

EFFECTS OF MATERNAL EMPLOYMENT ON SINGLE BLACK MOTHERS AND THEIR YOUNG CHILDREN: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF CURRENT AND FORMER WELFARE RECIPIENTS

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With shifting views about whether single, welfare-dependent mothers with young children should be required to work outside the home, there is a pressing need to understand the conditions under which employment by such mothers might result in favorable outcomes. Single and black mothers are disproportionately represented among the very poor and the welfare dependent (Duncan, 1991; Wilson, 1987). Since sparse research has examined employment among poor, single, and minority mothers, the impact of requiring these mothers to work outside the home is not well understood, either for the mothers or for the children (Eden, 1991; Garfinkel & McLanahan, 1986; Jencks, 1992; Wilson, Ellwood, & Brooks-Gunn, 1995). At the same time, large literatures address the effects of maternal employment and child care on (primarily non-poor) mothers and children. These effects may be moderated by parental, child, and family characteristics (Belsky & Eggebeen, 1991; Desai, Chase-Lansdale, & Michael, 1989; Hoffman, 1989; Vandell & Ramanan, 1992). Funded by grants from the William T. Grant Foundation and NIMH, as well as intramural funds for Faculty Research and Training Initiatives from the Columbia University School of Social Work, this project will examine factors that influence the well-being of poor and near-poor black children and their mothers in the maternal employment situation.

The proposed study will involve data gathering via structured interviews with single black mothers of a preschool child who receive welfare benefits and with former recipients who are employed in low-wage jobs in New York City at baseline. We will conduct a second interview with the mothers when the children are in early elementary

school to document, over a 2-1/2 to 3-year period, their job history, child-care use, welfare receipt, and sources of income. Of particular interest is understanding the links among work, welfare, social supports, maternal psychological well-being, and maternal parenting, and the associations among these and child outcomes in the preschool and early-elementary-school years in a sample of 300 mothers and children.

The sample will be recruited using a multiple-step procedure. First, the names of employed mothers eligible for child-care vouchers will be obtained from the New York City Human Resources Administration's Office of Employment Services. The list will include all such mothers with a 3- or 4-year-old child in zip codes representing Central Harlem, Bedford-Stuyvesant, and Jamaica, areas with substantial numbers of low-income black mothers. Next, individuals so identified who also are former welfare recipients will be sent a letter describing the study and requesting their participation. Then, mothers who indicate that they are willing to participate in the study will be contacted by telephone to arrange an appointment to visit at their home. Nonemployed mothers will be recruited in the same way, selected randomly from a list of recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) involved in education, training, and/or job placement programs in the same zip codes. The principal investigator and a research assistant will simultaneously conduct a structured interview with each mother and an objective assessment of each focal child. The structured interview, rather than a mailed survey, should encourage a high level of commitment to the research on the part of respondents, thereby increasing the response rate and diminishing attrition over time (Menard, 1991).

The second phase of the planned research will focus on whether changes in maternal employment statuses and situations, child-care use, welfare receipt, and sources of income affect the later behavior and academic adjustment of poor black children, and, if so, by what mechanisms these effects come into being. Of particular interest here is whether changes in the mothers' life circumstances affect maternal psychological well-

being, and if so, whether these changes affect maternal parenting behavior and, ultimately, children's subsequent development.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE RESEARCH

There is evidence that maternal employment in the child's first year may have negative effects for both boys and girls, poor and non-poor (Baydar & Brooks-Gunn, 1991; Desai et al., 1989). However, employment after the first year is usually not found to result in negative effects (unless moderating or mediating factors are taken into account). Some evidence even suggests that employment during preschool and elementary-school years may have positive effects, at least for girls.

Scholars have proposed two conflicting views concerning the effects of maternal employment on children from low-income families. One is that maternal employment, poverty, and single-parent status function as cumulative burdens on families, thereby resulting in poorer developmental outcomes among low-income children of employed mothers. The other is that the financial and psychological benefits associated with maternal employment are so considerable that children whose mothers are employed demonstrate better social and academic outcomes than low-income children whose mothers are not employed (Vandell & Ramanan, 1992; Desai et al., 1989). Policies mandating employment for welfare recipients with young children are based on the assumption that maternal employment has positive effects in low-income families. This assumption, while plausible (Vandell, 1991), is largely untested (Chase-Lansdale & Brooks-Gunn, 1995; McLoyd, 1993; Vandell & Ramanan, 1992).

Given the high risks for poverty, depression, and associated strains in single-parent families (Belle, 1990; McLoyd, 1990), it is plausible that maternal employment may be more advantageous to low-income children than staying home with a nonemployed single mother after the infancy and toddler years (McLoyd, 1993; Vandell, 1991). Although there is some support for this assumption (Cherry & Eaton, 1977; Milne, Myers, Rosenthal, & Ginsburg, 1986; Woods, 1972), some have argued that such findings should be interpreted with caution, inasmuch as employed mothers may differ a priori from mothers who are not employed (Hoffman, 1984). Also, studies have found

that congruence between actual and preferred employment status is associated with positive outcomes for mothers and children (Hock & DeMeis, 1990; Jackson, 1992, 1993; Ross, Mirowsky, & Huber, 1983). Thus, maternal employment might have different effects for families in which mothers choose to be employed during the children's early years as opposed to those in which mothers are forced to seek employment. The welfare to work literature does not adequately address the issue of requiring mothers to work (Aber, Brooks-Gunn, & Maynard, 1995; Maynard, 1995).

A large body of evidence documents the negative effects of poverty on children's development (Danziger & Danziger, 1995; Huston, 1991; Huston, McLoyd, & Garcia Coll, 1994, for example). But very little is known about how young children are affected by their mothers' transitions from welfare to work. Research has documented the importance of high-quality substitute care (Haskins, 1989; Lee, Brooks-Gunn, Schnur, & Liaw, 1990; Ramey & Campbell, 1994). There also is evidence that alternative forms of child care can be a positive force in the lives of young, low-income children (Vandell & Ramanan, 1992). Although debate continues about the effects of child care on children in the first three years of life, the paucity of data on the effects of child-care quality on low-income children in the maternal employment situation is frequently noted in the literature (see, for example, Belsky & Eggebeen, 1991; McCartney & Rosenthan, 1991; Scarr, 1991; Vandell, 1991). It is probable that the adequacy of child-care arrangements is critical not just for children, but for the psychological functioning and employment success of their mothers as well.

In examining the interplay among work, welfare, income sources, and child-care use as antecedents of maternal psychological well-being and child developmental outcomes in a sample of economically disadvantaged families headed by single black mothers, this study is concerned with how the transition to self-sufficiency, especially self-sufficiency in the low-wage market, is managed by poor mothers and children. Taking an individual difference approach, our conceptual model is based, in part, on the

work of Conger and his colleagues (1992), Elder (1974), and McLoyd (1990, 1991, 1993) which posits that children living in poverty are likely to be exposed to environmental risks such as female headship, maternal depression, unemployment, low maternal social supports, and less supportive parenting. These factors have been associated with adverse child outcomes. However, unlike previous work, this study will focus only on mothers with a young child who are receiving or who have received welfare, and on the interplay among work, welfare, income sources, and child care.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study will provide data that will enable us to address the following research questions and policy concerns:

- 1) What are the links among four aspects of single black mothers' lives (i.e., employment statuses and situations, child-care use, welfare receipt, and sources of income) and maternal psychological well-being, coping, and parenting?
- 2) How do variations in maternal employment statuses and situations, child-care use, welfare receipt, and sources of income affect child outcomes at ages 3-4 and 6-7?
- 3) How do variations in maternal psychological distress, well-being, coping, and parenting influence child outcomes, specifically as mediators and/or moderators of maternal employment statuses and situations, children's child-care experiences, maternal welfare receipt, and maternal sources of income?
- 4) How do changes in employment, child care, welfare receipt, sources of income, as well as changes in maternal psychological distress, well-being, coping, and parenting affect changes in child well-being between ages 3-4 and 6-7?
- 5) How do child factors moderate the links between and among the four aspects of single black mothers' lives (i.e., employment statuses and situations, child-care use, welfare receipt, and sources of income) and maternal and child outcomes, both concurrently and over time?

6) How do child factors moderate the links between and among maternal psychological well-being, parenting, and child outcomes, both concurrently and over time?

We expect that employed mothers will, in general, fare better on indicators of psychological distress and well-being than their nonemployed counterparts. However, maternal education, maternal social supports and sources of income, and the child's gender are expected to differentially affect maternal working statuses, maternal mental health and coping, and child outcomes. For example, if mothers have very low income or unstable work histories, outcomes may not be better among the employed (Smith, Brooks-Gunn, & Jackson, 1995). We anticipate, as well, that the quality of the home environment and the children's experiences in child care will be mechanisms whereby maternal employment statuses in the preschool years are associated with salutary effects on low-income black children, both concurrently and over time.

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