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# WORK CONDITIONS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS AMONG AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN

Verna Keith, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Arizona State University

Anna Riley, Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Missouri, Columbia; and National Institute on Aging Postdoctoral Research Fellow, School of Social Work, University of Michigan

## Abstract

Previous research on the effects of work conditions on women's psychological well-being has included statistical controls for race, but have not presented detailed analyses for African American women. We analyzed the effects of four dimensions of work – autonomy, job demands, time demands and feeling appreciated on the psychological well-being of African American homemakers and employed women. Using the American Changing Lives Survey, we found that housework as a full-time activity was reported to be more autonomous, appreciated more, less physically demanding, and involved less time pressure than paid work. These differences in work activities have implications for employed women's and homemakers' well-being. In general, the results indicate that without the advantage of greater autonomy, fewer physical demands, higher levels of appreciation and, to a lesser extent fewer time pressures, African American homemakers would be significantly more distressed than their employed counterparts.

## Introduction

The effects of paid employment on women's mental health, especially married women's levels of psychological distress, has been of ongoing interest for the past three decades. Traditionally, researchers have explored this issue by comparing the psychological well-being of wives who are full-time homemakers to those employed outside the home. Some studies report that wives working outside the home have lower levels of psychological distress than homemakers (Pearlin 1975; Rosenfield 1980; Reskin & Coverman 1985). Other studies report mixed results, suggesting that the effects of employment on married women's mental health are complicated by a host of factors such as family responsibility and job conditions (Kessler & McRae 1982; Rosenfield 1989; Lennon & Rosenfield 1992; Bird & Ross 1993; Lennon 1994). Several of the more recent studies compare the subjective work conditions of employed women to women who are full-time homemakers and the consequences these conditions have for psychological well-being. The conclusion from these studies suggests that employed women and full-time homemakers have similar levels of psy-

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chological distress owing to their differential exposure to positive and negative dimensions of their working conditions (Lennon 1994; Bird & Ross 1993). While housework is unpaid, more routine, more physically demanding, and provides less recognition than paid employment, paid work is less autonomous, involves greater time pressures, and is associated with greater responsibilities outside one's control.

The few existing studies investigating subjective work conditions and women's mental health have included statistical controls for race, but have not presented detailed analyses for African American women. This is a serious omission given that the work experiences of African American women diverge in significant ways from those of white women. For example, African American women fare less well in the prestige and rewards associated with work. Compared to white women, African American women are underrepresented in the most highly paid professional-managerial, clerical and sales jobs, and overrepresented in lower paid operative and service jobs (Anderson & Shapiro 1996; Woody 1992). Furthermore, these less prestigious, lower paid jobs are characterized by difficult work conditions including low autonomy, high levels of physical effort, and routinization. Another important difference is that compared to their white counterparts, African American women are less likely to be married and those that are married rarely have a choice between full-time homemaking and paid employment. Instead, most African American women must work outside of the home because of Black males' experiences with discrimination in employment opportunities and depressed wages.

While it is well-documented that African American women are more occupationally disadvantaged and are less likely to have the option of being full-time homemakers compared to white women, little is known about how African American women view housework or how their work experiences impact their psychological well-being. The ways that work conditions influence psychological well-being may be unique for African American women compared to their white counterparts because of their dual status as both women and minorities (Hughes & Dodge 1997). Given that these differences exist, the work conditions that influence African American women's psychological well-being deserves critical attention. It is important that research take into account the differential work conditions and rewards experienced by two distinct groups of women: African American women who are by preference homemakers and those who are employed. The present study provides such a comparison. It is quite possible that given the adverse work conditions that many African American women encounter in paid employment, full-time homemakers may display higher levels of psychological well-being than those who work.

### **Work Conditions and Well-Being**

Researchers propose that the conditions of paid work and housework can be benefi-

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cial as well as detrimental to women's psychological functioning. Investigators find that combinations of the various aspects of housework and paid work such as routinization, time pressure, responsibility for things beyond one's control, interruptions, physically demanding work, work fulfillment, autonomy, and symbolic rewards (i.e., recognition or appreciation of workers' efforts) can reduce or enhance women's well-being (Schooler et al. 1983; Bird & Ross 1993; Kahn 1991; Kibria et al. 1990; Lennon 1994). Although all of these dimensions of work can impact women's psychological well-being, there is emerging consensus that autonomy, time pressures, physically demanding work, and intrinsic rewards are work conditions that manifest the strongest effects on women's psychological well-being (Lennon 1994; Karasek & Theorell 1990; Pugliesi 1995).

A growing body of research finds that control over work is an important job condition that is central to healthy psychological functioning. Autonomy, the opportunity to use discretion in one's work activity (Lennon 1994), is one dimension of control that is frequently associated with lower levels of psychological distress. For example, Lennon and Rosenfield (1992) report that employed married women with high job autonomy have fewer symptoms of distress than housewives and those employed women with little job autonomy, although subjective autonomy in housework was not actually evaluated. Some researchers, however, propose that housework offers greater autonomy over paid work (Oakley 1974; Bird & Ross 1993; Lennon 1994; Bird 1999). Housework gives homemakers the opportunity to organize activities and set their own schedules (Kibria et al. 1990), which can reduce psychological distress. This research implies that housework is not burdensome to all women because it offers a certain degree of freedom. Those women who evaluate the conditions of housework as providing them with autonomy may have a psychological advantage. In sum, there is evidence that autonomy is an important work condition associated with lower symptoms of distress for both employed women and homemakers, but that homemakers may have an advantage over their working counterparts.

The literature indicates that employed African American women are concentrated in jobs where they have very little autonomy (e.g., St. Jean & Feagin 1998; McGuire & Reskin 1993; Riley & Keith, forthcoming), but only one study has focused on the association between autonomy and psychological well-being among African American women. In examining this relationship, Riley and Keith (forthcoming) found that employed African American women with lower levels of job autonomy are less satisfied with their lives. However, they do not examine the relationship between autonomy and symptoms of distress nor do they compare employed African American women to homemakers as is done in the present study. Brown and Gary (1988), comparing the depressive symptoms of African American homemakers to African American employed women, found no significant difference in depression levels of the two groups. However, their research did not include measures of autonomy or

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any other work conditions. Thus, the extent to which these two groups of Black women differ in levels of autonomy and its impact on psychological well-being remains unexplored.

Time and physical demands are two other important aspects of work and housework that are frequently found to influence women's psychological well-being. Rosenfield (1989) argues that excessive work demands along with low levels of control over the work process affect employed women's psychological well-being by decreasing their sense of control over their lives. Similarly, other research found that time pressure, physically demanding jobs, and jobs with high demands but little control also lead to higher levels of distress among employed women (Karasek & Theorell 1990; Pugliesi 1995). Comparing full-time homemakers with employed women, Lennon (1994) found that housework is more physically demanding, whereas paid work involves more time pressures. Moreover, she found that work requiring physical effort was associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms. Given that African American women are overrepresented in blue-collar occupations, we expect employed women to rate their work as more physically demanding and pressured in terms of time than women who do not work outside the home.

Symbolic aspects of work also differ for employed women and homemakers. Bird and Ross (1993) report that recognition of the quality of work is lower among houseworkers than among the employed. The probability of being thanked for work, on the other hand, appears to be equal for houseworkers and paid workers. In this study, we assess the impact of feeling appreciated on African American women's psychological well-being. Since paid work and housework may be an important part of women's self-identities (Bird & Ross 1993; Lennon & Rosenfield 1992; Lopata 1971; Oakley 1974), feeling appreciated is one dimension of work that can clearly shape feelings of self-worth and affect psychological well-being. In addition, feeling appreciated may serve as a symbolic dimension of work that can assist in diminishing the harmful effects of other work conditions for both women who work for pay and those who do not.

## **Methods**

### **Data**

The data for this investigation come from Wave I of the American Changing Lives (ACL) Survey, a nationwide probability sample of the non-institutionalized population residing in the coterminous United States. Using face-to-face interviews, a total of 3,617 respondents were interviewed for an overall response rate of 67 percent. In the ACL, African Americans under age 59 and Whites aged 60 and older were sampled at twice the rate of Whites under age 59. In addition, African Americans age 60 and

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over were sampled at four times the rate of non-elderly Whites. There are a total of 1,174 African American respondents in the ACL. In our study, we focused on African American women (N=778) and weighted the data to account for the over-sampling of older women. Similar to other investigations comparing housework and paid work (e.g., Lennon 1994), we restricted the analyses to younger and midlife women who either were employed and worked 20 hours or more a week for pay or women who were full-time homemakers. The final sample consisted of 348 employed women and 97 full-time homemakers.

## Measures

Psychological Distress is measured using 11 items derived from the Center for Epidemiologic Studies-Depression (CES-D) Scale (Radloff 1977). The items were: (1) I felt depressed, (2) I felt that everything I did was an effort, (3) my sleep was restless, (4) I felt lonely, (5) people were unfriendly, (6) I did not feel like eating, (7) I was full of energy, (8) I felt sad, (9) I felt that people disliked me, (10) I could not get going, and (11) I felt that people cared about me. Responses were: (1) hardly ever, (2) some of the time, and (3) most of the time, with higher scores meaning greater depressive symptoms.

Work Conditions and Symbolic Rewards. Four dimensions of work were used in these analyses: autonomy, time demands, physical demands, and appreciation. These constructs are based on women's subjective evaluations rather than on objective characteristics of their jobs and housework. Items were identical in wording except that for homemakers they referred to housework and for employed women they referred to their job. Responses to items measuring each of the four constructs were: (1) strongly agree, (2) somewhat agree, (3) somewhat disagree, and (4) strongly disagree. *Autonomy* was assessed by adding the responses to three items: (1) I have little chance to decide how to do my work, (2) I get to do a variety of things in my work, and (3) I have a lot to say about my work. The *Time Demands* measure was based on two items: (1) I am free from conflicting demands that others make and (2) I have enough time to do my work. *Physical Demands* was measured by adding three items: (1) my work requires working very fast, (2) my work requires physical effort, and (3) my work requires continuous physical activity. *Appreciation* was measured with a single-item indicator: I am not appreciated for the work (housework) I do. High scores indicated high autonomy and high levels of time and physical demands and greater appreciation.

Control Variables. Similar to previous studies, the analyses controlled for demographic and family variables that differentiate homemakers and employed women or correlate with work conditions or depressive symptoms (Lennon 1994). Control variables included age, marital status, education, family income and the number of chil-

dren residing in the household under the age of eighteen. *Age* was measured in years. *Marital status* was coded 1 for married and 0 for unmarried. *Education* was measured by the years of schooling completed ranging from 0 to 17. *Family Income* represents the midpoint of 10 income categories ranging from \$2,500 to \$110,000. The *Number of Children* residing in the household was measured by the number of respondent's own children living at home.

## Results

### Descriptive Results

Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for homemakers and employed women. The t-test is used to assess statistically significant differences between the two groups. The figures indicate that homemakers and employed women do not differ significantly on symptoms of distress. Women in this study range in age from 24 to 59. There are no differences in the age distribution, with the average age of women being 40. These two groups of women do not differ significantly in terms of marital status; 49 percent of homemakers and 51 percent of employed women are married. Homemakers have about 2.67 years less education than employed women (10.17 vs. 12.84). Family income for homemakers averaged \$10,097 in the year before the survey, but \$27,324 for employed women. Homemakers have more children on average than employed women; 1.79 compared to 1.18.

Homemakers and employed women differed significantly on all three measures of

**Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Variables Used in the Analyses by Employment Status**

	Homemakers (N=97)		Employed (348)		t-statistic <sup>1</sup>
	Mean	s.d.	Mean	s.d.	
Distress	17.36	4.38	16.63	4.36	1.47
Age	40.09	11.9	39.13	8.58	.74
Married	.49	.50	.51	.50	.40
Education	10.17	2.29	12.84	2.64	8.41***
Family Income	10.10	9.99	27.32	18.11	12.27***
# Children <18	1.79	1.58	1.18	1.24	3.50***
Autonomy	10.29	1.68	9.33	2.04	4.75***
Physical Demands	6.45	2.51	8.23	2.43	6.21***
Time Demands	3.00	1.22	4.21	1.49	8.23***
Appreciated	2.87	.98	1.08	.98	.47

<sup>1</sup>2-tailed significance tests with unequal variance assumed.

\* p ≤ .05                      \*\* p ≤ .01                      \*\*\* p ≤ .001

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work conditions. Among both homemakers and employed women, job autonomy was relatively high, with mean scores being 10.29 and 9.33 respectively, on a scale from three to twelve. However, the mean score is nearly one point higher for homemakers.

As predicted, employed women reported greater physical and time demands. Homemakers scored at the scale midpoint on physical demands (averaging 6.45), whereas employed women fell at the higher end of the distribution (averaging 8.23), with scale scores ranging from three to twelve. Both homemakers (3.00) and employed women (4.21) scored at or below the scale midpoint on time demands (scores ranging from 2-8), suggesting that neither group experiences excessive time pressures in their work activity.

Homemakers felt greater appreciation for the work they do (2.87) compared to employed women (1.08), although these scores do not differ significantly. In sum, housework as a full-time activity was reported to be more autonomous, appreciated more, less physically demanding, and involved less time pressure than paid work. Next we addressed the consequences of these differences for well-being. First, we focused on the consequences of working conditions for both married and unmarried African American women. Then, consistent with previous research, we focused only on married women.

### **Work Conditions and Psychological Distress among Married and Unmarried Women**

To address the relation of work conditions to well-being, we present results from hierarchical multivariate regression analyses whereby distress is regressed on work status, work conditions, and appreciation with controls for sociodemographic characteristics. This procedure permitted us to evaluate differences in psychological well-being among homemakers and paid workers while considering the effects of sociodemographic, work conditions, and appreciation.

Model 1 in Table 2 shows the zero order association between work status and psychological distress. Homemakers were more likely to be depressed, but the relationship is not significant. When the sociodemographic variables were added in Model 2, the effect of work status on distress was reduced, but was not significant. Results indicate that married and highly educated women were less distressed than unmarried and less educated women. Age had a marginally significant negative association with distress, whereas number of children had a marginally significant positive association with distress.

Model 3 examined the impact of work status on distress while controlling for work

**Table 2. Regression Analyses of the Effects of Work and Housework Conditions on Distress Among African American Women.**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Homemaker	.071 (.750)	-.001 (-.003)	.175*** (1.85)	.121* (1.29)
Age		-.108+ (-.005)		-.035 (-.002)
Married		-.164** (-1.436)		-.175*** (-1.532)
Education		-.214*** (-.323)		-.162** (-.246)
Family Income		.070 (.001)		.080 (.002)
# Children <18		.099+ (.323)		.087+ (.282)
Autonomy			-.201*** (-.439)	-.178*** (-.389)
Time Demands			.068 (.196)	.084+ (.243)
Physical Demands			.163*** (.280)	.143** (.246)
Appreciated			-.186*** (-.772)	-.180*** (-.746)
Constant	16.64	22.65	19.86	23.11
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	<.01	.06	.15	.18
+ p ≤ .10	* p ≤ .05	** p ≤ .01	*** p ≤ .001	

conditions (i.e., autonomy, time demands, physical demands) and appreciation. Compared to Model 1, the effect of work status was highly significant ( $\beta = .175$ ;  $p \leq .001$ ), indicating that homemakers' symptoms of distress exceed those of employed women when differences in the positive and negative aspects of paid and unpaid employment are considered. As expected, having autonomy and feeling appreciated decreased distress, whereas physical demands increased distress. Time demands did not have a significant effect on distress.

Model 4 shows the simultaneous effects of work status, work conditions, and sociodemographic factors on distress. The effect of work status remained significant although its impact is reduced (from .175 to .121). Similarly, the effects of autonomy,



physical demands, and feeling appreciated were reduced but remain significant. With these controls, the effect of time demands was marginally significant (beta = .084;  $p \leq .10$ ). Overall, these findings indicate that without the advantages of greater autonomy, fewer physical demands, higher levels of appreciation and, to some degree, time pressures, African American homemakers would be significantly more distressed than their employed counterparts.

### Work Conditions and Psychological Distress among Married Women

Table 3 presents the effects of work status, sociodemographic characteristics, work conditions, and appreciation on psychological distress among married African American women. Model 1 shows that, similar to results for married and unmarried women combined, housewives and employed wives did not differ significantly on symptoms of distress. This relationship remained insignificant when age, education, family

**Table 3. Regression Analyses of the Effects of Work and Housework Conditions on Distress Among Married African American Women.**

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
Homemaker	.001 (.004)	-.019 (-.184)	.154* (1.52)	.187* (1.83)
Age		-.092 (-.004)		.055 (.002)
Education		-.186* (-.282)		-.137+ (-.211)
Family Income		.104 (.002)		.185* (.004)
# Children <18		.060 .181		.113 (.002)
Autonomy			.154*** (.199)	-.293*** (-.589)
Time Demands			.070 (.199)	.038 (.109)
Physical Demands			.152* (.240)	.133+ (.210)
Appreciated			-.188*** (-.735)	-.204** (-.801)
Constant	16.19	20.34	16.15	21.60
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	<.01	.01	.16	.17

+  $p \leq .10$  \*  $p \leq .05$  \*\*  $p \leq .01$  \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$

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income and number of children were introduced into Model 2. Again, high levels of education were significantly associated with reduced distress.

The effect of work status on distress was significant when work conditions and appreciation were controlled for in Model 3. As in the analyses for all women, homemakers were more distressed than employed wives when controlling for these variables. The results remained essentially the same for physical demands and appreciation. Surprisingly, autonomy was associated with higher levels of distress in Model 3. This finding is puzzling, but may result because there was no control for sociodemographic variables. Model 4 considered the simultaneous effects for all variables. The effect of work status remained positive and increased (from .154 to .187), indicating that homemaking wives' symptoms of distress significantly exceeded those of employed wives when controlling for differences in job conditions and sociodemographic variables. Physical demands were only marginally significant in Model 4. Both autonomy and feeling appreciated were associated with lower levels of distress.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

This investigation examined the influence of work and housework conditions on African American women's mental health. Bivariate results indicated that the work conditions associated with housework and paid work differed significantly. Housework as a full-time activity was reported to be more autonomous, more appreciated, less physically demanding, and involved fewer time pressures than paid work.

As a consequence of homemakers' advantageous working conditions, homemakers and employed women did not appear to differ in levels of psychological distress. This finding is evident when the relationship between work status and depressive symptoms was examined in the multivariate analyses. The bivariate relationship between work status and depressive symptoms was not statistically significant. However, when work conditions were taken into consideration, homemakers were considerably more distressed than their working counterparts. In other words, if African American homemakers were subjected to the same levels of autonomy, physical demands, and lower levels of appreciation, and to a lesser extent, time pressures, their depressive symptoms would exceed those of working women. Conversely, if employed women experienced the same advantages in work conditions as homemakers, working women would report significantly fewer depressive symptoms. Thus, among African American women, homemakers appear to enjoy the same level of emotional well-being as employed women, but only because working inside the home offers more beneficial job conditions than working outside the home. Another way to view our findings is that employed Black women are holding their own psychologically, despite poor working conditions.

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The findings presented in this study are consistent with those of Lennon (1994) who also found that when favorable work conditions were controlled for homemakers, they reported higher levels of depressive symptoms. Lennon, however, included several work conditions not available to us—responsibility for things outside one’s control, interruptions, and the extent to which housework or work was routine. It is notable that for two of these, routinization and interruptions, employed women were more advantaged than homemakers. It is likely that had we included these additional indicators, homemakers would have had even higher levels of psychological distress. Overall, it appears that when it comes to work conditions and psychological distress, the process works similarly for African American women and women in the general population.

It is evident from this investigation that the subjective conditions of paid work and housework are important for African American women’s well-being. However, a number of issues remain unexplored and suggest topics for future research. When comparing homemakers to employed women, we do not make distinctions between employed women on such characteristics as part-time vs. full-time employment and occupational prestige. Research suggests that not only are white collar and blue collar workers subjected to different types of work conditions, there are significant variations within occupations classified as white collar. For example, sales-clerical occupations are classified as white collar, yet many of the work conditions associated with these occupations are similar to those of blue collar work (e.g., low autonomy and greater time pressures). These distinctions also be important when comparing working women and homemakers. Research that incorporates these elements will permit a more refined analysis of the consequences of work for African American women and other women’s psychological well-being.

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