

This article uses panel data from 745 married women in the Detroit Metropolitan Area to examine the mental health effects of employment and parenting status changes. Contrary to popular belief, the transition to parenting is not directly related to increases in psychological distress. Changes in employment status, however, are. Women who significantly increase their labor force participation report lower levels of psychological distress over the study period, while women who significantly decrease their labor force participation report higher psychological distress. The effects of labor force changes on mental health are not all modified by parenting status or changes in parenting status. The transition to parenting and increased parenting responsibilities, however, are indirectly related to increased psychological distress insofar as they result in decreased labor force participation. The implications of these results are used to evaluate four competing perspectives on the relationship between roles, stress, and psychological functioning.

Employment, Parental Responsibility, and Psychological Distress

A Longitudinal Study of Married Women*

ELAINE WETHINGTON

Cornell University

RONALD C. KESSLER

University of Michigan

This article analyzes the relationships of employment status and parenting status with psychological distress in a community sample of married women. Unlike most previous studies in this area of research, this paper examines these relationships over time, using longitudinal data designed expressly to examine the effects of role changes on mental health.

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There are two dominant theoretical perspectives on the relationship of employment and parenting status to psychological distress among women: the role stress and the role expansion perspectives. Each of these is supported by some evidence. According to the role stress perspective, women who are simultaneously subject to demands from employment and home will experience more psychological distress than those with only one of these roles (Cosser and Rokoff 1971; Hall 1975; Holahan and Gilbert 1979). This will occur, according to this perspective, because women occupying both roles experience more stress than those with only one role. Thus, employed women who have children are predicted to have higher levels of psychological distress than those who do not have children. Empirical evidence is generally consistent with this prediction (Radloff 1975; Aneshensel et al. 1981; McLanahan and Adams 1987).

In contrast, the role expansion perspective predicts that women who have fewer, rather than more, role obligations will experience higher levels of psychological distress (Gove 1972; Gove and Tudor 1973; Thoits 1983). The thinking here is that multiple roles provide additional access to resources that help people cope with role demands and stress, thus enhancing emotional resilience. Consistent with this perspective, past research has generally found that married women are in better mental health if they work outside the home in addition to being a homemaker and mother (Kessler and McRae 1982; Ross, Mirowsky, and Huber 1983).

Two other explanations are also possible, although they have not been considered as seriously as the role stress and role expansion perspectives. The first is based on the concept of person-environment fit (Townsend and Gurin 1981; Waldron and Herold 1986). This proposes that women whose role status fits their preferences will report lower psychological distress than women whose status does not fit their preferences. The basic assumption underlying this perspective is that role demands are seldom stressful in themselves, but only in relation to the expectations or capacities of the person facing them. There is some cross-sectional evidence consistent with this prediction (Townsend and Gurin 1981; Ross et al. 1983), and some longitudinal investigations that support it as well (Hock et al. 1984; DeMeis et al. 1986; Waldron and Herold 1986).

Another explanation is the selection perspective, or the possibility that prior mental health influences role acquisition (Kessler and McRae 1984). In this view, the comparatively high levels of distress found among mothers and full-time homemakers might reflect a positive influence of prior emotional problems on becoming pregnant and a negative influence on seeking and holding a steady job. There is some evidence from

longitudinal research consistent with this perspective. Kandel and Davies (1986), in a longitudinal investigation of adult women who were interviewed initially during their high school years, found that prior psychological distress was associated with early marriage, early pregnancy and birth of a child, and low labor force participation.

In this article we consider all four of these competing explanations. In the past, the literature on employment status and mental health has generally been based on the role expansion perspective because, consistent with this perspective, women who are employed generally report somewhat better mental health than those women who are not employed (Gove and Tudor 1973), although the evidence from more recently collected data is mixed (Mirowsky and Ross 1986; Thoits 1987). Previous research on parental responsibility and mental health, in comparison, has been based largely on the role stress perspective because, consistent with this perspective, women with young children generally report more psychological distress than childless women or women with older children (Pearlin 1974; Gove and Geerken 1977; Aneshensel et al. 1981). It is unclear from previous studies, though, whether the associations of either employment or parental status with mental health should be interpreted in terms of these dominant perspectives or from the perspectives of person-environment fit or selection. Person-environment fit, although discussed as a conceptual possibility by role theorists (e.g., Sieber 1974), has been considered directly in only a few previous analyses of roles and mental illness. Although some previous studies (e.g., Thoits 1986; Thompson and Ensminger 1989) have adjusted for the possibility of selection by controlling for prior levels of emotional functioning in panel analyses of role change, they have not explicitly examined the alternative explanation that women with good psychological health are more likely to enter the labor force or to postpone childbearing. We consider all these possibilities here.

METHOD

DESIGN AND SAMPLE

The data used here were obtained in a panel study administered in 1985 and 1988. The 1985 survey was administered by the staff of the Detroit Area Study and the Survey Research Center (SRC) at the University of Michigan. The sample consisted of nonblack married couples residing in

noninstitutionalized housing in the Detroit Metropolitan Area. Couples were not interviewed if both spouses were determined to be older than age 65. A total of 1755 respondents (820 males, 935 females) were interviewed, representing 76% of eligible respondents. Demographic characteristics of the baseline sample closely reflect those of the target population. Mean age of respondents at baseline was 42 years, mean education was 13 years, and mean income was \$42,000. Consistent with sample characteristics, the vast majority of men (83.9%) were full-time employed and a large proportion (48%) of the women were employed at least 20 hours a week. The 1988 reinterview survey, carried out by the staff of SRC, attempted to recontact all baseline respondents as well as the new spouses of those who had become widowed or divorced and then remarried. Time 2 interviews were completed with 1455 baseline respondents, representing 85.7% of those known not to be dead in 1989. There was no systematic difference on a wide range of baseline demographic and attitudinal variables between Time 2 respondents and nonrespondents.

The analysis in this report is confined to the 745 women who have valid data at both time points, and who are married to the same spouse at Time 2. Women who were divorced between Time 1 and Time 2 were excluded, even if they remarried in that period of time.

MEASURES

Role Changes

This article is primarily concerned with the effects of two different sorts of role changes on mental health: changes in employment status and changes in parenting status. A change in *employment* status is defined as a significant loss or gain in number of hours employed outside the home from the first wave of data collection in 1985 to the second wave of data collection in 1988. We divide employment status into three categories: homemaker (not employed or employed less than 10 hours in the "average week" outside the home); part-time (employed 10-34 hours); and full-time employed (35 or more hours). A change in employment status is defined as any movement among these categories.

Because of previous theoretical work on the relationship between social roles and psychological distress we focus our analysis on two particular types of employment role changes. The first is a movement from homemaker status at Time 1 to employment at Time 2. Although according to a pure application of the role expansion perspective (Thoits 1986),

gaining any sort of employment would be beneficial, it is likely that those with full-time jobs get most of the economic and social benefits (Baruch et al. 1987). Research on part-time working conditions (e.g., Vecchio 1984) has emphasized its stressful aspects: Low pay, irregular hours, lack of autonomy, and high demands. Based on these considerations we would not necessarily expect part-time work to have the same emotional benefits as full-time work. The second sort of change in employment status we focus on is the reduction from full-time employment in 1985 to either part-time employment or life as a homemaker in 1988. Once again, we are guided by previous theory. According to the role expansion perspective, the loss of employment should be associated with an increase in psychological distress.

It is important to note that the analysis *underestimates* the total number of employment role changes that have taken place in the study period. For example, a woman who left the labor force for several months to have a baby and then returned to her same job at the same level of hours would not be counted as having changed her role status. Similarly, a woman who left one full-time job for another was counted as being stably employed full-time, even if she spent a significant amount of time out of the labor force. Data are not available in the survey to reconstruct accurately all of these possible role changes.

Change in parenting status is also of interest, both theoretically and practically. Two possibilities concern us here. The first is the effect on Time 2 mental health of having a child since Time 1. The second is the departure of all children from the household (the "empty nest"). The role expansion perspective predicts that the transition to parenthood—surely a valued social role—should have positive effects on mental health. It also predicts that the loss of the parental role should have negative effects on mental health. Previous research on the relationship of parental status to mental health, though, generally supports the role stress perspective. The presence of children in a household is associated with slightly higher levels of psychological distress (for a review, see McLanahan and Adams 1987). The "empty nest" is associated with a small positive or neutral effect on well-being (Glenn and McLanahan 1981; Menaghan 1983).

Research, however, has not clearly defined the sources of stress in the transition to parenthood. For example, it has been asserted that the care of an infant has deleterious consequences on the mental health of married women (Radloff 1975). Gove (1972), in contrast, argued that the transition to parenthood creates higher distress because it limits access to other social roles, primarily employment. It is also unclear from previous

research, whether the transition to parenthood after the birth of the first child, or the overload and restrictions resulting from the births of subsequent children, accounts for the negative effects on well-being of parenthood in general. Some theorists (e.g., Rossi 1968; Bernard 1972) have argued that first birth itself constitutes a "shock" to women, who are ill prepared for the demands of parenting. Others have emphasized that overload arising from the birth of subsequent children causes higher levels of psychological distress (Pearlin 1974). Nor has research examined separately the often confounded events of having a child and reducing labor force participation (while theoretically, they may have different impacts on psychological distress). Bernard (1972), Pearlin (1974), Ryder (1979), and Kessler and McRae (1982), using cross-sectional data, argued that employment benefits mothers less than other married women. In order to address these unresolved issues directly, the analyses in this report distinguish between the birth of first children and the birth of subsequent children. We also take into account how certain *combinations* of employment and parenting status changes over time may affect level of psychological distress (Menaghan 1989).

Psychological Distress

Psychological distress is represented by the *depression* subscale from the revised SCL-90 (Derogatis 1977). The identical scale was used in both the Time 1 and Time 2 data collections. The depression scale consists of ten items that measure frequency and occurrence of negative self-cognitions such as: worrying too much, feeling trapped or caught, blaming one's self, feeling lonely, feeling sad or blue, feeling no interest in things, feeling hopeless about the future, feeling that everything is an effort, feeling worthless, and having suicidal thoughts. In each wave, the ten items were standardized across the sample, summed, and the resulting index standardized. In the first wave, full-time employed women report no more or less psychological distress than part-time employed women or homemakers. In the second wave, homemakers report significantly more distress than either part-time or full-time employed women. The alpha reliability of the depression scale is .84 in each of the waves.

Analysis

Regression models were estimated, using psychological distress at Time 2 as the outcome. The predictors of primary interest are role changes

TABLE 1
Married Women's Changing Labor
Force Participation: 1985 and 1988 (n = 745)

<u>1985 Labor Force Participation</u>			
<u>1988 Labor Force Participation</u>	Homemakers (a)	10-34 Hours	35+ Hours
Homemakers (a)	232 69.0	48 31.1	50 19.0
10-34 Hours	69 20.0	72 46.8	29 11.0
35+ Hours	36 11.0	34 22.1	179 69.0
TOTALS	337 100.0	154 100.0	258 100.0

NOTE: (a) This category includes women who were not employed outside the home as well as those who were employed less than 10 hours per week.

between 1985 and 1988. The effect of role changes are estimated net of age of respondent, years of education, family income in 1988, and number and ages of children in the household. In order to investigate the effects of social selection on the relationship between role change and psychological distress, psychological distress at Time 1 was also entered as a control variable. The possibility that prior levels of psychological distress caused role changes was also investigated more directly by estimating models that predicted the effects of Time 1 psychological distress on the probability of role changes between Time 1 and Time 2.

RESULTS

ROLE LOSS AND GAIN OVER TIME

Table 1 presents data on changes in labor force participation between Time 1 and Time 2. There are several interesting patterns in this table. The most notable of these is that 25% of the women reported a different level of labor force participation at Time 2. This finding is consistent with demographic research documenting that changes in labor force participation are much more common among married women than among men or single women (Bianchi and Spain 1986). Among those who changed,

TABLE 2
Proportion of Women Who
Gave Birth/Adopted a Baby or Whose Last Child
Left Home Since 1985, by 1985 and 1988 Labor Force Status

<u>Homemakers in 1985: (n=337)</u>	<u>First baby</u>	<u>Additional baby</u>	<u>"Empty nest"</u>
Homemaker in 1988:	0.3	6.5	5.6
Part-time Employed in 1988:	0.3	2.1	0.6
Full-time Employed in 1988:	0	1.2	0.3
\bar{X}^2	1.31	.20	3.00
 <u>Part-time Employed in 1985: (n=154)</u>			
Homemaker in 1988:	1.3	3.2	1.3
Part-time Employed in 1988:	2.6	5.8	3.2
Full-time Employed in 1988:	1.3	0.0	1.9
\bar{X}^2	.15	4.51	.76
 <u>Full-time Employed in 1985: (n=258)</u>			
Homemaker in 1988:	4.3	2.7	5.4
Part-time Employed in 1988:	1.2	1.9	0.8
Full-time Employed in 1988:	3.5	3.1	2.7
\bar{X}^2	6.85*	12.10*	2.00

NOTE: *Significant at a = .05.

wives who were part-time employed at Time 1 (39%) or homemakers (31%) were more likely to have modified their labor force participation than women who were full-time employed (21%) at Time 1.

Changes in parenting role status were also frequent. Between 1985 and 1988, 129 women reported an additional child entering the household. The majority of these additions (n = 101) were births and/or adoptions of infants. Of these, 33 were first births. Among the 28 additions of older children to the household, 25 are children over the age of 18 returning to the household, and 3 are minor children who lived with other parents at Time 1. Another 55 women reported that their last child had left the household.

As expected from previous research, there is an association between changes in labor force participation and changes in parenting status (e.g., Bianchi and Spain 1986). Nevertheless, as reported in Table 2, these

associations are fairly modest in magnitude. It is only among respondents employed full-time at baseline that a statistically significant pattern can be detected. This pattern is largely due, furthermore, to the fact that full-time working women who give birth or adopt infants between Times 1 and 2 are much more likely than those who do not to reduce their employment to part-time.

It is also evident that the presence of young children in the household was associated with reported labor force participation at Time 1. The overwhelming majority of new children born since 1985 to women who were homemakers or part-time employed at Time 1 are "additional" rather than first children. For this reason, we believe that examining the effects of parenting role changes over a three-year period *understates* the true association of parenting role changes and labor force participation changes.

THE EFFECTS OF ROLE LOSS AND GAIN ON PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS

Role Stress Versus Role Expansion

Estimates of the effects of employment and parenting role changes on psychological distress are reported in Table 3. Changes in parenting and employment status were entered as a series of dummy variables, with the contrast categories for each set of role statuses consisting of those women who did not report a change in that status between Times 1 and 2.

The role change categories examined in this regression equation, and others of a related sort that are not reported here, differ somewhat from those used in the previous two tables. For example, in some equations we distinguished those women who had first babies from those who had second (or more) babies and from those who had children added to the household for other reasons. We made this distinction based on previous empirical research (e.g., Radloff 1975), which indicates that the presence of preschool children in the household is associated with poorer mental health for women. In addition to this change, we broke up some categories of employment role changes by distinguishing low part-time (10-19 hours per week) from high part-time (20-34 hours per week) employment. We did this on the basis of evidence that, on average, jobs in these two categories have very different working conditions (Vecchio 1984).

The most surprising finding in Table 3 is that changes in parenting status are not associated with changes in psychological distress. Neither the birth/adoption of a first child nor the birth/adoption of an additional

TABLE 3
**The Effect of Role Changes on
 Changes in Psychological Distress: 1985-1988 (n = 745)**

<u>Predictors</u>	<u>b</u>	<u>(se)</u>
Time 1 Distress	.532*	(.034)
First child born	-.286	(.192)
Additional child born	-.064	(.129)
Child returns to HH	-.013	(.182)
"Empty nest"	.030	(.139)
85 full-time/88 part-time	.023	(.177)
85 full-time/88 homemaker	.346*	(.141)
85 homemaker/88 low part-time	-.009	(.197)
85 homemaker/88 high part-time	-.303*	(.151)
85 homemaker/88 full-time	-.283	(.160)
85 part-time/88 homemaker	.087	(.141)
85 part-time/88 full-time	-.083	(.165)
Constant	.929*	(.297)
² R (adjusted)	.256	

NOTE: These are estimates net of controls for age, education, 1988 family income, and number and ages of children in the household in 1985. The excluded category for parenting responsibility changes are women who did not report the birth of a child/adoption of an infant, the addition of an older child to the household, or the departure of their last child since Time 1. The excluded categories for employment status changes are women who reported the same employment statuses at Time 1 and Time 2.

*Significant at a = .05, two-tailed test.

child is associated with an increase in psychological distress (indeed, the birth of a first child is associated with a nonsignificant decrease in psychological distress). The departure of the last child is essentially neutral in effect. The overall finding of no effect from parenting role changes could be due to imprecise specification of contrast groups. In this model, those who have parenting role changes are contrasted against a heterogeneous group: those who are still childless, those whose children

left home before 1985, and those whose number of children in the household did not change between 1985 and 1988. Below, we explore parenting transitions using more precise contrasts.

While the overall effects of parenting role changes are not significant, changes in employment status are associated with changes in psychological distress. These associations are not constant across all types of employment role changes, but specific to *larger* shifts in labor force participation. Most notably, the change from full-time employment in 1985 to homemaker in 1988 is associated with an increase in psychological distress, while the change from full-time employment to part-time employment is not. The shift from homemaker to full-time worker in 1988 or to high part-time worker (20-34 hours per week) is associated with a decrease in psychological distress. The change from homemaker status to low hour part-time employment (10-19 hours per week), though, is not associated with a decrease in psychological distress. Interestingly, part-time workers who changed their labor force participation (a very large group) did not report either lower psychological distress from increasing their work hours or higher psychological distress from decreasing them.

These findings imply that there is some support—albeit limited—for the role expansion perspective. Changes in parenting status are not associated with significant changes in mental health, although the sign of the nonsignificant effect for first child suggests that for some subgroups, the birth of the first child is a happy transition, rather than a negative one (Rossi 1968). Nor are all employment role changes associated with changes in mental health. Only larger shifts in labor force participation, as defined by the number of hours employed in the average week, are associated with changes in mental health. This suggests that, whatever social and psychological mechanisms underlie the relationship of social roles and mental health, the positive effects are more salient when participation is more intense (Sieber 1974; Marks 1977).

The fact that low hour part-time employment does not have the same emotional benefits as high part-time or full-time employment may be thought to imply that the role conflict version of the role stress perspective has some validity. It may be, for example, that conflict or interference stemming from responsibilities at home prevent the part-time employed from getting full benefit of employment (Cosser and Rokoff 1971; Gove and Tudor 1973; Gove and Geerken 1977; Thoits 1986). In order to test this possibility, we estimated interactions between changes in employment status and changes in parenting status and number and ages of children in the household. In these analyses, we examined: women 18-45

at Time 1 who had made the transition from nonparent to parent, in contrast to women their age who were still childless; women age 18-45 who had children in the household at Time 1 and who had given birth or adopted a baby since then, in contrast to other women in that same situation at Time 1 who had not given birth/adopted; and older women (over age 45) whose last child had left home, in comparison to women their age who still had children in the household. Our reasoning was that if the role conflict perspective has some validity then women with increased parental responsibilities would reap fewer psychological benefits from changes in employment status, while women with decreased parental responsibilities should reap more. None of the predicted interactions, however, was significant, even in the theoretically-defined subgroups. Women benefit from increased employment hours whether or not they have children and irrespective of the number and ages of their children. These analyses, however, yielded a surprising finding in regard to the birth of first children. We find that the birth of the first child among young married women (all of whom but two were in the labor force at Time 1) is associated with a significant *decrease* in psychological distress, compared to their same age married counterparts who were also childless at Time 1 and do not have a child by Time 2. This decrease occurs irrespective of changes in labor force status that occur between birth of the first child and Time 2.

This finding could be dismissed as misleading by the "role overload" version of the role stress perspective, which predicts that psychological distress should increase when there are *additional* children, rather than just a first child in the household (Pearlin 1974). Nevertheless, when we examine the emotional effect of an additional birth since Time 1 among women of childbearing age (18-45) who already had children in Time 1, we find that the additional birth has no association with changes in psychological distress, even if there are other preschool children living in the household; nor does the addition of another child to the household interact with labor force status or changes in labor force status to produce higher psychological distress.

We conclude from these results that the pattern of associations in these data is more consistent with the role expansion perspective than the role stress perspective. First, the "additions" of some role—transition to parenthood and entering full-time or near full-time employment from not having previous employment—are related to *decreases*, not increases, in psychological distress. Second, the loss of the employment role is associated with an increase in psychological distress (although the same cannot

be claimed for loss of the parental role). Third, we could find no strong evidence that transition to parenthood, additional births of children, or increases in work hours are associated with *increases* in psychological distress. Fourth, there is no evidence consistent with the role conflict version of the role stress perspective that the combination of employment and parenting increases psychological distress among women.

Person-Environment Fit

The person-environment fit perspective argues that the mental health effects of role loss and gain are related to the discrepancy between such changes and the person's preferred role situation. According to this idea, those who prefer full-time employment are more distressed if they are working part-time or not working at all, those who prefer part-time employment are more distressed if they are working full-time or not working, and those who prefer being homemakers are more distressed if they are working outside the home rather than working as homemakers.

Similarly, preferences for child-bearing and rearing should have implications for the emotional effects of bearing and rearing children. Unfortunately, we do not have data from our sample about preferences for childbearing vs. remaining childless. There is some evidence that the preference for childbearing vs. career orientation affects women's emotional state and feelings of role conflict after birth (DeMeis et al. 1986). In this report, we can only examine how preferences for employment interact with employment role changes.

In the Time 1 data collection, respondents were asked: "If you had your choice, would you prefer to work full-time, work part-time, or work as a full-time homemaker?" Analyses of Time 1 data (not reported here) show that women who were in employment statuses incongruent with their preferences for employment reported higher levels of psychological distress. Waldron and Herold (1986) found a similar pattern in regard to levels of reported physical health.

Our Time 1 data, however, are not conclusive in showing that person-environment fit mediates the relationship between employment roles and psychological distress. It is possible that distress arising from stress in the role causes the preference rather than a situation incongruent with preferences causes psychological distress. In order to address this ambiguity, we estimated models of role changes and mental health that controlled for Time 1 preference for labor force participation. In these models we considered the possibility that Time 1 preference would interact with role

change, particularly if the employment change was incongruent with Time 1 preference. Surprisingly, we found no evidence that lack of fit between Time 1 preference and employment role change was related to higher psychological distress. Homemakers at Time 1 who expressed a preference for full-time employment were no more likely to report higher psychological distress at Time 2 than were homemakers who had expressed a preference for being homemakers. Findings were similarly null for Time 1 women who were employed full-time or part-time. We conclude from these results that the cross-sectional association between lack of employment role fit and psychological distress is as likely to be due to temporary distress over work or home conditions as it is to a long-term preference for labor force participation.

Selection

It is important to note that the results reported in Table 3 suggest that selection does not explain the relationship between changes in employment and parenting status and psychological distress. If selection explained role effects, then controlling for Time 1 distress would reduce the size of the role change coefficients. This is not the case; however, the role change coefficients reported in Table 3 are not at all affected by the inclusion or exclusion of prior psychological distress as a control variable.

A more direct test of the selection explanation was also conducted. A series of logistic regressions was estimated to predict the effect of Time 1 psychological distress on the probability of role change from Time 1 to Time 2, controlling for demographic characteristics and other role changes. These analyses found that prior psychological distress has no effect on either employment or parenting role changes, net of demographic characteristics and other relevant role changes (e.g., having a child is associated with reducing labor force participation). On the basis of these results we conclude that selection does not play an important part in the observed association between changes in employment status, changes in parenting status, and psychological distress in this sample of women.

DISCUSSION

This article has provided direct evidence that role changes affect the mental health of women over time. We draw three conclusions. First, employment role changes are more directly and consistently related to

changes in women's mental health over time than are parenting role changes, with one surprising exception. Second, not all employment role changes are equally efficacious or deleterious to mental health. Only large changes in participation, in terms of the average number of hours worked, are related to changes in mental health. None of these effects, moreover, was found to be significantly modified by changes in parental status, although there is evidence that changes in parenting status lead to changes in employment status. Third, prior levels of psychological distress do not explain away the effects of role changes on mental health.

Our findings have important implications. The first is that not all changes in social roles have equal effects on psychological distress. A simple application of the role expansion perspective would suggest that the addition or subtraction of any role would have equal effects on mental health. Our analyses and those of Thoits (1986) and Menaghan (1989) soundly reject that possibility. The analyses reported here were unable to find clear evidence of an association between parental responsibilities, *per se*, and psychological health, except a *positive* effect of first childbirth on women who report full-time employment at Time 1. This is somewhat counterintuitive. Now classic theoretical statements (Rossi 1968) and empirical investigations of the effects of social roles on women (e.g., Bernard 1972, 1974) suggest that the stress of childbearing should be at least as important in explaining high levels of psychological distress among women as is participation in employment. But we find no evidence that changes in childbearing status *per se*—at least as we define them here—are associated with other than *positive* changes in mental health, if there is any association at all. Changes in parenting status, nevertheless, are associated with reductions in labor force participation among women employed full-time at Time 1. Thus, the transition to parenthood and the birth of additional children exert an *indirect* effect on psychological distress, mediated by changes in labor force participation.

Our failure to find evidence that parenting exerts a negative effect on mental health is not due to the fact that we focused on change while earlier studies considered only cross-sectional associations. In both our Time 1 and Time 2 data sets, there is no meaningful cross-sectional association between the number and ages of children in the home and psychological distress (for a similar finding, see Kandell et al. 1985). This is a clear discrepancy between a basic pattern in most earlier surveys (for a review, see McLanahan and Adams 1987) and our survey. The reason for this discrepancy cannot be analyzed deeply in our single data set. Comparative analyses of trend surveys in the same population over time are required.

We can, however, make some beginning examinations and speculations from our survey.

The first one we considered was that compositional differences between the white married population of the Detroit metropolitan area and other areas might explain this discrepancy. Ross and Huber (1987), for example, reported that parenting was more stressful in the presence of economic strain. Nevertheless, subgroup analyses in our data based on economic strata did not yield a significant association between changes in parental responsibilities and elevated levels of psychological distress. This argues against one sort of compositional difference interpretation. We did find that changes in parenting responsibilities are significantly more positively experienced by the more educated, in contrast to the less educated. This is consistent with previous cross-sectional research findings (e.g., Radloff 1975). Nevertheless, because the educational level of our sample is similar to that of all white women in 1980 (Bianchi and Spain 1986), these educational differences do not support a compositional difference interpretation.

Another possibility is that the stress-provoking nature of having a young child has become smaller over time. Our results, according to this argument, reflect a broader trend in the larger population rather than an idiosyncrasy of our particular sample or the area from which it was drawn. This possibility cannot be evaluated directly in our survey, although broader knowledge about the increased availability of child care is consistent with it (Lueck et al. 1982).

Selection is a related explanatory possibility. As options for controlling pregnancy and birth have become more readily available, the proportion of married women who are having children by choice rather than chance has increased. It is reasonable to expect that the emotional stresses associated with being the parent of a young child would be less pronounced among women whose childbearing was planned and considered. We have no way to evaluate this possibility in our data because no questions were asked about childbearing plans. Nor are we aware of any earlier, large-scale surveys that contain questions of this sort that could be used as a baseline for assessing trends in the mental health of parents as a function of whether their children were planned or whether abortion was considered a viable option if the children were not planned. There is evidence from smaller-scale surveys, however, consistent with the idea that the current social and personal tolerance toward combining motherhood and employment may have reduced the "conflict" experienced by

some new mothers, compared to older cohorts of women (Hock et al. 1984; DeMeis et al. 1986; Stewart and Healy 1989).

While we were unable to document a negative effect of increased parental responsibility, the findings clearly suggest that employment benefits women emotionally. In accordance with the findings of Baruch et al. (1987) and Baruch and Barnett (1985), we find that not all employment is equally beneficial. Only large changes in labor force participation, from homemaker to full-time (or close to full-time) worker or from full-time worker to homemaker, are related to changes in psychological distress over time. Shifts in labor force participation among part-time workers, or shifts from full-time to part-time work are not associated with gains or losses in mental health among women.

One could easily imagine the opposite result. If the higher levels of distress typically found among homemakers, as compared with women employed outside the home, are due largely to the stresses associated with housework, most notably social isolation and lack of structure in daily role activity (Bernard 1972; Gove and Tudor 1973), one could plausibly predict that the major benefits of employment outside the home would be achieved by working part-time. The reasoning here is that *any* level of part-time employment would resolve the problems of social isolation and lack of structure, while avoiding the problems of role overload and role conflict that can occur when heavy work responsibilities and family responsibilities occur together. That this pattern was not documented consistently in the data requires that we rethink this line of reasoning.

We have not yet fully exploited the possibilities in our data for investigating this issue, but preliminary work suggests two possible lines of argument. One is that low hour part-time employment, while providing the escape from social isolation and access to structured daily activities that we would expect to improve mental health, is also associated with stresses that negate these benefits. This reasoning is consistent with the zero-order relationship of employment status and psychological distress in the second wave of our panel: part-time employed women report more psychological distress than full-time employed women. In particular, part-time employed women may operate under the fiction that they can retain full responsibility for child care and home maintenance and, as a result, they may actually experience more role overload and role conflict than women employed full-time (Hochschild 1989). Our data about household conditions are consistent with this interpretation. Part-time employed women are much less likely than full-time employed women to have help with child care and housework, either from their spouses or

from paid helpers. Our own data and that of others (e.g., Ross and Mirowsky 1988) also show that lack of such help exacerbates the impact of role demands on psychological distress. Future work will explore whether this combination of factors helps explain why low hour part-time employment does not necessarily lead to the same mental health benefits as full-time employment.

Another line of analysis involves the possibility that full-time work is more rewarding than low hour part-time work and that this explains why it is associated with better mental health among women making the transition from life as homemakers. Consistent with this reasoning, our data show that women employed in part-time positions earn less money in relation to their years of education than those in full-time jobs. Their jobs are substantively less complex and more routinized. Part-time workers, moreover, report less full participation in the social life of the work place and they have less access to supportive social relationships with coworkers. All of these differences in job conditions, in turn, are known to be associated with psychological functioning (Miller et al. 1979). Although as yet incompletely analyzed, these preliminary findings suggest that differences in the nature of part-time and full-time work and work contexts, especially in conjunction with concomitant differences in resources for shifting or reducing family responsibilities, may hold the answer to why low hour part-time work is less emotionally beneficial than full-time work.

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