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ABSTRACT

Recent studies suggest that parenthood may have negative consequences for the psychological wellbeing of adults. Adults with children at home report that they are less happy and less satisfied with their lives than other groups. They also appear to worry more and to experience higher levels of anxiety and depression. Overall the difference between parents and nonparents appears to be small, although it has increased during the past two decades. Differences between parents and nonparents stem from economic and time constraints, which in turn arise from general social trends such as the increase in women's labor force participation and the increase in marital disruption and single parenthood. We expect these trends to continue in the near future, reducing the desire for children and increasing gender conflict over the division of parental obligations. Parental strain might be altered by some form of State-supported child care or child allowance.
1. INTRODUCTION

Recent studies carried out in the United States suggest that parenthood may have negative consequences for the psychological well-being of adults. Adults with children at home report that they are less happy and less satisfied with their lives than nonparents. They also appear to worry more and to experience higher levels of anxiety and depression than those without children. Although the differences between the two groups appear to be small, there is evidence that the relative disadvantage of parents has increased during the past two decades and may continue to grow in the near future.

The research on the psychological consequences of parenthood is of interest to the broader community of sociologists for a number of reasons. First, the finding that parents are less well off than nonparents is inconsistent with some theories about sources of social identity and self-image. The parental role serves a function—societal reproduction—that is positively of great value. How can we reconcile the fact that parenthood, a highly valued social position, is associated with lower levels of psychological well-being? Further, theorists have argued that multiple role identities form the basis for more positive self images. Is the parent role somehow different? How does this alter our understanding of the construction of social identity?

Second, the subjective effects of being a parent have implications for the current debate among demographers over recent trends in fertility: whether fertility will level off in the near future or continue to decline. While researchers agree that the economic value of children has decreased during the past century, some have argued that this decline is offset by the social rewards that accrue to those who abide by pronatalist norms. If the subjective benefits of parenthood are also declining, does this suggest that normative pressures are no longer powerful enough to counteract perceived economic costs? Will this have an impact on fertility trends?
Finally, the studies described below are relevant to our understanding of gender relations and the struggle over gender inequality. Feminist scholars have long argued that the mother/homewife role, at least as it is currently structured, is a fundamental element in women's oppression inasmuch as it underpins women's economic dependence on men. The research on the psychological consequences of motherhood provides empirical evidence that there are psychic as well as economic costs associated with motherhood and that these costs are related to the unequal division of responsibility for children.

We begin this review by discussing the social trends that have occurred during the past century that we believe are directly related to changes in the experience of parenthood. Next we examine the empirical literature on the psychological effects of children, including studies of happiness and satisfaction as well as studies of anxiety and depression. We also look at research that asks adults about the costs and benefits of children and the overall consequences of parenthood. In the final section, we speculate on what all this means for future fertility and gender relations, and how changes in social policy might alter current trends.

II. TRENDS AFFECTING THE EXPERIENCE OF PARENTHOOD

During this century, a number of changes have occurred in the social organization of society and in the behavior of individuals that have had a profound effect on the meaning and experience of parenthood. These include the decline in the economic value of children, the increase in women's labor force participation, and the increase in marital instability and single parent families. We are especially interested in changes during the past thirty years, the period during which the empirical research on parenthood and psychological wellbeing has been carried out. These changes can provide important clues to our understanding of the specific forces underlying
recent declines in parents' wellbeing and they can help us determine whether current trends will continue in their present direction or reverse.

The first change affecting the experience of parenthood is the decline in the economic value of children. Whereas at one time children were clearly an economic asset to their parents - both as children who contributed to the family income and as adults who provided care for elderly parents - their value as sources of economic support has eroded during the 20th century. Initially, the decline was due to the passage of child labor laws which transformed children from producers into dependents during the early 1900s. The passage of the Social Security Act in 1935 further reduced their value by providing parents with old age pensions. Most recently, the 1972 amendments to the Social Security legislation increased benefits to the elderly, making older parents even less dependent on their children for economic support.1

A second major trend affecting parenthood is the growth of women's labor force participation. Labor force participation increased gradually for all age cohorts of women since the early 1950s and grew markedly for married women with children during the 1960s and 1970s. Whereas in 1950 only 24 percent of married women were in the labor force, by 1980 over 50 percent were working. For mothers with young children the change was even more dramatic. Twelve percent of mothers with children under six were employed in 1950 as compared with 45 percent in 1980 (England and Farkas, 1986). The increase in women's labor force participation had several consequences for the family roles of men and women and these were especially acute for women. First, the trend reflected the growing independence of women and, in particular, the increase in opportunities outside the housewife/mother role. Increases in employment opportunities mean

1For discussions of the changing value of children see Bumpass, 1985; Bult and Ward, 1979; Huber, 1980; Ryder, 1979; Westoff, 1976.
increases in opportunity costs for women who choose to not to work in the paid labor force. These costs are greatest for women with a college education, which suggests that parenthood may be viewed more negatively by adults with college degrees. In addition to opportunity costs, the increase in women's employment has caused conflict over the traditional gender-based division of labor, especially among parents. At present, working mothers appear to bear a greater burden than fathers and nonworking mothers. They work about 60 hours per week (market work plus housework) as compared to men and full-time housewives, who work about 54 hours each. (Vanek, 1974). We should note that the increase in wives' employment during the 1970s was partly in response to a decline in husbands' income, suggesting that wives' working may be associated with greater economic strain as well as greater marital conflict.

The increase in marital instability is the third trend. The divorce rate increased steadily over most of the 20th century and accelerated in the 1950s and 1970s. By the 1960s, one out of two couples who married would expect to divorce. The increase in marital disruption has altered the experience of parenthood in several ways (Cherlin, 1981). It has led to the formation of single parent families, which are subject to numerous forms of economic and psychological stress (Garfinkel and McLanahan, 1980), and to the creation of noncustodial parents, whose contact with their children is often irregular and unrewarding (Kurstenberg and Nord, 1985).

Increases in divorce have led to increases in remarriage, which means that a larger proportion of families include step-parents as well as stepchildren. Although remarriage generally reduces the economic problems of single parent families, parent-child relationships in such families are often difficult (Cherlin, 1978). Given the increase in unconventional families, we would expect parents to experience more psychological distress today than they did in the fifties when family relationships were more stable and less complex.
A final factor that is relevant to interpreting the relationship between parenthood and psychological wellbeing is the decline in the importance of the parent role as a central focus of identity. Although one might argue that changes in attitudes about parenthood simply reflect the rising opportunity costs of raising children, they also play an independent role in lowering the relative wellbeing of parents vis-à-vis nonparents. First, they affect the selection into the nonparent category. The relaxation of norms against voluntary childlessness means that a greater proportion of those in the nonparent status are there by virtue of their own choice (Veevers, 1973). Today the childless category is made up of a large number of adults who either have a strong preference against parenthood or a preference for some other activity that interferes with parenthood. Because of greater selectivity, we would expect these adults to be more satisfied with their status and more satisfied with their lives in general as compared with childless adults in the fifties. Second, changes in parental norms should affect the willingness of adults to admit to negative feelings about their own children and about parenthood in general. To the extent that normative constraints have led to an overvaluation of children in the past, a shift in norms will deflate these evaluations. If this holds true, an increase in negative perceptions will reflect a change in response bias rather than a change in the experience of parenthood.2

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2We do not believe that changes in attitudes about parenthood can account for all of the change in wellbeing. First, response bias might account for observed changes in perceptions of children, but it is unlikely to explain changes in direct measures of wellbeing and distress, e.g. happiness, anxiety. Changes in selectivity are also unlikely to account for all of the decline in parents’ wellbeing since the increase in voluntary childlessness is a fairly recent phenomenon and could not account for dissatisfaction or unhappiness among older cohorts of parents.
III. PARENTHOOD AND SUBJECTIVE WELLBEING

There are three areas of research that are pertinent to the question of whether parenthood enhances or reduces subjective wellbeing: the research on happiness and quality of life, the research on psychological distress, and studies of adults’ perceptions of children. In the quality of life and distress research, respondents’ wellbeing is measured directly and comparisons are made to determine whether parents are psychologically better off (or worse off) than nonparents. In the research on perceptions of children, respondents are asked about their overall evaluations of parenthood and about the specific costs and benefits of children.

The major dependent variables in the quality of life research are global indicators of wellbeing, such as satisfaction with life, happiness, and worries, and domain-specific indicators, such as marital happiness, satisfaction with friends, etc. According to Campbell et al. (1976), questions on satisfaction tend to evoke a cognitive judgment based on external standards, whereas questions about happiness or worries tend to pinpoint an absolute emotional state. It is arguable that satisfaction questions serve as more cumulative measures, asking respondents to reflect on their past experiences, whereas the questions about worries and happiness focus on the present and are more sensitive to current stress.

The two most commonly used constructs in the psychological distress research are depression and anxiety, the former being measured by a set of questions about feelings and perceptions of the self (e.g., the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (CES-D), Radloff, 1977) and the latter by questions about psycho-physiological symptoms such as a fast heartbeat, loss of appetite or nervous stomach (e.g., the Guri Psychological Symptoms (FPS) scale, Guri et al., 1960). A few researchers have examined both wellbeing and distress (Alwin, et al, 1984).
Gurin et al., 1960; Veroff et al., 1981) but most have concentrated exclusively on one or the other of the constructs. In fact, researchers who study wellbeing rarely cite the work of those who study distress.

The Quality of Life

The research on the quality of life has focused on variation in parents' wellbeing over the life course and on specific transitions, such as the birth of the first child and the departure from home of the last child. Generally, parenthood is broken down into multiple categories that represent distinct phases in the family life cycle intended to capture the context in which parenthood is experienced. Life cycle categories typically consist of a period without children, a period with preschool children, a period with school age children, and an "empty nest" stage, after the children have grown and gone.

Many researchers have commented on the apparent U-shaped curve in marital wellbeing that is associated with the sequence of life cycle stages for couples who become parents (Aldous, 1978; Figley, 1972; Rollins and Cannon, 1974; Rollins and Feldman, 1970). These authors claim that marital satisfaction drops with the advent of the first child, continues to decline up to the first child's adolescence, and then begins to increase as the children leave the home. Some have found that life cycle variation is especially strong for wives (Rollins and Feldman, 1970).

These studies have been criticized on several grounds. First, there is some disagreement as to the prevalence of the U-shaped pattern and how it should be interpreted. Spanier, Lewis and Cole (1975), for example, have argued that the patterns are evident for working class but not for middle class respondents. Second, some researchers have contended that the life cycle approach

healthy and unhealthy persons in the general population.

*Rollins and Galligan (1972) try to explain this discrepancy by arguing that only families with few resources
has no noticeable advantage over the use of separate variables to measure each stage (Menaghan, 1982; Nock, 1979; Spanier et al., 1979). They conclude that it is more useful to examine the effects of presence/age of children independent of the effects of age of respondent, duration of marriage, etc.

In addition to the cross-sectional studies described above, a few researchers have looked at particular transitions such as the birth of a child, generally the first birth, and the departure of the last child that marks the beginning of the “empty nest” phase of the family life cycle. Nearly all of these studies have focused on the impact of transitions on marital quality. A number of older articles pointed to the “crisis” of the initial transition to parenthood (Dyer, 1963; LeMasters, 1957; Rossi, 1968), but since these studies were based largely on retrospective reports, their conclusions could only be viewed as tentative. Later work that gathered information from couples before and after the first birth, however, generally showed that the quality of the marital relationship declined after the birth of the first child (Belsky, 1985; Miller and Solls, 1980; Russell, 1974). The research also found that the transition to parenthood was more difficult for women than men (Belsky, 1985; Ryder, 1973; Russell, 1974; Waldron and Routh, 1981). Unfortunately, researchers did not control for variables other than gender, and therefore one cannot tell whether age, employment status or economic strain are important factors in determining the effects of the first birth. Studies of the transition to the “empty nest” are

would be affected by high-demand family stages, but others have objected to this line of reasoning. For example, Oppenheim’s (1982) description of the life cycle sequence on economic resources, applies to middle class as well as working class families.

*Note that some studies are described as “transition studies” when in fact they are based on cross-sectional data.

*See for example Harkins, 1978.) In this review, however, we use the term transition to refer specifically to studies of changes in well-being over time.
less common than studies of the first birth, but the evidence that is available suggests that the departure from home of the last child has very little effect on the psychological well-being of the parents (Menaghan 1982; Mullan, 1981; Pearl and Lieberman 1979). 6

Many of the studies described above are based on small and nonrepresentative samples of married couples taken for the explicit purpose of studying marital quality and family relationships. Moreover, at least in the early work, statistical analyses tended to be rather crude and based primarily on bivariate relationships. 7 A second group of studies based on data from large national surveys has extended this research in several ways; by including nonmarried as well as married respondents in the samples, by using multivariate models that control for exogenous variables, and by attempting to explain the conditions under which parenthood is associated with lower levels of well-being (Alwin et al., 1984; Andrews and Withey, 1976; Bradburn, 1969; Campbell et al., 1976; Glenn and McLanahan, 1981; Glenn and Weaver, 1978, 1979, 1982; Marini, 1980; McLanahan and Adams, 1984, 1985). 8

This second group of studies finds that parents with children at home are psychologically less well off than nonparents on a wide range of indicators. Parents report less satisfaction with 6Mullan found that parents’ distress declined after the children had been gone for a while, whereas marital well-being showed no improvement. Menaghan found that the transition to the empty nest was associated with a small positive shift in feelings of marital equity but had no impact on another indicator of marital quality. Finally, Pearl and Lieberman reported that parents showed no change in psychological distress as a result of their children leaving home. All of these analyses were based on the same data, but the researchers used different indicators of well-being.

7The studies by Pearl and Lieberman, Mullan and Menaghan are exceptions. For more information on this point see the review by Hicks and Flott (1970).

8Andrews and Withey, Bradburn and Campbell et al. generally look at bivariate relationships, but they meet the other two criteria for inclusion in the second group of studies.

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their lives and with other domains, such as friends, marriage, and health. They are also less happy and appear to worry more than adults without children. Overall the contrast between parents and nonparents appears to be small, with the greatest differences appearing for marital happiness and worries.\footnote{Several researchers have reported no difference between parents and nonparents, or at least no difference on some indicators of wellbeing (Alwin et al., 1984; Andrews and Withey, 1976; Marini, 1980; McLanahan and Adams, 1984), but no one has found that parents are better off than nonparents on any of the conventional measures of wellbeing. Some researchers have found that mothers, especially those with young children, are less happy and less satisfied than other groups (Campbell, 1976; Glenn and Weaver, 1978; Glenn and McLanahan, 1982; Hofferth and Manis, 1978), whereas others report no gender differences in the effects of parenthood (McLanahan and Adame, 1985). At least one study has looked at race differences and found that the effects of children on marital happiness are similar for blacks and whites (Glenn and McLanahan, 1982).\footnote{See Reskin and Crawford for conflicting results. They find that the effects of children on psychological distress are less negative for blacks.}}

These studies are consistent with the earlier life cycle research in that they find that parents with children living at home are neither as happy nor as satisfied with their lives as other groups. (Glenn and McLanahan, 1981; McLanahan and Adame, 1985). There is mixed evidence on whether the absolute number of children is important.\footnote{There is particular contention over the issue of the impact of the number of children on marital satisfaction or happiness. Some studies have indicated that marital happiness declines as number of children increases (Campbell et al., 1976; Glenn and McLanahan, 1982; Miller, 1972), whereas other researchers have found no effect (Marini, 1988; Pelonko et al., 1982; Ross, 1970). Finally, Abbott and Brady (1985) suggest that there is an interaction of number and gender of children, arguing that the lower marital adjustment of wives with children is accounted for by the presence of sons.} There is also disagreement regarding
whether spacing and density of offspring affect wellbeing. 11 Overall, the presence of children appears to be more consistently important than either number, spacing, or gender of child (Polis, 1982).12

In addition to specifying family structure characteristics, several studies have looked at how marital status, women's employment, and socio-economic status moderate the consequences of children. Not surprisingly, those that examine marital status have found that single parents (nonmarried adults living with children) report more worries and less happiness than other groups (Alwin et al., 1984; Andrews and Withey, 1976; Glenn and Weaver, 1970; McLanahan and Adams, 1984). Furthermore, divorced fathers - both those who are currently divorced and those who have remarried - appear to worry more and to be less satisfied with themselves than other groups (McLanahan and Adams, 1985).

The consequences of children are also related to whether or not the mother works outside the home. McLanahan and Adams (1985) found that employed mothers with young children worried much more than employed women without children. This does not mean that working itself has negative consequences. In fact, working appears to increase the psychological wellbeing of women. Rather, mothers do not obtain the psychological benefits from employment that accrue for the problems of those with preschool children and/or more than one male child.

11 Again, the issue of marital wellbeing serves as an exemplar. Most argue that there these variables are not important (Figsley, 1973; Marini, 1980; Miller, 1975), but Hollins and Galligan (1976) attribute the absence of findings to a failure to include desire for children as an intervening variable.

12 We should note that the relative wellbeing of parents in the empty nest stage may have as much to do with the fact that their children are now managing their own lives, for the most part successfully, as it has to do with the stabilization of the household. American parents are made to feel responsible for how their children "turn out," and yet they have few indicators as to how they are doing as parents. Once children are on their own, parents are better able to evaluate their past efforts and to feel greater satisfaction with themselves.
to fathers and to women without children.\textsuperscript{13} Perceived economic strain also appears to be an important factor in accounting for the lower levels of wellbeing among men as well as women (Bradburn, 1969; Campbell et al., 1976), but education does not (Glenn and McLanahan, 1982).

Since most of the empirical research on the effects of parenthood is based on data collected in the late sixties and seventies, the question arises as to whether or not the relative disadvantage of parents who are living with children is a fairly recent phenomenon or whether it has existed for some time. As noted above, single parenthood detracts from the wellbeing of mothers, whereas paid employment enhances the wellbeing of women without children relative to that of mothers. Since both have become more common in recent years, we would expect parents, and especially mothers, to have become relatively less well off than they were previously.

The two "Americans View Their Mental Health" surveys provide information on the contrast between parents and nonparents at two time periods: 1957 and 1976. Analyses based on these data indicate that parents with children at home worried more and were less happy with their marriages in the seventies (relative to nonparents) than in the fifties (McLanahan and Adams, 1985; Veroff et al., 1981).\textsuperscript{14} Conversely, these parents were not less satisfied with themselves and felt just as much in control of their lives as their counterparts in the fifties. These results indicate that declines in affective states do not always result in declines in more cumulative measures of

\textsuperscript{13}Wright (1975) found no significant differences between housewives and women who work outside the home in happiness or life satisfaction. However, his data exclude working women with preschool children, nonwhite women, students, retired, disabled and nonmarried women. He controls only for whether the woman's spouse was employed in blue- or white-collar work, and does not examine the general impact of parenthood or number of children on his general measure of wellbeing.

\textsuperscript{14}We should note that marital happiness increased absolutely for both groups between 1967 and 1976, which is what one would have expected, given the greater freedom to divorce.
Mclanahan and Adams (1986) also found that parents in the empty nest stage were much less satisfied with themselves in the seventies than in the fifties, not because of a decline in the satisfaction of parents, but because of a sharp increase in the satisfaction of nonparents. The latter finding may be due to the increase in the economic and social independence of the older cohort and to the decline in the need for children as a source of support.

Parenthood and Psychological Distress

Most of the early research on psychological distress emerges from the debate over the importance of the housewife role in explaining gender differences in the mental health of married men and women. This debate was initiated by Bernard (1972) and Gove (1972), and followed up by Gove and Todor (1973). Bernard's widely influential work argued that housekeeping has a "pathogenic" effect on wives. According to Gove, keeping house is unstructured and may lead to perceptions of poor performance. Moreover, housewives have fewer sources of gratification than their husbands do. Married men have both a family role and an employment role. When things go badly in one domain (the family), men may compensate by investing more heavily in the other role (career). Housewives have no such alternative, Gove argued, and therefore they are more vulnerable to the problems associated with family life.15

This description of the housewife role and its implications for mental health stimulated a large body of research during the seventies, most of which was designed to test hypotheses about the nature of the role and whether women's employment would reduce gender differences in

15Gove also noted that even when married women work, they usually have both paid jobs and very often carry the burden of two jobs: homemaker and worker. Moreover, they are apt to view their careers as contingent on their husband's career - or family goals - rather than in terms of their own needs.
mental health. The findings have been mixed. Some researchers found that employment reduced depression, although not as much for women as for men (Gove and Geerken, 1977; Radloff, 1974). Other researchers reported no differences between employed and unemployed women (Pearlin, 1974). Although Pearlin found no direct relationship between employment and depression, he did find that women who were disaffected with the homemaker role were more likely to be depressed than other women. This experience was further differentiated by class. For middle-class women, the meaning of their job was the main factor in predicting disaffection—career-oriented women felt torn between two sets of ambitions. For working-class women, family demands were the most important factor.

Strictly speaking, motherhood is not a necessary component of the homemaker role. In the process of specifying the latter, however, researchers incorporated parental status into their models, and thus the literature on gender differences in psychological distress provides information on relationship between parenthood and mental health. All of the studies discussed above found that parents experienced more depression and anxiety than adults without children. Pearlin (1974) found that maternal responsibilities, measured by number of children at home and age of youngest child, were major factors in determining disaffection with the maternal role, which in turn increased depression for women. Other researchers found that parenthood increased depression for fathers as well as mothers (Gove and Geerken, 1977; Radloff, 1974). Gove and Geerken also looked at the effects of family size and age of children on parents' feelings about (1) experiencing too many demands from others (2) needing to be alone, and (3) loneliness. For men, the presence of children increased perceived demands, whereas for women, the number and ages of children increased perceived demands and also the desire to be alone.16

16Gove and Geerken's study did not show parenthood to be related to loneliness.
A problem with these studies is that couples with children at home are compared to other married couples, including parents in the empty nest stage as well as adults who never had children. Thus it is difficult to determine whether the negative effects of living with children arise from the comparison with empty nest parents or the comparison with childless couples. Only in Radloff's study can we distinguish between the three groups, and her results indicate that it is the empty nest parents rather than the childless couples who are less depressed than parents with children at home. When empty nest parents were compared with childless couples of similar age, Radloff found that the former were slightly less depressed, although the difference was not statistically significant.

Since the late seventies, researchers have expanded their focus to include nonmarried adults as well as married couples. The issue of women's waged work continues to be a major concern, but the questions being posed are somewhat different. Whereas early studies concentrated on married women and whether employment reduces the stress associated with the homemaker role, recent studies have focused on employment in general and have examined whether women with children garner the same benefits from work as childless women. As with the quality of life research, the later work on distress is based on more sophisticated methodologies and more complex models.

The recent work is less conclusive than the early studies with respect to the effect of children on psychological distress, and especially with respect to depression. Gore and Mangione (1983) found that having children at home increased the anxiety of married women but did not affect depression. Cleary and Mechanic (1983) also found that parenthood was not related to depression, except among employed mothers.

At least two researchers have reported that parents are better off than childless adults. Kandel
and her colleagues (1985) found that parenthood reduced the incidence of depression in women, and Aneshensel et al. (1981) reported similar results for men as well as women. The latter two studies defined parenthood as having ever had children rather than as living with children, and therefore their comparisons were between parents and childless adults. Although they did not test for within-group differences, their results indicate that parents with children at home were not as well off as parents whose children were grown. Thus it appears that the main reason for the contradictory findings in these studies is the difference in comparison groups.

The most consistent finding in this research is that single mothers are much more distressed than other groups. Pearlin noted this in the early seventies, as did Brown and Harris (1978). It has since been verified by numerous other researchers (Alwin et al., 1984; Aneshensel et al., 1983; Gutten tag et al., 1980; Kandel et al., 1985). Even Kandel et al., who found that parenthood reduced depression, also reported that nonmarried mothers were more depressed than other groups.

In addition to qualifying our thinking about the overall effects of children, the more recent research has contributed to our understanding of the mechanisms by which children increase distress. Ross and Huber (1985) found that having children at home leads to economic strain, which in turn increases depression for men as well as women. They also found that after controlling for economic strain, the effect of children was positive for women. Ross and Huber note that direct and indirect effects may cancel one another out, which could explain why some studies find no relationship between children and women's depression. The weight of economic strain in parents' wellbeing supports Campbell and Bradburn's similar findings in the quality of life literature.

Kandel, for example, reported that the bivariate relationship between number of children at home and depression was positive.
Finally, the research on distress has extended our knowledge about the interaction of employment and parental status. As noted above, those who followed up on Bernard and Gove found that working reduced mothers' distress, but not enough to close the gap with men. It now appears that employment has positive effects for women without children and under certain conditions for women with children. At least two studies have shown that employment has a positive effect for married women if their husbands help with childcare and housework (Kessler and McHale, 1982; Ross et al., 1983). Ross et al. also found that the benefits of work depended on the couple's preferences about whether or not the wife should work. If they preferred a "traditional" division of labor, working had no psychological benefits for the wife. 18

Several generalizations can be drawn from the studies reviewed in the previous two sections. First, the presence of children appears to be associated with lower levels of happiness and satisfaction and with higher levels of psychological distress for both women and men. There is some evidence that effects of parenthood are more negative for women. The differences between parents and non-parents are small although they appear to have increased since the late fifties.

Second, single mothers are clearly worse off than other groups. Third, parents whose children have grown and left home (empty nest parents) are no different than adults of similar age who have never had children. Fourth, working outside the home improves the psychological wellbeing of women without children, and it improves the wellbeing of mothers if husbands help with childcare and if both partners approve of her dual role as homemaker and breadwinner. Finally, perceptions of economic strain and personal demands are important factors in accounting for the

18Ross et al. combine housework and childcare into one measure of domestic work, whereas Kessler and McHale look at the two types of help separately. The latter find that help with childcare is more important than help with housework.
negative psychological effects of children.

Parents' Perceptions of Children

The findings described above are based on studies that examine the correlation between parental status (the independent variable) and psychological wellbeing (the dependent variable).

A second major approach to determining the consequences of parenthood studies parents' perceptions of children. This approach asks respondents about the costs and benefits of children or asks them to evaluate how children alter the lives of adults.

Not surprisingly, parents appear to have more positive perceptions of children than non-parents. Moreover, parents' responses vary over the life course (Blake and del Pinal, 1981; McLanahan and Adams, 1985; Veroff et al., 1981). Looking just at parents, Veroff and his colleagues found that younger couples were less positive and viewed parenthood as more restrictive than couples over 50. These results were confirmed by McLanahan and Adams (1985), who distinguished between parents with children at home and empty nest parents, controlling for age.

Veroff et al. (1981) also found that mothers were slightly less positive than fathers in their evaluations of children and reported more parental problems as well. Tolerance (patience) was the major concern of mothers whereas fathers were more bothered by financial problems. The finding that mothers' perceptions were less positive than fathers should be qualified, however. Hoffman and Manis (1976) found that the former reported more parental satisfaction than the latter, and Campbell et al. (1976) found no gender differences in parental satisfaction.

In her extensive review of the research on parental satisfaction, Coe (1986) suggests that such inconsistent results reflect the multidimensional and gender-specific nature of the construct: motherhood brings both greater role fulfillment and more restrictions than fatherhood. This
argument is tacitly supported by Veroff et al. (1981) in their investigation of the salience of parenthood. When asked about fulfillment associated with the parent role, mothers were more likely than fathers to say that parenthood gave them a great deal of fulfillment. Blake and del Pinal also found that women were more likely to view children as a "social investment."

Women's perceptions also vary according to whether or not they work outside the home (or plan to work) and whether they see parenthood as entailing conventionally structured gender roles. (Blake and del Pinal, 1981). Blake and del Pinal found that women who were currently employed, part- or full-time, were twice as likely as homemakers to say that the costs of children outweighed the benefits. Similarly, women who believed that men were unlikely to share in housework and childcare were much more likely to emphasize the direct costs of children: being tied down, being subject to burdensome demands, and having difficulty organizing one's time. These findings dovetail nicely with what we have learned about the joint effect of employment and motherhood.

Several studies show that being divorced has negative consequences for adults' perceptions of children, at least among women. Blake and del Pinal found that divorced women were much more likely than married women to say that the costs of children exceeded the benefits, whereas divorced men were more sanguine than their married counterparts. According to Veroff et al., single mothers reported the most problems of all subgroups and reported economic problems twice as often as married men. Overall, however, their evaluations were no less positive than those of married women, and they viewed children as no more restrictive. The latter study also found that divorced fathers had unusually positive perceptions. Evaluations were about 1.5 times as positive as those of other parents, and they reported fewer restrictions and problems. The discrepancy between the very perceptions of divorced fathers and their experience of living apart
from their children may account for this group’s extremely low levels of subjective wellbeing (McLanahan and Adams, 1984).

The research on perceptions of children shows that women who do not graduate from high school are more likely to report that the benefits of children outweigh the costs than than women with a high school or college degree. Blake and di Pino (1981) found that women with limited schooling were more likely to view children as a social and financial investment, especially compared to women who had attended college. Veroff and his colleagues (1981) also reported that mothers with only a high school education were more likely than other groups to say that parenthood gave them a great deal of fulfillment.

The fact that women with less education have more positive views about children than women with college degrees is consistent with the argument that groups with fewer social and economic alternatives will value children more highly (Hoffman, Thornton and Manis, 1978). It is also consistent with the argument that the opportunity costs of children are lower for women with only a high school education. Ironically, these are the women whom we might expect to experience the greatest economic strain.

Finally, parental satisfaction appears to have declined over time. Veroff et al.’s bivariate analysis indicated that parents in 1975 felt significantly less positive about parenthood than they did in 1957. Those results were confirmed by McLanahan and Adams (1985), who found that the variation among parents was consistent with the trends in the wellbeing indicators: the relative decline in perceptions of children was greater for parents with children at home than for parents whose children were grown and gone.
Explanations for Why Children Are Stressful

The quality of life literature tends to be atheoretical, with researchers concentrating primarily on describing the effects of children on different indicators of wellbeing for different subgroups of adults. The studies of psychological distress, on the other hand, contain a variety of explanations for why parenthood has negative consequences. This research traces variations in individuals' subjective wellbeing to variations and changes in the linked roles that compose institutions. Two major perspectives inform this research: one holds that by accumulating roles, individuals gain sources of identity and self-esteem, and one argues that multiple roles are potentially incompatible, and that role incompatibilities may undermine psychological wellbeing. In this section, we clarify the arguments underlying this research and evaluate them in light of the empirical evidence.

The first perspective holds that individuals who take on additional roles are accumulating further bases on which to build identity and self-esteem (Marks, 1977). If an individual with multiple roles finds that one ceases to be gratifying, it is argued, she or he can draw on other roles for support. If someone has few roles, and things are going badly in one domain, there are no alternative sources of esteem. This view predicts that parents have higher wellbeing than non-parents, and that employed parents are better off than childless workers. It would also expect that the wellbeing of women in particular, now increasingly both employees and parents, should have improved over time. This framework is implicitly adopted by Gove (1972), who states that the parental role is negative for women because it limits access to other roles. 20

20In a sophisticated example of this approach, Tholea (1968) argued that there is a curvilinear relationship between the numeric accumulation of roles and psychological wellbeing.

21Similarly, Brown and Harris (1978) emphasize that having a limited number of roles restricts access to social
The empirical evidence does not support the simple "role accumulation" argument. Nearly all of the research suggests that parenthood does not increase psychological wellbeing or self-satisfaction. Moreover, it appears that motherhood and paid employment do not mix well for women (Ryder, 1979), insofar as occupying or managing both roles offers women no additional subjective benefits over occupying one or the other. One might argue that employment enhances the wellbeing of fathers and that marriage enhances the wellbeing of mothers. However, the additional benefits deriving from these roles would appear to result more from their association with success in the parent role than from their provision of additional sources of identity. The only evidence that parents are psychologically better off than nonparents comes from two studies of depression whose findings are not statistically significant (Aneshesmel et al., 1981; Kendall et al., 1985).  

The second predominant explanation argues that individuals may experience strain, and a consequent drop in subjective wellbeing, by trying to link incompatible roles (Goode, 1960). "Role strain" actually contains two concepts, role overload and role conflict, not systematically separated by Goode (Selke, 1974). Role overload denotes problems generated by accumulating too many roles, given time constraints. The overload hypothesis states that effects will be most negative when the ratio of demands to resources is highest. The hypothesis incorporates role characteristics that result in financial or emotional demands into a more general model that includes the availability of resources. The parent role should prove burdensome for those with support, which has both preventive and curative functions in maintaining mental health.

\[21\] The Aneshesmel study finds no significant difference for parental status, and the Kendall study does not test for whether parents are less depressed than nonparents.

\[22\] In this way it is similar to the notion of the family "life cycle squeeze" discussed by Oppenheinr (1982).
too much other work and too few resources to meet its demands. Role conflict, on the other hand, refer to discordant expectations that exist irrespective of time pressures. The conflict hypothesis states that problems arise when an individual fills two roles that have conflicting expectations, or when individuals disagree over the expectations of a particular role. The concept was adopted by Bernard (1972) and Pearlin (1975) as the basis for an explanation of the impact of women's experience of competing commitments to work and home. It also applies to situations in which couples disagree over familial roles, such as whether wives should work outside the home or how housework should be divided.

The empirical findings discussed above are more consistent with the role strain than the role accumulation perspective, and in particular with the role overload hypothesis. The ratio of demands to resources is highest for parents with young children, parents with large numbers of children, single parents, and low-income working mothers, all of whom report higher levels of distress and lower levels of well-being. Moreover, the central role of economic strain and demands in accounting for parental stress has been documented directly by several researchers (Cleary and Mechanic, 1985; Gove and Geerken, 1977; McLanahan and Adams, 1985; Ross and Huber, 1985). McLanahan and Adams also show that the drop over time in women's well-being can be explained by increases in single parenthood and employment.

Role conflict may also be a factor in accounting for paternal distress, but the evidence suggests that this is more important for middle class women than for working class women. Pearlin's work shows that middle class mothers are more likely to feel torn between two careers, whereas working class mothers are more likely to feel overloaded. Additional evidence for the role conflict argument comes from the research on married couples which shows that both partners are less depressed when husbands help with housework and childcare (Kessler and McRae, 1982; Ross et al., 1984). 22
Although some might argue that the wife is better off because she has less work (the overload hypothesis), husband's help may also be symptomatic of his acceptance of her dual role. 23

There are two key objections to the role-theoretic analytical perspective in which much of the distress literature is couched. First, the framework is theoretically weak. The relationship between concepts and indicators is not always adequately specified. A single empirical phenomenon, such as the impact of husbands' housework on wives' depression described above, can be used to substantiate different causal arguments. More fundamentally, sociologists working within this tradition conceptualize the individual as an assortment of roles, and ignore the rigidity or flexibility of role allocation and differences in the degree of internalization of different roles. As Turner has noted, when a role is deeply merged with the person, socialization in that role structures the individual's personality. The differences in the degree to which role and person are merged should have a profound effect on the adoption and performance of other roles, and on responses to role strain and role conflict (Turner, 1976).

Second, the role perspective fails to situate its arguments about the individuals who manage or occupy various roles in a broader social-structural context. The research on parenthood and psychological well-being suggests that the higher levels of stress reported by parents stem from the more general social trends that were discussed in section II. All of the studies indicate that single mothers experience more psychological distress than other groups, and at least one study has shown that the increase in single motherhood can account for a substantial part of the increase in mothers' distress between 1957 and 1976. There is also evidence that the subjective wellbeing of divorced fathers has deteriorated more than other groups. Thus, the increase in marital

23 Since the amount of housework husbands do is very small, the symbolic interpretation may be more accurate than the overload explanation (England and Parkes, 1980).
disruption and growth of families headed by women can be said to have played a significant role in undermining parental wellbeing during the past thirty years.

In addition, the change in women’s labor force participation has been critical in the relative decline in mothers’ subjective wellbeing. Women are much more likely to be employed today than they were in the past, and working has substantial psychological benefits for women without children. Working mothers, on the other hand, do not receive equivalent benefits from work, and therefore their wellbeing has declined relative to that of nonmothers. Mothers clearly face a dilemma: if they work, they reduce their opportunity costs, but they simultaneously increase the demands on their time.

These patterns testify to the causal links between macro-structural developments and parents’ wellbeing. Researchers using concepts from role theory to assess parents’ subjective wellbeing, and hypothesizing role overload and conflict, should situate their arguments within the ambit of more general patterns of social change.

IV. IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

To date, researchers have concentrated on documenting the impact of parental roles on psychological wellbeing and perceptions of children. They will also need to chart the reciprocal influence of these effects on individuals' actions. There are at least two key areas which are closely related to parental status and which should be foci of further research: namely, gender relations and fertility behavior. With respect to gender relations, we expect a continuation of the struggle over the division of domestic responsibilities and, among divorced parents, over the division of financial responsibilities as well. The flow of women into the labor market during the past two decades has meant a decline in the time available for child care, and we expect that
couples will continue to contest the division of parental responsibilities. Husbands will resist in part because of self-interest and in part because norms are slow to change, even in the face of changing circumstances. Moreover, although some husbands are assuming a greater share of household responsibilities, it is doubtful that a satisfactory resolution to this struggle can be obtained simply through a readjustment of gender roles on an individual or couple basis, given the time demands on two working parents.

With respect to fertility, we expect that childless adults, or couples that have not reached their desired fertility, will anticipate the problems partially captured in the concept of role strain and therefore have fewer children. This means simply that negative perceptions regarding the psychological costs of children will have a feedback effect on the more general decline in fertility that has been occurring throughout the 20th century. This effect should be especially great among couples with higher levels of education for whom the perceived costs of parenthood may appear greater than the benefits. Changes in gender roles might mitigate perceptions of costs among women. However, such a shift would place a greater burden on men, which might reduce their desire for children. Conflicting preferences generally lead to lower fertility. (Thompson, et al., 1984).

Many of the problems associated with parenthood result from a lack of family resources (time and money), and these problems are amenable to public solutions. Numerous other industrialized countries have a Child Allowance and/or some form of subsidized childcare, and there is some support for such policies in this country, especially for the latter (Kameneman and Kahn, 1978). Public solutions would reduce economic strain for both men and women, and would have a beneficial effect on their mental health. They should also increase fertility by removing some of the disincentives to rearing children. The consequences for gender relations would probably not
be univocal and would depend on the precise nature of state policies. A Child Allowance, for example, has no direct implications for the sexual division of labor, and might actually buttress traditional gender roles in the household. State-supported childcare, on the other hand, is more likely to free women from traditional role obligations and to reduce their economic dependence on men.
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