Career Counseling with Working Mothers

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Abstract
The working mother is faced with complex issues as she struggles to balance the demands of work and family. This review found a number of variables in the family and workplace that affect the satisfaction and psychological well-being of working mothers. Within the family, the level of spousal support and the couple’s attitudes towards sex roles were highly influential. Within the workplace, the level of supervisory support and length of maternity leave were among the most significant indicators of satisfaction. Counselors need to realize the complexity of issues facing working women today, and must understand that work and family must be dealt with jointly.
Issues Involved in Counseling Working Mothers

The days of the typical American family consisting of an employed father and a homemaker mother raising the children are gone. According to 1993 Department of Labor statistics, 67% of women with children under 18, and 55% of women with children under 3 are employed (cited in Hyde, Klein, Essex, & Clark, 1995).

This change in family employment patterns has not engendered a similar change in family housework and caregiving patterns. In her presentation at the American Psychological Association’s 1996 convention, Nolen-Hoeksema reported that women spend an average of 74 hours a week in work, housework, and caregiving activities, while men average only 56 hours a week in those same tasks (Azar, 1996).

How does involvement in multiple roles affect working mothers? The answer appears to be “It depends.” The role accumulation hypothesis of employment satisfaction posits that the accumulation of social roles results in greater satisfaction with life and with psychological health (Sieber, 1974). Conversely, the role stress hypothesis states that the accumulation of social roles is positively related to dissatisfaction with life and psychological distress (Coser & Rokoff, 1971). Recent research on working mothers has found support for each hypothesis (e.g., Barnett & Baruch, 1985; Facione, 1994; Houston, Cates, & Kelly, 1992; Rankin, 1993). Because of the equivocal findings of these contradictory hypotheses, they are of questionable relevance to many women, and provide little assistance to career counselors working with this population.

Career counseling for working mothers calls for theories and strategies that better reflect the complexity of issues facing the group. Shehan (1984) calls for a less simplistic viewpoint, stating that at issue is not just work versus family roles, but rather the costs and benefits of various types of employment and intimate relationships.

Neither the role stress nor the role accumulation theories take into account the differing values society places on various roles (Barnett & Baruch, 1985). The social roles of wife and mother are typically judged to be low in occupational prestige, as are the types of jobs (e.g., secretary, teacher, nurse) most often filled by women.
McBride (1991) states that finding one theory that would integrate what is known about working mothers is difficult because of the number of variables involved. Organizational policies, family/spouse support, quality and availability of childcare, prestige, and compensation are all mediating factors that must be considered. Furthermore, while some of the traditional sex-role behaviors may have changed, traditional attitudes and beliefs may still lag behind. McBride asserts that counselors must investigate the different meanings individuals attach to work and family domains.

Social change never happens smoothly and evenly -- it comes in fits and starts. And that is how it is is for working mothers today: they are teetering on the cusp of change, at a time when economic pressures and occupational opportunities have increased but when marital and organizational systems have not kept pace. According to the data of Nolen-Hoeksema (Azer, 1996), this creates an 18 hour a week gap that women must fill.

**Family issues**

These complicated issues of home/work role conflict can arise when husbands and wives find that their acquired roles are inconsistent with their acculturated roles. At such times, wives may feel guilty about putting their children in daycare, or husbands may feel less masculine when performing household or caregiving tasks (Wiersma, 1994).

Working women who are not comfortable in their acquired (employed) role have been found less likely to return to work after their children are born. In their study of the psychosocial variables that affect the career patterns of women with young children, Morgan and Hock (1984) found that women’s beliefs about the necessity of young children being cared for exclusively by their mothers was inversely related to the women’s level of employment after one, three, and six years postpartum.

Discrepant patterns of acceptance of non-traditional roles for mothers were neatly demonstrated in a study conducted by Yogev and Brett (1985) on the attitudes of husbands and wives in dual-earner and single-earner (male earner) marriages. Among their findings were that dual-earner men are more satisfied when they feel they are doing their fair share of housework
and childcare and when they feel their wives are doing more than their fair share. Yo
gev and Brett postulate that these men have not quite given up their notions of the ideal, tradi
tional wife and mother. Interestingly, dual-earner women appear to have more fully embraced their acquired roles: they were most satisfied when they felt that they and their husbands did their fair shares.

This finding is consistent with Pleck’s (1985) suggestion that working women’s feelings of role overload stem less from physical exhaustion than from their sense that their husband is not contributing his fair share. According to Pleck, women are dissatisfied when they feel their husbands are doing too little rather than because they feel that they themselves are doing too much.

Derry and Gallant (1993) similarly report that working mothers’ perceptions of inequality in the couple’s division of household labor is an accurate predictor of marital distress. Women who feel their husbands are not doing their fair share of childcare and housework are more distressed, regardless of the husband’s actual behavior.

If working mothers are distressed when they perceive that their husbands are not fair helpers, they are also most satisfied when they perceive that their husbands are available for assistance or back-up when needed, regardless of the couple’s actual division of childcare. Ozer (1995) studied the ways in which childcare responsibility and self-efficacy in managing multiple roles affected professional women’s psychological well-being and distress one month after the end of their first maternity leave. She found that a working mother’s confidence in her capability to enlist the help of her husband for childcare was the most consistent predictor of well-being.

Husbands’ positive attitudes towards their wives’ work is a significant indicator of the wives’ work-force participation, and of a positive marital relationship (Stoltz-Loike, 1992). In fact, in her study of “the second shift,” Hochschild (1989) reported that spousal support for their wives’ employment was of vital importance to women’s subjective work experience.

Workplace issues

Workplace issues begin during pregnancy, before the woman has even officially become
a mother. In their study of attitudes toward pregnant women, Halpert, Wilson, and Hickman (1993), found that men were more likely than women to view pregnant coworkers as emotional and irrational. They were more likely to feel that women should choose family over career and that businesses should be under no obligation to accommodate the needs of pregnant employees, and rated pregnant employees consistently lower than non-pregnant employees when they were observed performing the same tasks. According to Derry and Gallant (1993), women feel compelled to deny physical problems such as fatigue during pregnancy in order to prove that they can function on the job equally with men, and that their commitment to work will not be compromised by maternity.

How long a woman takes off for maternity leave is also a significant factor. According to Hyde, Klein, Essex, and Clark (1995), women who viewed their job as unrewarding and who took a short leave (six weeks) showed the highest levels of depression. The relationship between poor work rewards and taking shorter leaves was associated with both depression and anger.

Upon return from maternity leave, new mothers find that they are working in organizations that treat childbirth as a temporary interruption, expecting employees to return to normal with maternity no longer an issue (Derry & Gallant, 1993). Maternity within the workplace is viewed as an emotional state that must be kept from interfering with work. This assumption that the impact of maternity on the workplace will be limited to the inconvenience of maternity leave is symptomatic of the lack of cultural acknowledgment that parenthood is an important and permanent transition in adult development.

The level of support a working mother receives from her supervisor was found to be a significant factor associated with multiple effects (Houston et al., 1992). More supervisor support resulted in less job-related tension and less daily stress and tension in general. Additionally, supervisor support tended to be associated with marital happiness and marital adjustment.

Issues and concerns between family and work must cease to be treated only as personal problems within the workplace. Structural change is required (McBride, 1991). Most jobs are
not structured to accommodate parents. Part-time employment is difficult to find and the part-time worker is often stereotypically assumed to have lower job commitment (Derry & Gallant, 1993). Flextime, job sharing, parental leave and lenient sick leave are rare (McBride, 1991). Quality childcare that is easily available and affordable is necessary.

Furthermore, according to McBride (1991), the United States has left intact outdated, male-defined standards of achievement which expect workers to be free of home responsibilities or at least to act as if that were the case. For fundamental change to take place in this arena, a new set of values has to take hold which accepts collective responsibility for the development of the next generation (as opposed to glorifying rugged individualism), and recognizes that family needs cannot be dismissed as merely a “woman’s problem.”

**Issues in Counseling**

Counselors must recognize the complexity of the issues facing working mothers today, and understand that work and family have to be dealt with jointly. The question is not whether a woman should work, but rather how we can move these issues from being women’s problems to being family, organizational and societal challenges. It’s not about how women should change, but how traditional roles, values, and expectations no longer meet the needs and behaviors of both men and women.

Derry and Gallant (1993) propose a number of strategies for counselors. The first (and most critical) objective for counselors is to discover their own bias. Counselors can unwittingly perpetuate stereotypes (e.g., maternity is an emotional role, or nurturing means putting the child before one’s self). Clinicians also have a history of making “mother-blaming” assumptions (e.g., pathology is the result of a deficit on the mother’s part). Counselors must be aware of the reality of institutional constraints and must help women make decisions within them. Similarly, they must be aware of the impact of traditional sex roles on women and their families.

Clinicians need to provide a sense of balance by calling attention to the positive, rather than just the negative, aspects of an experience (Derry & Gallant, 1993). For instance, much has been written about postpartum depression, but not enough about postpartum joy. Additionally,
working can cause stress in new mothers, but it can also provide a valuable sense of competency and self-esteem. And finally, counselors need to take the perspective that maternity is a stage of adult development involving both the development of a parental self-concept and personal growth.

Group counseling is an approach worthy of consideration. In a pilot study to promote positive well-being in employed mothers through participation in a new mother’s support group, Collins, Tiedje, and Stommel (1992) found that over time, marital satisfaction declined in the control group and increased significantly in the intervention group. This difference occurred in the presence of similar levels of husband participation in childcare between the two groups at both the two and twelve month measurements.

Other issues for counselors to explore include values clarification, long range career planning, and sequential career and family planning (Stolz-Loike, 1992). Women need guidance in developing practical strategies for garnering support from their spouses for household chores. And finally, traditional measures such as assisting mothers in developing proficiency in time management, communication skills, decision making, and role expectation negotiation (Rankin, 1993), as well as stress management (McBride, 1991), are useful in helping women cope.

**Areas for Further Research**

All of the research cited above used samples of middle-class, white, married women. What of working single mothers and the issues they face? Given consistent findings regarding the importance of marital support, how does the complete lack of such support affect single mothers? More research is also needed on working mothers from lower income levels. How are they managing the additional stress of making ends meet? And finally, more research is needed on women from different cultures. How are they handling the potential double discrimination in the workplace, or the additional weight of sex-role expectations inherent in their own culture’s values?

The influences affecting working mothers are many and complex. Counselors must be cautious not to add to their burdens by unwittingly perpetuating traditional sex-role expectations.
or by failing to acknowledge the existence of numerous institutional constraints. Counselors
must recognize the complicated family and workplace challenges facing women today, and
provide realistic and effective guidance and support.
Reference


