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Parenting Style Trumps Work Role in Life Satisfaction of Midlife Women

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Our study investigated the effects of work role and parenting style on life satisfaction in midlife mothers. 432 mothers of college-aged children completed the Parental Authority Questionnaire (Buri, 1991) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons, Larson & Griffin, 1985). They also reported their history of work, if any, outside of the home. Work role was found to be nonsignificant in relation to midlife mothers' life satisfaction, whereas an authoritative parenting style was significantly correlated to this same variable. Employed mothers did report being more stressed, especially when their children were younger, but again maternal work role was not predictive of these women's life satisfaction in midlife.

Keywords: work role stress, life satisfaction, authoritative parenting, midlife mothers

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Introduction

Many midlife parents attempt to balance both parenting and work roles, often with divisions of time and labor that are different from those of their own parents. Midlife mothers, in particular, are likely to report role strain as they make choices related to career paths, whether they choose to be at home, work outside the home, or have nontraditional or interrupted work, depending on other parenting demands (Minter & Samuels, 1998; Huang et al., 2007).

This study examined maternal work role and parenting style in relation to the life satisfaction of midlife mothers. The purpose of the study was to investigate whether maternal work patterns would be significantly related to midlife life satisfaction. In addition, we hypothesized that adopting an authoritative parenting style would be beneficial for mothers in terms of their self-reported life satisfaction.

Maternal Role Stress and Life Satisfaction

In recent decades, mothers working outside of the home have reported both beneficial and detrimental consequences of managing multiple roles. The variability in women's patterns of employment as well as confounds such as marital satisfaction, income, and parental relationships make broad generalizations difficult (Huang et al., 2007; Perrone, Webb, & Jackson, 2007). However, research has identified a few consistent findings regarding women's work roles and their well-being at midlife.

One finding is that life satisfaction in midlife employed mothers is complexly moderated. Walters and McKenry (1985) found that the life satisfaction of rural employed mothers was impacted by more job-related variables than was the life satisfaction of urban employed mothers. Helson, Elliott, & Leigh (1990) reported that among privileged midlife women, marital satisfaction predicted contentment. Interestingly, Helson, Elliott, and Leigh (1990) found no significant difference in role overload or conflict among their subjects with varying work roles, but more recently several studies have examined role stress in employed mothers.

Martire, Stephens, and Townsend (2000) found that the centrality of a particular role for a woman (e.g., wife, mother, worker) influenced the extent to which role-related stress impacted life satisfaction and depression. The clearest main effects were found for life satisfaction, with more central roles as either mother or employee predicting more life satisfaction in midlife women. However, Huang et al.'s (2007) longitudinal study of 500 midlife women found that among the nine different career patterns identified, those women in the "family building" (at-home) pattern reported higher levels of health than did mothers employed outside the home, a finding the authors related to role stress. Huang et al. (2007) found no significant differences in job satisfaction or life satisfaction between the nine groups of women.

Some studies do suggest life satisfaction is associated with lower levels of role stress (Crohan et al., 1989; Martire, Stephens, & Townsend, 2000; Sandvik, Diener, & Seidlitz, 1993; Van Aken et al., 2006). Still, Perrone, Webb, and Jackson (2007) found that both satisfaction with work and satisfaction with marriage contributed strongly to life satisfaction. There is no clear consensus on the interrelationships between work role or work satisfaction and life satisfaction in midlife employed mothers.

Maternal Parenting Style

Four decades of research on authoritative parenting support its benefit for children and adolescents. An authoritative parenting style, as opposed to authoritarian or permissive styles, combines high control and positive encouragement, and has been correlated with competent, responsible, and independent behavior in girls and to a lesser extent in boys (Baumrind, 1971; Ferrari, 1993; Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991; Spera 2005). Longitudinal studies suggest daughters raised authoritatively also report greater self-efficacy and life satisfaction as young adults (Flouri, 2004). An authoritarian parenting style, characterized as high in control but less warm and more detached, was associated with less independence in girls and less social responsibility in boys; permissive parenting, involving low-to-moderate control with some warmth, was associated with less competence in boys and less assertiveness in girls (Baumrind, 1971).

But what about the effects on mothers? There is less information, although an authoritative parenting style has shown some association with life satisfaction in parents as well as their children (Jackson, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Pancer, 2005; Milevsky, Schlecter, Netter, & Keehn, 2007). Pratt, Danso, Arnold, Norris, and Filyer (2001) reported that education level was interrelated with mothers' work choices and parenting practices, specifically an authoritative disciplinary style. This investigation sought to clarify the impact of authoritative parenting on midlife mothers.

Satisfaction With Life

Satisfaction with life (SWL) is a component of the complex, multifaceted concept of subjective well being. SWL is distinguished as a cognitive-judgmental measure, involving a self-appraisal of one's global quality of life, based on personal criteria (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985). This cognitive process has been shown to be distinct from and more stable than more affective aspects of self-reported well-being (Diener et al., 1985; Pavot & Diener, 2004). A number of studies have concluded that SWL is a single cognitive factor (Diener et al., 1985; Pavot & Diener, 1993; Sandvik, Diener, & Seidlitz, 1993). Even so, this unitary factor has demonstrated relevance for important life benefits such as marital satisfaction, spiritual well-being, social and emotional adjustment, and success at work (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Holohan, Holohan, & Wonacott, 1999; Pavot & Diener, 2004; Perrone, Webb, Wright, Jackson, & Ksiazak, 2006; Van Aken et al, 2006).

The criteria by which someone appraises quality of life are necessarily unique to the individual (Sandvik, Diener, & Seidlitz, 1993). And beyond individual differences, gender and cultural differences are apparent: e.g. middle class, middle aged women tend to associate income more than education with SWL (Crohan, Antonucci, Adelman & Coleman, 1989; Degges-White & Myers, 2006) while SWL and education were actually negatively correlated among African-American adults in a study by Broman (1988b). Pavot and Diener (2004) suggest cross-cultural differences in goals and perceptual biases also contribute to an individual's self-appraisal of life satisfaction.

Still, despite intervening factors as gender, race, and age, some patterns emerge among the correlates of SWL. SWL tends to be related to lower levels of unemployment and higher levels of income (Crohan et al., 1989; Degges-White & Meyer, 2006; Diener & Seligman, 2004; Perrone, Webb, & Jackson, 2007); lower levels of divorce and higher levels

of marital satisfaction (Freudiger, 1983; Pavot & Diener, 2004; Perrone, Webb, Wright, Jackson, & Ksiazak, 2006); and better utilization of personal and social resources when coping with challenges to health, income, and aging (Diener & Seligman, 2004; Pavot & Diener, 2004; Sandvik, Diener, & Seidlitz, 1993; Van Aken et al., 2006).

Method

Participants

The research participants were 432 mothers of undergraduate students from an upper Midwest college who completed a survey measuring work roles, parenting style, life satisfaction and stress during their child's preschool, middle school, high school, and college years. The sample was 96% Caucasian with a mean age of 49.6 ($SD=5.58$).

Materials and Procedures

Included were the Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ; Buri, 1991) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larson, & Griffin, 1985).

Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ): Based on Baumrind's (1971) classification of parenting styles, Buri's (1991) PAQ consists of two sets of thirty items per parent, based on subjects' perceptions of their parents' authority. Out of an original pool of 48 items, 36 were validated and 30 chosen: ten each for authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parenting behaviors and attitudes (Buri, Louiselle, Misukanis, & Mueller, 1988). Thus, each parent receives three scores from their child. Respondents rate their agreement on a five-point scale to such items as: "As I was growing up my father/mother allowed me to decide most things for myself without a lot of direction from him/her." Test-retest reliabilities were reported ranging from $r = .77$ (father's permissiveness) to $r = .92$ (father's authoritarianism). Cronbach's coefficient alpha values were strong given the brevity of the scales, with a reported range of .74 (father's permissiveness) to .88 (father's authoritarianism) (Buri et al., 1988).

The PAQ in our study was revised for the mothers so that they would be answering questions about their own parenting style. Using the same five-point scale, mothers responded to statements such as, "I have always encouraged verbal give-and-take whenever my child has felt that family rules and restrictions were unreasonable."

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS): The SWLS is a brief measure of satisfaction with one's life as a whole (Diener, Emmons, Larson & Griffin, 1985). Out of an original pool of 48 items, initial analyses identified three underlying factors: life satisfaction, positive affect, and negative affect (Pavot & Diener, 1993). Ten items with loadings of .60 or better on the cognitive life satisfaction factor were further reduced to five while maintaining acceptable alpha reliability (Pavot & Diener, 1993). Respondents note their agreement on a 7-point Likert-type rating scale to items such as, "The conditions of my life are excellent." Total scores range from five to 35, with totals below twenty hypothesized to reflect dissatisfaction and scores above twenty reflecting life satisfaction (Pavot & Diener, 1993). Two month test-retest reliability is reported as $r=.87$, and the SWLS shows moderate levels of convergent validity with eleven other measures of life satisfaction, plus discriminant validity with the Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Scale and several measures of emotional well-being such as the Beck Depression Inventory (Diener et al., 1985; Pavot & Diener, 1993; Perrone,

Webb, & Jackson, 2007).

Work Role and Stress Questions: A question on work role was included in the survey. Mothers were asked what their work roles were when the child was in preschool, grammar and middle school, high school, plus their current work role. Response choices were: 1=stayed at home, 2=worked at home for income, 3=limited part-time outside of home – 1-19 hours/week, 4=regular part-time outside of home – 20-39 hours/week, and 5=full-time outside of home – 40+/week. Also included was a question on how stressed the mother was during the child’s preschool, grammar and middle school, high school periods, and how stressed she was currently. Response choices were 1=not particularly stressed or worried, 2=fairly stressed or worried, and 3=significantly stressed or worried.

Procedure

Students in psychology classes were asked to provide the residential addresses of their mothers, knowing that a survey would be mailed and, if returned, would result in extra credit for the student. Surveys were mailed to the mothers with a cover letter, consent form, and a stamped envelope addressed to the university. Each survey was given a subject number corresponding to each mother so that when surveys were returned, we could cross that address off the list and assign extra credit to the son or daughter. Reminder postcards were sent out a couple of weeks after the initial mailing to increase the response rate. Surveys were mailed to 529 mothers: 432 mothers returned them, a response rate 81.6%. Identifying lists were destroyed upon conclusion of the data collection and all responses were kept anonymous and confidential. Students were given other options for extra credit if they chose not to opt for this opportunity.

Results

Reliabilities of Scales and Correlations for the Parental Authority Subscales

Reliabilities of the scales included in the survey were acceptable. For the mothers’ Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ), Cronbach’s alpha was .811 for the authoritarian style, .718 for the authoritative style, and .637 for the permissive style. Cronbach’s alpha was .883 for the Satisfaction with Life Scale. In addition the subscales of the PAQ were all negatively correlated, indicating that each subscale was distinct from the other two (see Table 1).

Table 1: *Correlations between Mothers’ Self-report of Authoritarian, Authoritative, and Permissive*

Parenting Style	
Permissive – Authoritarian	-.167**
Authoritarian – Authoritative	-.186**
Permissive – Authoritative	-.063**

** $p < .01$

Work Role and Life Satisfaction

Table 2 illustrates the percentage of mothers in each of the various work roles for the four time periods included in the study. Full-time work outside the home increased with age of the child, while staying at home decreased.

Table 2: Frequency (%) of Mothers' Work Roles During the Time

Periods	Stay-at-home	Part-time 20-39 hrs	Part-time 1-19 hrs	Work at home	Full-time
Preschool	38.42	10.50	16.95	7.40	26.73
Middle school	18.61	22.20	19.33	6.21	33.65
High school	11.69	25.30	13.37	4.06	45.58
Current	11.69	23.39	7.88	5.25	51.79

ANOVA analysis of work role status on mothers' current life satisfaction was not significant for any of the four time periods.

Work Role and Stress

ANOVA analyses did reveal significant differences in mothers' stress level by work role during the various stages of the children's upbringing. For the preschool years ($F(4,416) = 27.951, p < .001, \eta^2 = .268$), Tukey post-hoc analysis indicated that mothers working limited part-time outside of the home ($p < .001$), regular part-time outside of the home ($p < .001$), and full-time outside of the home ($p < .001$) reported higher levels of stress than at-home mothers. For the middle school years ($F(4,416) = 19.481, p < .001, \eta^2 = .187$), Tukey post-hoc analysis indicated that mothers working regular part-time outside of the home ($p < .001$), and full-time outside of the home ($p < .001$) reported higher levels of stress than at-home mothers. For the high school years, ($F(4,415) = 7.726, p < .001, \eta^2 = .074$) Tukey post-hoc analysis indicated that mothers working full-time outside of the home ($p < .005$) reported higher levels of stress than at-home mothers. There were no significant differences for current work situation and stress.

Competitive Test of Work Role and Parenting

A stepwise multiple regression was conducted to test competitively the impact of parenting style and work role. The dependent measure was life satisfaction. The independent variables were authoritarian, authoritative, and permissive parenting styles, plus four dummy coded variables corresponding to working at home for income, limited part-time work outside the home, regular part-time work outside the home, and full-time

work outside the home. Staying at home, not working for income was the default category for the dummy coded variable set. The analyses were repeated for work role during the preschool, middle school, high school, and current time periods.

Results for the preschool, grammar and middle school, and current periods were exactly the same: the only correlate of life satisfaction was the score on authoritative parenting style ($R = .258$, $\beta = .258$, $t = 5.44$, $p < .001$). For high school, there were two significant variables ($R = .281$, $F(2,416) = 17.80$, $p < .001$): mother's authoritative style ($\beta = .257$, $t = 5.47$, $p < .001$) and working outside of the home less than 20 hours a week ($\beta = .112$, $t = 2.38$, $p < .05$, $\Delta R^2 = .013$).

Discussion

The goal of the study was to investigate whether the work role choices of mothers throughout the upbringing of a child significantly impact those mothers' midlife life satisfaction. Using the survey procedure, we found that life satisfaction of midlife mothers was not related to work role choices during the preschool, grammar and middle school, and current periods. The $N=432$ was sufficiently large to have detected an effect size of 1.3% of the variance if it existed, as it did in the case of part-time work during the high school years. This is the only work role (1-19 hours/week part-time) in the only time period that appears to contribute to mothers' midlife life satisfaction. Even though the variance accounted for is only 1.3%, it is interesting. Why would a mother's current life satisfaction be higher if she worked minimal part-time rather than full-time, more than 20 hours/week part-time, worked for income at home, or stayed at home during the teenage years? The need for additional income as adolescent children approach college years might be a factor. Given that our sample all had young adult children attending a private university, expenses are a potential consideration. Alternatively, the need to work less and be physically available to supervise teens could explain the lessened strain compared to mothers working more hours outside of the home. But then having less stress when working 1-19 hours/week outside of the home compared to at-home mothers does not make sense in terms of role strain. Perhaps some time away from teenage children supports mothers' mental health. Arguably there are plausible and unmeasured variables that need to be identified. Future research could try to replicate these results and investigate explanations for it.

The consistency of the impact of the authoritative parenting style in particular was noteworthy. Competitive test results were exactly the same for three out of the four time periods because the same parenting style variable was significant, and the research strategy did not produce different measures of parenting style at different stages in the child's upbringing. We did not think it practical to ask mothers to fill out the 60 item Parental Authority Questionnaire four times, one for each time period. It is likely that they would not have been able to accurately reconstruct any subtle differences in their styles over time, and such a request would in all likelihood have drastically reduced our response rate.

Asking mothers to recall retrospectively their parenting styles is a potential limitation in this study. Certainly social desirability effects or other biases in memory could come into play. Another limitation worth noting is that our sample was overwhelmingly Caucasian and Christian, so generalizations must be made with caution. And one other limitation would be that our results, while significant, accounted for a small amount of variance and thus should not be overinterpreted. Continuing to identify the factors that contribute to more of the variance accounted for in life satisfaction would be a worthwhile goal for future

studies.

The stress results indicate that mothers working outside the home do report more stress than stay-at-home mothers during the preschool, grammar and middle, and high school years. This is not a surprising finding given the demands put on mothers with the dual roles. Making career choices that might differ from those of close models such as one's own mother can add to strain. Divorced or never-married mothers may feel additional pressures in terms of time and supports. In recent decades the pro's and con's of such choices have been relentlessly scrutinized through such prisms as the "Mommy Wars" and more recently the "Tiger Moms." Despite so much discussion in the popular press, the scientific community has lagged behind in identifying the variables that affect parenting styles and work role choices, especially in reference to the mental health and well-being of the mothers. Somewhat encouragingly, the stress effects observed were not found for mothers' current work situation during the college years, and it appears that the previous stress experienced working outside the home in the earlier time periods does not affect current midlife satisfaction.

In conclusion, these results should reassure mothers as they are making work role decisions. Mothers frequently worry about how to balance the demands of work and childrearing, concerned about the impact on their children as well as their own personal and professional development. Often women wonder if their work role choices will affect future happiness, but the study results suggest that they do not. In our sample, work role choices were not predictive of later life satisfaction, whereas having adopted an authoritative parenting style was. An authoritative parenting style, which has consistently been shown to have positive effects on children, also appears to have a positive effect on the midlife satisfaction of mothers. Additional studies focusing on parenting style choices in relation to maternal (and paternal) adjustment would be helpful. But to the extent that maternal life satisfaction is the construct of interest, these findings do suggest that mothers concern themselves with developing an authoritative parenting style rather than fretting over the specifics of their work role choices.

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