

This article examines gender differences in the strains associated with parenting. We hypothesize that due to the different role experiences of being a parent, mothers are more likely than fathers to experience greater role strain. Women who parent are more likely than their male counterparts to be exposed to strain-inducing experiences because they spend more time in child care and other household chores, because they are more likely to be doing so as a "single-parent," because they are more likely to be juggling family responsibilities and work commitments, and because being a parent has greater role salience for women. We also hypothesize that by taking into account the different role experiences of mothers and fathers we can partially account for the expected gender differences in parental strain. These hypotheses are explored using survey data from a probability sample of Detroit parents obtained in 1982-83 ($n = 1,040$) which assessed their parental role experiences and psychological well-being. The results confirm the hypothesized difference between mothers and fathers in reported strain, among both blacks and whites, with mothers expressing significantly greater role demands and parental strain than fathers. We find, however, that little of this difference is attributable to the differential role experiences we analyzed. We conclude that gender differences in parental strain may be linked more strongly to "gender role" than "parental role," in that women are socialized more than men into taking responsibilities for relationships and are therefore more likely to experience the greater stresses associated with intimacy and emotional involvement with others. The greater strains of parenting felt by mothers as opposed to fathers may, thus, be due as much to the differential orientations they bring to the parental role as it is due to the objectively-assessed differences in role experience.

Gender Differences in Parental Strain

Parental Role or Gender Role?*

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Few would doubt that parenting is a different experience for men and women. The difference has not only been noted in the psychoanalytic literature, but it has been cited for the most part with uncritical approval. Erich Fromm, for example, describes how the mother's task is to offer the

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unconditional love that is necessary for the development of an internal sense of security and self-acceptance; while the father's role is to provide the kind of conditional love that inspires the child to self-criticism and achievement in the external world (1956, pp. 41-43). In short, Fromm and others claim the mother's role is to care for and raise the child, whereas the father's role is to provide a link to the outside world. More recently such a justification of traditional gender division of parental roles has been challenged. Chodorow (1978), for example, questioned why it is the woman who does the mothering. She notes that we mean something quite different when we say that someone mothered a child than when we say someone fathered her or him. We can talk about a man "mothering" a child in the sense that a man can be the primary parent or caretaker; but in American society it is largely women, not men, who routinely serve as the primary parent and undertake most of the daily tasks associated with raising children.

Our concern in this article is not to understand why it is women, not men, who do the mothering. Rather, it is to determine how the strain associated with the mother role is different from the strain associated with the father role. Our initial hypothesis is that there will be gender differences in parental strain and that the strain associated with mothering will be greater than the strain associated with fathering, because the parental demands of being a mother are greater than the demands of being a father. We use data from a survey of the Detroit metropolitan area to test whether there are gender differences in parental strain, and why these differences occur.

If our hypothesis is correct, that women experience more parental strain than men, this may throw some light on the finding in the epidemiological literature on mental health that consistently shows women are more susceptible than men to the symptoms of depression (e.g., Reskin and Coverman 1985). It may be that women and men interpret parental strain and depression differently.¹ However, the gender difference in depression is usually assumed to reflect differences in the social experiences of men and women—especially those conflicts and frustrations of everyday life (Pearlin 1975). Parenting is certainly an important and ongoing social experience, and one that is very different for men and for women. It is also—as every parent knows—one that brings in its wake plenty of everyday conflicts and frustrations as well as numerous daily demands. It is possible then that the strains caused by mothering may go some way in explaining why women are prone to more general psychological stress than men (Umberson 1989).

Our initial argument is that women feel more parental strain than men because their parental role is more burdensome. This implies that if the role experiences of men and women were identical then the gender differences in parental strain should disappear. Of course, the role experiences of men and women are very different. For example, women are likely to spend more time than men looking after children. They are also likely to spend more time in household chores. Some of this inequity in division of home labor may be due to gender differences in employment, but previous studies indicate that even when women work, they still carry the burden of household chores and child care (Hartmann 1987). Talk of the "symmetrical family" has been common for decades (Young and Willmott 1973); however, practice has lagged behind ideals. Nevertheless, if women experience greater strain because they perform more of the chores associated with parenting, then once such factors are taken into account, the gender differences in strain should be reduced or eliminated.

Ironically, in a period when more emphasis is being placed on the equal involvement of the father in child care, an increasing number of children are being raised in female-headed single-parent households. For many women the reality is not only that they bear the responsibility of raising their children alone, but that they do so in financially strapped circumstances. A 1981 census report showed 27% of white and 53% of black female-headed households were living below the poverty line (Beeghley 1983). It seems reasonable to expect that single parenting—especially the dual burden of single parenting and low income—will result in more parental strain. Thus, the difference in parental strain may be explained by such role differences and not by gender, *per se*.

MULTIPLE ROLE AND PARENTAL STRAIN

One important difference in the role experience of men and women is that men are more likely to be employed. The empirical literature provides mixed evidence as to whether the multiple roles of spouse, parent, and worker are beneficial or not to psychological well-being. Traditionally multiple roles have been viewed as harmful because of role competition and conflict (Merton 1957; Goode 1960; Coser 1974). In more recent research there has been growing acknowledgement of the positive benefits of multiple roles on self-esteem and sense of purpose (e.g., Gove 1972; Sieber 1974; Thoits 1983). Gove has long argued that gender differences in mental health are due, in part, to the number of roles held by men and

women. Gove, however, does acknowledge that women who hold three roles—spouse, parent, and worker— may reap less benefit than men because women's jobs may be less intrinsically and financially rewarding and because women still bear the major responsibility for child care and housework, despite their employment. Another reason why women may enjoy less benefit than men from the roles of parent and worker, is that women are more likely to experience role conflict in terms of guilt and anxiety about not being a full-time parent, especially when the children are young (Rubin 1976; Emmons et al. 1988).

The literature suggests, and most empirical studies seem to confirm, that working women are more likely to experience psychological distress than working men (e.g., Radloff 1975). The empirical results taken as a whole, however, yield decidedly mixed results on whether working women are in better psychological health than women who do not work (see Thoits 1987). Thoits suggests that whether multiple roles are beneficial for women is likely to depend on structural and normative constraints, and that the benefits of multiple roles will vary by social class because women with greater amounts of schooling and income can create more beneficial roles for themselves. Moreover, Ross et al. (1983) suggest that working women among the married will reap more benefit from their multiple roles, if their marriages are more egalitarian.

Such studies, however, focus on general psychological distress, not on the strains of parenting. It is not at all clear that working women who have young children will benefit from working outside the home, if the responsibilities of child care still fall primarily to them. It may be true that working women are less likely to face the constant strains of child care, as compared with full time homemakers, but the latter do not combine child care with the role demands associated with working. Working mothers should, therefore, be expected to report more general psychological strain, but perhaps less strain linked directly to child care, than mothers who are not employed outside the home. But working or not, since women are typically responsible for much more of the child care than men, they will feel more parental strain.

Another way in which role experience may differ by gender is the salience of the parental role. Past research has suggested that the role of mother is more important to the woman than the role of father is to the man (Mulford and Salisbury 1964). This is likely to be especially true for women who are not employed outside the home because they do not have the additional identity of paid worker. It is sometimes assumed that role salience alleviates role strain, for example, Stryker's (1981) theory of

identity salience might suggest that the greater the salience of a role, the less problematic that role should be. If women are more committed to their parental role then it could be argued that they should experience *less* parental strain. But one could easily turn such a proposition on its head and suggest that women may look at all the stresses and strains they endure as a parent and thereby determine that being a mother must be very important to them, implying that with identity salience comes greater parental strain. It is probably more sensible, however, to conceptualize role salience as a protective mechanism that should reduce strain. Still, gender differences may persist and we expect women to score higher than men on both measures of salience and measures of strain. But, for both men and women, we predict the greater the salience of the parental role, the less the parental strain.

If gender differences in parental strain persist even when we eliminate the variation due to the gender-linked differences in role experiences (e.g., time spent on child care and household chores, single parenting, parental salience etc.) then some explanation is needed for the residual effects. It could be argued that any remaining gender difference may reflect the psychological, biological, and socialization factors that constitute what it means to be a mother or father in our society. As Noddings (1984) points out, mothering is not so much a role as it is a relationship, and women have a particular commitment to caring that enables them to establish a close mother-child bond. This line of reasoning suggests that women will feel more strain, regardless of whether or not their role experience is different from men's in any clearly discernible way, and that even if their "role experiences" are the same, women will feel more strain because of the unique nature of gender roles. No matter how egalitarian the marriage, no matter how many hours the woman works outside of the home, the woman may feel that it is her responsibility to be the primary caretaker of the child. In short, this model, while not denying the very manifest parental demands placed on women in our society, suggests that women are psychologically, or even biologically disposed, and socialized into feeling more parental strain.

RACE, GENDER, AND PARENTING

In the decades since the publication of the Moynihan Report (Moynihan 1965), research on the black family has not been reticent in confronting the issues regarding the differences in family functioning between blacks and whites. There is little systematic evidence, however, of the black-

white differences in parental role experience, or perception of parental strain. Sex-role socialization and gender marital roles differ by race (Lewis 1975; Weitzman 1979) and, thus, there may be racial differences in causes and levels of parental strain that interact with gender. Fortunately, a black over-sample allows us to analyze our data separately by race.

HYPOTHESES

Our first and major hypothesis is that gender differences will be found for parental strain, with women feeling more strain than men. We expect this difference to hold up both for women who are employed outside of the home and for full-time homemakers. However, we expect working to reduce the parental strain of women. We suggest and test two possible explanations for this gender difference in parental strain:

1. On the one hand, women's greater parental strain may reflect gender-linked role differences. Women are more likely to be single parents; more likely, if married, to do most of the child care and housework chores; more likely to have prime responsibility for the care of young children; and more likely to give greater salience to their parental role. These role differences are not expected to disappear even when the woman is in full-time employment outside the home. Differences in parental strain may, therefore, be attributable to such gender-linked role differences, and the relationship of parental strain and gender may disappear once these role differences are held constant.
2. On the other hand, it is possible that parental strain has less to do with social role differences than with more fundamental differences that men and women bring to the parental role — gender role differences in orientation to parenting. If women tend to embrace relationships and caring more than men then, regardless of external role characteristics, women may experience greater parental strain.

Finally, we will consider how our findings concerning parental strain relate to gender differences in more general measures of psychological well-being.

METHOD

The data are from the 1982 Detroit Area Study. This was a multistage probability sample of households in the three counties (Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb) that make up the Detroit Metropolitan Area. Eligible

respondents were parents with a child aged 2-17 years, living at home. One randomly selected parent was interviewed from each household. A supplementary study in 1983 contained an over-sample of black parents, allowing our analysis to be separated by race. In the combined respondent samples, there were 428 black and 623 white respondents. The overall response rate was 76%.

DEPENDENT VARIABLES

The measure of *parental strains* is an adaptation of a scale used by Gove et al. (1979) which assesses the strains of child rearing. Our index is based on the following six items and has an estimated internal consistency reliability coefficient of .75.²

1. Parents sometimes feel that they have too little time to spend by themselves. How often do you feel this way — very often, often, sometimes, rarely, or never? (TIME)
2. How often do you wish that you could be free of the responsibilities of being a parent? (FREE)
3. How often would you say your (child/children) get(s) on your nerves? (NERVES)
4. How often do you feel that your (child/children) (is/are) making too many demands on you? (DEMANDS)
5. How often do you get upset because your (child/children) (is/are) too noisy? (NOISY)
6. How often do you wish you could get away from your (child/children)? (AWAY)

This last item was asked only in the 1983 supplement. A factor analysis pointed to two different aspects of the strain index: *role demands* (FREE, DEMANDS, AWAY); and *emotional strain* (NOISY, NERVES). On this basis, in addition to the single items, we consider two parental strain indexes: *role demands* and *emotional strain* along with the composite index of the six items that measure *parental strain*.

Two measures related to, but distinct from, the strains of child rearing are perceived general *life strain* and psychological *distress*. The first measure is intended to contain self-reports of emotional strain. The index is based on 16 items and has an estimated internal consistency reliability coefficient of .69. The exact wording of the questions is given in the appendix. The psychological *distress* measure uses an adaptation of the CES-D scale, a self-report depression scale developed for use in the

general population (Radloff 1977; Weissman et al. 1977). The internal consistency reliability of this scale for the Detroit data is .89.

INDEPENDENT VARIABLES

Single parent status is a binary (dummy) variable reflecting whether the respondent is a single parent (or parent surrogate), living alone with children, or whether they are living in a dual-parenting household. We consider people who are cohabiting, as well as married, to be living in dual-parenting households. Among dual-parent households, we measure the *division of housework*. This is a composite index of the following three items, which has an estimated internal consistency reliability of .71.

1. Who spends more time doing cooking and kitchen work in your household, you or your (husband/wife/friend)? Do you/Does your (husband/wife/friend) spend a little more, somewhat more, or a lot more time doing this?
2. Who spends more time doing other household tasks, like cleaning, doing the laundry, shopping, and transporting children?
3. Who spends more time taking care of your (child/children) on the whole?

We also use a single measure *hours in child care* which reflects the amount of time parents spend in the company of their children on a typical weekday.

Employment status is measured in terms of current labor force involvement. We use three measures in our analysis: a dummy variable representing the presence of employment outside the household; a dummy measure of the degree of external labor force involvement—full time (40 or more hours), or part-time; and a measure of the hours per week of employment.

Parental role salience is measured using the following three self-report indicators that form a composite score with an estimated internal consistency/reliability of .36.

1. People who have children often have other interests and responsibilities to think of besides raising a family. Of all the things you do in you life, is being a parent the most important, very important, somewhat important, or not important at all?
2. If you had not been able to have any children, how would you feel about it? Would it be a terrible tragedy, very disappointing, disappointing, or would it make little difference?
3. During those times when you are *not with* your children, are they on your mind nearly all the time, most of the time, some of the time, or almost none of the time?

RESULTS

GENDER DIFFERENCES AND MEASURES OF PARENTAL STRAINS

It can be seen, from the first two columns in Table 1, that the source of parental strain that is reported as the most frequent is feeling that "children get on your nerves," with most parents admitting to frayed nerves at least "sometimes." The vast majority of parents, however, deny that they want to be "free of the responsibilities of being a parent." Men and women agree about the relative ranking of the various aspects of parental strain. But they differ in their reports of parental strain, with women reporting more parental strain than men, both among blacks and whites.

This gender difference in parental strains is statistically significant among whites for two of the three items that make up the *role demands* index — FREE and DEMANDS. The third item in the *role demands* index (AWAY), shows a similar trend with women more often wishing to get away from their child or children than men. Similar gender differences are apparent among blacks but, owing to the smaller sample, the difference reaches significance only for the single item, AWAY, on the *role demands* and parental *strains* indexes.

Surprisingly, among whites there are no significant differences between employed mothers and full-time homemakers on the items that constitute parental strain, as can be seen in Table 1. We predicted that employed women would feel less parental strain than full-time homemakers because they do not face the constant strain of child care; however, this is true in only one instance — black employed women are significantly less likely than those who do not work to report wanting to get away from the responsibilities of parenthood. As we shall see, black women who do not work are more likely to be single parents and from low income households, and responsibilities of parenthood may be especially burdensome for these women. However, even when income and marital status are controlled, employment does reduce the wish to be free of the responsibility of parenting for black women, although the effect is only of borderline significance ($p < .10$). With this one exception, however, employment makes no difference to the parental strains of women.

Not only do women show greater parental strains than men, but they also score significantly higher than men on the more general *life strain* index. The gender difference is particularly marked for blacks, with black women showing far more *life strain* and *distress* symptoms than black men. Among whites the gender difference is only significant for *life strain*,

TABLE 1
Gender Differences in Measures of
Parental Strain and Global Aspects of Psychological Well-Being

| | Gender | | F-ratio | Women | | F-ratio | (1)/(3) F-ratio |
|----------------------------------|------------|--------------|----------|-----------------|------------------|---------|--------------------|
| | (1) Men | (2) Women | | (3) Employed | (4) Not Empl. | | |
| Whites | | | | | | | |
| Approx. N | (255) | (368) | | (193) | (175) | | |
| Little time alone | 2.94 | 3.02 | 1.13 | 2.97 | 3.07 | .94 | .17 |
| Free of responsibility | 1.97 | 2.19 | 7.76** | 2.22 | 2.15 | .52 | 8.07*** |
| Child gets on nerves | 3.02 | 3.10 | 1.54 | 3.07 | 3.13 | .66 | .40 |
| Child makes demands | 2.46 | 2.91 | 33.71*** | 2.87 | 2.95 | .71 | 20.36*** |
| Upset at noise | 2.66 | 2.72 | .75 | 2.64 | 2.81 | 3.50 | .04 |
| Get away from child ¹ | 2.38 | 2.55 | 2.11 | 2.57 | 2.52 | .13 | 2.08 |
| Strains Index | 2.59 | 2.77 | 13.00*** | 2.74 | 2.80 | .98 | 6.60*** |
| Role Demands | 2.23 | 2.54 | 25.78*** | 2.55 | 2.53 | .02 | 19.33*** |
| Emotional Strain | 2.84 | 2.91 | 1.56 | 2.85 | 2.97 | 2.78 | .05 |
| Life Strain Index ¹ | 2.21 | 2.39 | 4.70* | 2.36 | 2.41 | .27 | 2.84 |
| Distress Index ¹ | 1.46 | 1.52 | .98 | 1.48 | 1.57 | 1.28 | .12 |
| Blacks | | | | | | | |
| Approx. N | (71) | (357) | | (139) | (218) | | |
| Little time alone | 2.69 | 2.84 | 1.21 | 2.88 | 2.82 | .28 | 1.59 |
| Free of responsibility | 1.94 | 2.10 | 1.35 | 1.95 | 2.19 | 4.84* | .00 |
| Child gets on nerves | 3.03 | 3.16 | 1.12 | 3.15 | 3.17 | .03 | .85 |
| Child makes demands | 2.20 | 2.44 | 3.26 | 2.49 | 2.41 | .50 | 4.53* |
| Upset at noise | 2.68 | 2.72 | .11 | 2.65 | 2.76 | 1.14 | .04 |
| Get away from child ¹ | 2.26 | 2.63 | 5.14* | 2.65 | 2.62 | .06 | 5.00* |
| Strains Index | 2.47 | 2.64 | 3.74* | 2.61 | 2.66 | .37 | 2.34 |
| Role Demands | 2.09 | 2.34 | 6.18** | 2.31 | 2.35 | .30 | 4.54* |
| Emotional Strain | 2.85 | 2.94 | .66 | 2.90 | 2.96 | .43 | .19 |
| Life Strain Index ¹ | 2.14 | 2.54 | 11.29*** | 2.48 | 2.57 | .94 | 7.17** |
| Distress Index ¹ | 1.46 | 1.67 | 6.70** | 1.61 | 1.71 | 2.62 | 2.72 |

NOTE: 1 = 1983 study only.

*p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.

although the trend is in the same direction for the measure of *distress*. As we reported earlier, research evidence concerning the effect of employment on the psychological well-being of women has been mixed. We did, however, expect that working women would report more general psychological strain than mothers who are not employed outside the home because of the combination of child care and work demands. In our data, however, there is no discernible difference in the mental health of women by employment status; regardless of whether or not they work, women report more general *life strain* than men.

Thus, pervasive gender differences exist not only in the general measures of *life strain* and *distress*, but also for the more specific measures of *parental strains* and the *role demands* associated with the parenting. In

the next section we examine more closely whether these differences can be explained by employment and other gender-linked differences in role experiences.

GENDER DIFFERENCES IN ROLE EXPERIENCES

The roles of men and women differ in many ways that may have a direct bearing on their experience of parental strain. Some of the most pertinent gender differences in role experiences are shown in Table 2. It comes as no surprise that women are far more likely than men to be single parents. In our sample 26% of white women and 68% of black women are single parents compared with only 7% of white and 17% of black men. Women are also more likely than men to be from low income households where the annual family income is below the median level of \$26,500. Nearly half of the white women, 46%, and 87% of black women are from low income households.³

Despite the rapid influx of mothers into the paid work force, gender differences in employment are marked with 52% of the white women working compared with 86% of white men. Moreover, men are far more likely than women to be employed in full-time jobs (95% of white men versus 62% of white women). The gender difference with respect to employment is similar among blacks, although the proportion of employed blacks is smaller than for whites. Women who work are less likely to have preschool-age children than those who are full-time homemakers. This is true for both whites and blacks. Among whites, employed women are almost twice as likely to be single parents as non-employed women; yet among blacks the opposite pattern is found with single parents less likely to have paid employment.⁴

The employment status of women also has a significant effect on the number of hours per day the woman spends with her children. Among whites, employed women spend significantly fewer hours with their children than full-time homemakers. It is important to note, however, that employed women still spend far more time looking after the children than do employed men. This gender difference holds even when only those women in full-time employment are considered. Among blacks, employment reduces the amount of time women spend in child care to the extent that employed black women do not differ significantly from black men in the amount of child care they report. This lack of gender difference appears to be due to high unemployment rates among black men. There is a significant gender difference ($p < .05$) between employed black

TABLE 2
Gender Differences in Role Experiences: Detroit Parent Sample

| | Gender | | | Women | | | (1)/(3) F-ratio |
|--------------------------------|------------|--------------|-----------|-----------------|------------------|----------|--------------------|
| | (1) Men | (2) Women | F-ratio | (3) Employed | (4) Not Empl. | F-ratio | |
| Whites | | | | | | | |
| Approx. N | (255) | (368) | | (193) | (175) | | |
| Single Parent | .07 | .26 | 41.55*** | .35 | .17 | 15.12*** | 64.66*** |
| Low Income Household | .29 | .46 | 18.77*** | .45 | .48 | .20 | 12.38*** |
| Hours in Childcare | 1.4 | 3.0 | 31.28*** | 2.5 | 3.6 | 5.82* | 17.47*** |
| # Young Children | .54 | .53 | .03 | .36 | .71 | 20.55** | 6.83** |
| Employed | .86 | .52 | 87.76*** | | | | |
| Full-time Employment | .95 | .62 | 86.98*** | | | | |
| Hours Worked | 45.1 | 32.7 | 115.06*** | | | | |
| Parental Role Salience | 2.82 | 3.05 | 33.66*** | 3.02 | 3.08 | 1.50 | 18.60*** |
| Division of Labor ¹ | 1.74 | 1.67 | .39 | 1.91 | 1.46 | 12.63*** | 1.47 |
| Blacks | | | | | | | |
| Approx. N | (71) | (357) | | (139) | (218) | | |
| Single Parent | .17 | .68 | 73.19*** | .54 | .76 | 20.02*** | 30.16*** |
| Low Income Household | .50 | .87 | 50.69*** | .72 | .96 | 44.61*** | 9.17*** |
| Hours in Childcare | 3.2 | 4.7 | 7.04** | 3.8 | 5.3 | 10.31*** | 1.08 |
| # Young Children | .66 | .49 | 3.23 | .32 | .60 | 13.25*** | 12.66*** |
| Employed | .69 | .39 | 22.81*** | | | | |
| Full-time Employment | .86 | .68 | 5.64* | | | | |
| Hours Worked | 41.3 | 34.7 | 14.95*** | | | | |
| Parental Role Salience | 2.84 | 3.08 | 12.04*** | 2.99 | 3.05 | 3.37 | 5.14 |
| Division of Labor ¹ | 2.03 | 1.97 | .09 | 2.16 | 1.70 | 4.36* | .34 |

NOTE: 1 = Asked only of dual-parent families; the N for whites is 82 (men), 130 (women); the N for blacks is 30 (men), 77 (women).

*p < .05; **p < .01, ***p < .001.

women and employed black men, with women spending more time with their children.

The *division of housework* index is based on a smaller number of cases because the questions were only asked of dual-parent households, as can be seen in Table 2. It comes as no surprise that for both blacks and whites, women do more of the household chores, including child care, and employed women do significantly less of the chores than full-time home-

makers. Much more interesting is that blacks report a more egalitarian division of labor than do whites ($p < .01$). This conflicts with the finding by Sutherland et al. (1988) that it is only among nonparents that blacks are more egalitarian than whites. The finding is important because gender differences in parental strain may be less marked among blacks than whites, if black fathers are taking a more equal share of the parental burden.

Somewhat different from the other role experience measures is the composite measure of *parental role salience*. We expected women to regard their parental role as more salient than men, and, as can be seen from Table 2, this is true for both blacks and whites. Interestingly, having the additional identity of worker makes no difference to the salience of the parental role for women. We hypothesized that salience would be associated with less parental strain for both men and women and, for whites, this is true both of parental *strains* and *role demands*. The trend is similar for blacks, although the effect is not significant.

Before we can determine the effects of these gender-linked differences in role experience on parental strain, it is first necessary to examine whether the effects of role experience on strain differ by gender. Surprisingly, there are very few such interaction effects. The only exception, for whites, is that the relation of the *division of housework* and *role demands* is different for men and women. The greater the amount of household chores and child care done by the woman, the more likely she is to experience parental *role demands*, whereas for men there is no clear relationship. Interestingly, the reverse pattern is found among blacks for parental *strains*. The greater the share of household chores done by the man the more likely he is to report parental *strains*, whereas, for black women, there is no clear relationship. This interesting race difference in the effects of egalitarianism on parental strain warrants further investigation. One possible explanation is that for white men egalitarianism may be a voluntary option, whereas for black men it may be the consequence of the high levels of unemployment.⁵

Despite the significance of a few interactions, they were judged in general to be small enough to be safely ignored in our assessment of gender effects. Moreover, none of the significant interactions involved variables that were asked of the full sample. We included only those measures that were asked of the entire sample in our subsequent analysis. We also examined the impact of gender and gender-linked role experiences on the more general measures of *life strain* and *distress*.⁶

TABLE 3
Partial Regression Coefficients for the Prediction of Parental Strain Measures from Gender and Gender-Linked Role Experiences

| Predictor/ Dependent variable | STRAINS | | | ROLE DEMANDS | | |
|----------------------------------|---------|------|-----|--------------|------|-----|
| | b | t | p | b | t | p |
| Whites (N=623) | | | | | | |
| Gender (male=1) | -.161 | 2.92 | .01 | -.327 | 4.70 | .00 |
| Single Parent | .011 | .17 | .86 | .014 | .17 | .86 |
| Time spent | .007 | 1.02 | .31 | .015 | 1.70 | .09 |
| # Young Children | .060 | 1.87 | .06 | -.007 | .17 | .86 |
| Employed | -.073 | 1.35 | .17 | -.018 | .26 | .79 |
| Parental Role Saliency | -.114 | 2.30 | .02 | -.223 | 3.56 | .00 |
| R ² | .0396 | | | .0629 | | |
| R ² (gender only) | .0205 | | | .0400 | | |
| Blacks (N=428) | | | | | | |
| Gender (male=1) | -.129 | 1.33 | .18 | -.148 | 1.34 | .18 |
| Single Parent | .026 | .36 | .72 | .146 | 1.77 | .07 |
| Hours in Childcare | .020 | 2.62 | .01 | .029 | 3.37 | .00 |
| # Young Children | .006 | .12 | .90 | -.045 | .83 | .41 |
| Employed | .004 | .06 | .95 | .015 | .19 | .85 |
| Parental Role Saliency | -.018 | .26 | .79 | -.112 | 1.38 | .16 |
| R ² | .0270 | | | .0493 | | |
| R ² (gender only) | .0087 | | | .0143 | | |

SOURCE: Survey of Detroit Parents 1982/83.

GENDER, GENDER-LINKED ROLE EXPERIENCES, AND STRAINS

The partial regression coefficients for the prediction of parental strain measures from gender-role experiences are shown in Table 3. It can be seen that gender remains the strongest predictor of parental *strains* and *role demands* for whites, even when we control for single parent status, hours spent with children, number of young children in the household, employment status, and the saliency of the parental role. Thus, irrespective of these role experiences, women report more parental strains than men. It is also worth noting that parental role saliency reduces the effect of *strains* and *role demands*, even when all these other factors are controlled.

For blacks, the results are somewhat different. Once the gender-linked role experiences are controlled, gender is no longer a significant predictor

TABLE 4
Partial Regression Coefficients for the Prediction of Life Strain Measures from Gender and Gender-Linked Role Experiences

| Predictor/ Dependent variable | LIFE STRAIN | | | DISTRESS | | |
|----------------------------------|-------------|------|-----|----------|------|-----|
| | b | t | p | b | t | p |
| Whites (N = 250) | | | | | | |
| Gender (male = 1) | -.095 | 1.16 | .24 | .090 | 1.41 | .16 |
| Single Parent | .292 | 3.09 | .00 | .416 | 5.62 | .00 |
| Hours in Childcare | .017 | 1.71 | .08 | .015 | 1.90 | .06 |
| # Young Children | -.012 | .25 | .80 | .007 | .20 | .84 |
| Employed | -.060 | .75 | .46 | -.178 | 2.84 | .01 |
| Parental Role Salience | .022 | .30 | .76 | -.081 | 1.42 | .15 |
| R ² | .0781 | | | .1438 | | |
| R ² (gender only) | .0324 | | | .0039 | | |
| Blacks (N = 270) | | | | | | |
| Gender (male = 1) | -.336 | 3.26 | .00 | -.104 | 1.23 | .22 |
| Single Parent | .119 | 1.54 | .12 | .099 | 1.57 | .11 |
| Time spent | .004 | .46 | .65 | .010 | 1.53 | .12 |
| # Young Children | .044 | .87 | .39 | .004 | .09 | .93 |
| Employed | -.027 | .36 | .72 | -.063 | 1.03 | .31 |
| Parental Role Salience | -.089 | 1.18 | .24 | .038 | .62 | .54 |
| R ² | .0793 | | | .0541 | | |
| R ² (gender only) | .0613 | | | .0244 | | |

SOURCE: Survey of Detroit Parents 1983.

of parental *strains* and *role demands*. The single most important factor for blacks is the time spent with children (*hours in child care*).

In marked contrast to the results concerning parental strain for whites, we can see in Table 4 that there is no gender difference for parents in either *life strain* or *distress* measures once gender-linked role experiences are controlled. For whites, single-parent status is the strongest predictor of general *life strain*. This is not surprising as one aspect of *life strain* is concern about family income. Weitzman (1985) has carefully documented the economic disaster for women and children that often follows divorce. The strongest predictor of *distress* is again single-parent status, although employment status is also significant. Interestingly, controlling for these role differences among blacks does not eliminate the woman's greater vulnerability to *life strain*.

Gender Differences in Parenting

We posited two possible explanations of the gender difference in parental strain. Our first explanation that gender differences in parental strain may reflect gender-linked differences in role experiences is not supported by our data, at least for whites. Our alternative explanation is that gender differences in strain may reflect men's and women's distinctive ways of relating to their child. There is evidence to suggest that women are more relationship orientated than men (e.g., Kessler and McCleod, 1984) and we hypothesized that women may be more psychologically disposed and socialized into forming a closer, more intimate bond with the child. Such a close identity of mother and child may contribute to women's greater parental strain. Men, on the other hand, are more likely to be concerned with the child's achievements that may gain recognition in the non-familial world. This hypothesis is not easily tested. However, we did ask respondents to express, in their own words, what they felt had been most enjoyable about being a parent. Our hypothesis led us to predict that men will stress the accomplishments of their children, whereas women will stress the closeness of the mother-child relationship.

A content analysis of the open-ended responses of 248 whites and 270 blacks confirmed our predictions for whites but not for blacks.⁷ There were just two significant gender differences among whites. First, men were more likely than women to mention pride in the child's accomplishments (32% of men versus 17% of women, $p < .01$). For example, the following responses were all given by white fathers:

- "Just the pride . . . they never disappointed me."
- "The satisfaction of seeing them accomplish things."
- "Seeing them succeed."

Second, among whites, women were significantly more likely than men to stress their relationship with their child—a relationship that involves mutual cooperation, help, and good communication. Twelve percent of women mentioned this theme versus 5% of men ($p < .05$). For example, the following responses were all given by white mothers:

- "Just being able to help her out."
- "The friendship I have formed with my daughter. We can talk about anything."
- "Developing a relationship with them."

Such evidence from open-ended responses can only be suggestive but it does lend support to our claim that the reason gender differences in parental strain persist even when gender-linked role differences are held constant, is that women form qualitatively different relationships with their children than do men, and that the mother-child relationship imposes greater parental strain.

CONCLUSIONS

Our initial hypothesis that women will show greater parental strain than men is confirmed, both for blacks and whites. This gender difference in strain is true both of women who are full-time homemakers and those employed outside of the home. Contrary to our expectation, however, working women do not differ from full-time homemakers in their reporting of parental role demands and strains. We had expected women who work to report less parental strain because their employment takes them away from the stress of continuous child care responsibilities. However, it may be that the maternal role demands that remain are especially burdensome for women who juggle home and work responsibilities. Today women have become relatively liberated with respect to demanding equal rights at work, but they find it harder to relinquish deeply held beliefs concerning the woman's proper role in the home. Bernard made this point over a decade ago when she noted "It is easier for women to accept the feminist position in the outside world than it is in the world of the family" (1975, p. 189).

We suggested two possible explanations for the gender difference in parental stress. One explanation is that women's greater strain may reflect gender-linked role differences. The other is that women may feel more strain than men because women form a qualitatively different relationship with their children. Women are socialized into and perhaps psychologically disposed to take the nurturant role of caretaker and, even in the most egalitarian of relationships, women can still feel bound to this "mothering" role. "Mothering" is not merely a matter of undertaking the daily tasks associated with raising children but also implies a close and intimate relationship with the child. The intimacy and closeness of the mother-child bond could result in the woman feeling more parental strain.

Our results clearly demonstrate that the gender difference in parental strain is not solely attributable to gender-linked role differences for whites. For whites, gender remains the strongest predictor of parental strain even

when we control for single-parent status, hours spent with children, number of children in the household, employment status, and the salience of the parental role. However, for blacks, once these gender-linked differences in role experiences are controlled, then gender is no longer a significant predictor of parental strain. For blacks, the strongest predictor of strain is time spent with the child. It makes perfect sense that parental strain reflects the time spent in the company of the child. What is surprising is that the gender difference in strain for whites remains even when other factors—like time with children—are held constant.

This gender difference in parental strain for whites may be due to the greater emphasis placed by women on the quality of their relationship with the child. In Gilligan's words: "Women not only define themselves in the context of relationship but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care" (1982, p. 17). In our study, women are more apt than men to talk about their relationship to the child when describing what they enjoy about parenting. Men tend to stress pride in their child's accomplishments. Interestingly, a similar gender difference was observed by Veroff et al. (1981), in their national data from 1957 and 1976. They note that "When they think of the nicest things about having children, mothers allude more often to the love and warmth, aspects of affiliative pleasure with their children. Men are more likely to say that having an influence, forming the character of the child, is a major pleasure of parenthood" (p. 219). For all the publicity and pressure brought to bear on ending the sex-typed distinctions in parenting, it seems that the traditional definitions of the mother and father role still hold sway in the eighties and infuse people's conceptions of parenthood and consequent experience of parental strain.

Our final concern was to relate gender differences in parental strains to gender differences in life strain and distress. Surprisingly, in our data there was no gender difference in distress, but women were much more likely than men to report life strain. It is reasonable to assume that such gender differences in life strain relate to the problems of everyday life, including the strains of parenting. However, although the strains of parenting may contribute to more general life strain, the reverse could also be true and parental strain could be felt more keenly when one is subject to other life stresses. It is not possible to determine causal relationships with our cross-sectional study but we can conclude from our data that, unlike parental strains, these more general measures of life strain do *not* show a gender difference once gender-linked role experiences are controlled. The one exception is, even after controlling for gender-linked role experiences, black women report more life strain than black men. It may

be that the supportive extended kin networks identified by Stack (1974) and others ameliorate some of the parental strains of black women, but even these supportive networks cannot eliminate the life strain that black women experience, perhaps as a consequence of the racism and sexism in American society. What is more certain, however, is that among whites, once gender-linked role differences are controlled, the gender difference in life strain disappears but the gender difference in parental strains remains.

Strain is usually conceived of as a negative experience that should be avoided, if possible. This is not necessarily the case. Strain may indicate greater emotional involvement and intimacy, and as such, is a positive sign of a close relationship.⁸ As Gilligan (1982) argued, women are more oriented to the needs of those around them and are also more likely than men to subordinate personal needs to the needs of others. This implies that women will be more vulnerable to personal strain because of their greater emotional involvement with friends and loved ones and there is some empirical evidence to support this interpretation (e.g., Kessler and McCleod 1984). Women are especially likely to subordinate their personal needs in relation to their children and, indeed, this is part of the expectations associated with mothering. Parental roles, however, may change — some argue that they are already changing — with men becoming more involved in the responsibilities of parenting. If such a change occurs, and if parental strain does reflect the emotional involvement of the mother and child, then it is to be hoped that fathers will come to feel as much parental strain as mothers.

APPENDIX

Life Strain Measure

1. How satisfied are you with the amount of money you have to do the things you want to do? (Please pick a number between 1 and 7, where 1 means completely satisfied and 7 means completely dissatisfied.)
2. In general, how often do you feel rushed, even to do the things you have to do? Would you say very often, often, sometimes, rarely, or never?
3. How often is there so much going on that you can't seem to think straight? (Very often, often, sometimes, rarely, never).
4. How often do you feel tired or run down? (Very often, often, sometimes, rarely, never).
5. How often do you feel it is impossible to finish anything? (Very often, often, sometimes, rarely, never).

6. How often do you think you get enough sleep? (Very often, often, sometimes, rarely, never).
7. If someone else at home is sick how often do you seem to catch it? (Very often, often, sometimes, rarely, never).
8. When you are really sick, how often is there someone to help take care of you? (Very often, often, sometimes, rarely, never).
9. Would you say your overall *health* is excellent, good, fair, or poor?
10. How often do you feel you are really enjoying life? Would you say all the time, fairly often, now and then, or rarely?
11. How do you feel about the way you have handled problems that have come up in your life? Would you say you have handled them very well, pretty well, not too well, or not well at all?
12. Have you usually felt pretty sure your life would work out the way you want it to, or have there been times when you haven't been sure about it?
13. Do you think it's better to plan your life a good way ahead, or would you say life is too much a matter of luck to plan ahead very far?
14. When you make plans ahead, do you usually get to carry things out the way you expected, or do things usually come up to make you change your plans?
15. Some people feel they can run their lives pretty much the way they want to; others feel the problems of life are sometimes too big for them. Which are you most like?
16. Do you ever worry that your family's income will not be enough to meet your family's expenses and bills? (YES, NO.). (IF YES: Would you say that you have worries like this all of the time, most of the time, some of the time, or just now and then?)

NOTES

1. For an interesting report on cultural differences in subjective interpretations of health, see Angel and Cleary (1984); and for implications of such differences in statistical models, see Angel and Gronfein (1988).

2. We report internal consistency coefficients for our composite scores to give an indication not of reliability of measurement, but of the extent to which our indicators intercorrelate and thus seem to measure the same factors.

3. Not surprisingly, the overwhelming majority of households headed by women fall in this low income bracket — 84% of white single mothers and 98% of black single mothers are doubly burdened with both the strain of raising their children alone and the strain of relative economic hardship (data not shown).

4. There is also a significant three-way interaction of employment and income by race. Among blacks, unemployed women are far more likely than the employed to be from a low income household; whereas among whites, there is no difference in income by employment status. (This race difference for the relation of income and employment holds even when single-parent status is controlled.)

5. This explanation cannot be tested directly with these data, but there is another interaction that is consistent with this interpretation. For blacks, the relation of hours working and role demands and strains varies by gender: the more hours a man spends in employment the less he experiences parental *role demands and strains*, whereas for black women there is no clear relationship. There are no such interaction effects for whites. This suggests that, for blacks, male participation in child rearing may be a function of their hours in work. This is not true for whites, because most white men are in full-time employment.

6. Measures of egalitarianism and hours of employment are excluded because they are only asked of dual-parent households and the employed, respectively. Low income is also excluded because concern with family income is a component of the *life strain* index.

7. This open-ended question was asked only in our 1983 supplement. In all, nine major themes and a miscellaneous category of "other" responses were coded. The nine themes are pride in the child's accomplishments, caring relationship, watching the child grow and mature, companionship, displays of love and affection, giving life, the health and happiness of the child, the child's good qualities, and responses concerning the parental role. Up to four themes were coded. The coding was done without knowing the respondent's sex. Among blacks, only two gender differences were found: black men were more likely than women to mention watching their child grow up and black women were more likely to mention the health and happiness of the child.

8. Positive social relations, in general, may be less strongly related to well-being than negative ones (Rook 1984) but a very demanding positive relationship, such as may exist between mother and child, is likely to exacerbate strain.

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