%** of married women with children are employed.

**Figure 1. Employment rate, by marital status and presence of children, prime-aged women, 1979-2005**

Sample: Men and women aged 25 to 45.
Employment rates of mothers with children

79% of women with children 6-17 employed

60% of women with children under 3 employed
Almost 60% of new mothers return to work within 9 months.
Between 2006-2008, 17% of women without a high school degree and 31% of women with only a high school degree received any paid leave before or after birth compared to 47% of those with some college and 65% of those with a college degree.
The Transition to Parenthood

- The transition to parenthood is one of the most studied phenomena in the psychological and sociological literature.
  - However, much less attention to the second transition of returning to full-time employment.

- Parents’ mental health topic of key concern in this literature.
  - BOSTON—Gov. Deval Patrick has given final approval to a bill designed to help new mothers struggling with postpartum depression. The law requires Massachusetts health insurers to submit annual reports on their efforts to screen for postpartum depression (August, 2010).
Employment and the Transition to Parenthood

- Despite the enormous research base on the topic we know little about
  - How employment conditions affect new parents’ mental health across the transition
  - How employment conditions affect infant development

- How this transition is experienced within unique social contexts
  - Social class
  - Race and ethnicity
  - Sexual orientation
An Important Niche: the Working-Class in the U.S.

Social Class in the United States

- Typical Occupations
  - Investors
  - Heirs
  - Executives
  - Capitalist Class
    - Upper manager
    - Professionals
    - Medium-sized business owners
    - Upper-Middle Class
      - Craftsmen, Foremen
      - Middle Class
        - Low-skill manual
        - Clerical
        - Retail sales
        - Working Class
          - Lowest-paid manual, retail, and service workers
          - Working Poor
            - Unemployed or part-time
            - Menial jobs, public assistance
          - Underclass

Min. wage in MA = $8/hr
Yearly Income at min. wage = $16,640
Two parents employed full-time = $33,280
Low-Wage Work: A Unique Socio-Ecological Niche

- Low-income occupations have been characterized as
  - mind-numbing, monotonous, and boring.

- Low wage workers, especially those becoming new parents, may be more at risk for negative outcomes.

- At the same time we ask: Is it really the case that all low-wage work is “bad” work?
  - Probably not
  - Important to consider conditions of low-wage jobs that lead to most positive outcomes
Research on Low-Wage Work

- Much of the research on how work affects parental well-being has focused on work hours and schedules or on policies that afford parents time away from work...
  - Parental/family leave
  - Sick time
  - Personal time
  - Flexible time

- However, low wage workers spend a lot of time at work

- How are work conditions such as urgency, autonomy, supervisor and co-worker support related to parent well-being and relationships?
The Work and Family Transitions Project

• **Our research focuses on how work conditions, such as:**
  - Structural dimensions of working-class jobs (e.g. hours, schedules),
  - Workplace policies (e.g., leaves, flexibility)
  - Conditions of jobs (e.g., autonomy, urgency, supervisor support)

• **Predict family outcomes such as:**
  - Parental well-being (e.g., depression, anxiety, overload,)
  - Marital and close romantic relationship quality
  - Children’s developmental outcomes (e.g., emotional and cognitive).
WFTP#1

How does the transition to parenthood coupled with parents’ early return to paid employment influence the mental health and marital relationships of working-class, first-time parents?

153 Couples (mothers and fathers) interviewed in their homes five times across the first year of parenthood
## Interview Schedule: WFTP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birth of Baby</th>
<th>Prenatal Interview</th>
<th>1-month Interview</th>
<th>Return To Work Interview</th>
<th>6-Month Interview (mail)</th>
<th>One Year Follow-up Interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Well-Being</td>
<td>Well-Being</td>
<td>Well-Being</td>
<td>Well-Being</td>
<td>Well-Being</td>
<td>Well-Being</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>Marriage</td>
<td>Marriage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>Work</td>
<td>Work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender Ideology</td>
<td>Gender Ideology</td>
<td>Gender Ideology</td>
<td>Gender Ideology</td>
<td></td>
<td>Gender Ideology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Support</td>
<td>Social Support</td>
<td>Social Support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Social Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Temperament</td>
<td>Child Temperament</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Child Temperament</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

153 Two parent families
## Sample Characteristics: WFTP #1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase 1</th>
<th>Husbands (n=153)</th>
<th>Wives (n=153)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>27.2 (4.9)</td>
<td>25.6 (3.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HS/Ged or less</td>
<td>22.3%</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tech training</td>
<td>62.3%</td>
<td>53.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assoc Degree</td>
<td>12.1%</td>
<td>22.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>29,500</td>
<td>24,400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Hours</td>
<td>47.2</td>
<td>40.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yrs Married/</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohabiting</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A primary aim of our research is to consider how social-contextual factors shape processes within families and the well-being of parents and children.

Our first goal was to determine if variability existed in subjective experiences of work, such as job autonomy, job urgency, and supervisor support and co-worker support.

The second goal was to examine how these dimensions of work predicted working parents’ depression across the first year of parenthood.

Measures

**Work Conditions**
- Assessed at three time points
- Centered at Time 1
  - Job Autonomy
  - Job Urgency
  - Supervisor Support
  - Co-Worker Support

**Mental Health**

**Depressive Symptoms (CES-D)**
- Assessed at five time points
  - Centered at Time 5
### Interview Schedule: WFTP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Birth of Baby</th>
<th>1-month Postnatal Interview</th>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### 153 Two parent families

- **Well-Being**
- **Marriage**
- **Work**
- **Gender Ideology**
- **Social Support**
- **Child Temperament**

#### Replication: 207 families, primarily single mothers
Is there variability in blue-collar workers’ experiences of their jobs?

- For both mothers and fathers at Time 1 (the prenatal interview) there was significant variability in reports of:
  - Job autonomy
  - Job urgency
  - Supervisor Support
  - Co-worker support

- In addition, for mothers and fathers there was significant change over time in:
  - Job urgency (+)
  - Supervisor Support (-)
  - Co-worker support (-)
  - For fathers only, job challenge (+) changed over time
Is there variability in mothers’ and fathers’ reports of depressive symptoms?

- For both mothers and fathers at Time 5 (one-year postnatal interview) there was significant variability in reports of depression.
- In terms of change in depression, curvilinear trend only significant for mothers.
Was there variability in mothers’ and fathers’ reports of depression?

- For both mothers and fathers at Time 5 (one-year postnatal interview) there was significant variability in reports of depression.

- In terms of change in depression, this was only significant for mothers.
Primary Research Questions

- Our primary questions focused on how Time 1 work conditions and changes in work conditions across the first year predicted both levels of depressive symptoms at Time 5 and change in depressive symptoms across the first year for mothers and fathers.
Work Conditions and Mental Health

- **Job Urgency** is the experience of having too much to do in too little time, stress, lack of control.

Mothers experiencing the steepest declines in depression are moms working full-time in low job urgency.
Work Conditions and Mental Health

- Supervisor support buffers job urgency

Under conditions of high urgency and high support, depression declines

Mothers reporting high job urgency and low support do not have declines in depression
Conclusions

- The social context of new parenthood is important to consider in our understanding of pre- and post-natal depression.

- Employment is an important site for interventions and supports for new parents.
  - The majority of current interventions focus on managing parenting stress, relationship conflict, mental health WITHIN the family...basically learning how to cope
  - It is time to examine how conditions of low wage work, and all work for that matter, make it such a struggle for new parents to manage jobs and family life and to consider workplace policies that could make a difference
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