

Correlation between Working Mothers' Stress and Socioeconomic Status: Does it exist?

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Abstract

This paper will focus on correlations between job satisfaction and stress levels in working mothers of various socio-economic statuses. More specifically, 20 working mothers were interviewed through the telephone to obtain some information about their job, family, and personal time. The aims of this paper are to investigate correlations between job satisfaction and experienced stress levels in working mothers of this Chicagoland population. The sample size was too small to make generalizations about the entire population, yet it can be assumed that some findings on a small scale can be applied to the larger society.

Intro

In the United States, women and mothers specifically, have increased their participation in the labor force dramatically since the 1970s according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The current number of employed women since measured in 2008 is up 67,876 from 29,976 in 1971 (Labor Bureau Statistics, 2008). As the participation of women in the job market increases, women are continuing to uphold their responsibilities at home and balance a family. The split between hours devoted at work and hours devoted at home causes an increase in demand of mothers' time and energy. Working mothers then become at a high risk for experiencing role spillover, where her stress at work starts to affect her mental state at home and vice versa. Or working mothers may experience role conflict, where they are confronted with contrary or incompatible role expectations in the various social statuses they occupy in their lives (Johnson 2000). Women's expectations point to the natural tendency for mothers to fulfill the home responsibilities, perpetuating the inequality that women experience as a homemaker and employee (Hays 1996). As a result, many life stressors may be exacerbated or intensified even if the sufferer does not realize this.

Stress is classified as physical, mental, or emotional strain or tension (Webster's Dictionary). Some stress cannot be avoided and seems to be a necessary component of life itself. Even so, researchers have noticed that workplace conditions can contribute to the variations in well-being and unhealthy levels of stress that an individual experiences over time (Eby et al. 2005). Because it is an abstract concept, stress is caused by numerous factors that fluctuate on a case by case basis which makes it very difficult to measure. It is unlikely that stressors will have uniform effects on all individuals. Recently news articles and media have implied that women's health is suffering and on a decline when compared with men's health (Health and Wellness; Health.com). Higher reports of illness, increase in reported diabetes, and weight gain seem to float around the news and public domain. Many of these illnesses are linked to stress and overall ability to cope with stressful life events. It is necessary to understand the kinds of stress working mothers are experiencing in order to pinpoint ways to improve women's health. In my study, I investigate the ways in which stress is perceived by twenty working mothers. I use somewhat open-ended interviews with some specifically directed questions to generate the most accurate information on stress experienced by these working mothers as correlated with job satisfaction. The tested population will focus on full-time working mothers with children because these are the groups whose time is most affected by the rise in women's employment (Bianchi et al 2006). I expect that working mothers with lower socio-economic status will have less flexibility in their jobs and will experience more perceived stress than mothers with more flexibility. I also expect that mothers who find their work to be challenging and/or stimulating will experience less perceived stress than those who find their jobs to be monotonous. The last hypothesis is that those who describe their work social setting in a positive manner will have less experienced stress than those who feel disconnected from their work's social setting. However, I do not

expect perceived stress levels to vary by socio-economic class. The reader should note that because I am not focusing on the physiological aspect of stress, this study will primarily use womens' perceived stress levels as the focal point. The hypotheses are based on patterns found in the existing literature about flexibility, challenges, and social networks in the workplace and the ways that they are connected to stress.

Lit Review/Theory

1. Social Class and work schedule=stress

Links between working mothers' stress levels and social class membership remain widespread in the existing literature. This connection between class and work schedules is derived from the inference that the lower class working population is more likely to have lower paying jobs and less-flexible work hours, leaving them more prone to higher levels of stress. Jobs are becoming more demanding with a continually increasing expected number of hours (Jacobs and Winslow 2004). Thus, there is a greater emphasis on the difficulties incurred while attempting to balance both a family and job. Previous research has found that the more hours spent on the job or at work, the more likely an individual is to have greater levels of stress (Goodman and Crouter 2009; Presser 2003; Bianchi et al 2006; Wilk 1986; Jacobs and Winslow 2004).

This literature shows how high stress, long hours, and a deficiency in flexibility can lead to over-responsibility in working mothers. "Nonflexible work arrangements" as described in one study is directly linked to depressive symptoms and stress levels in working mothers (Goodman and Crouter 2009). Furthermore, it was found that mothers with strict work schedules were more likely to have difficulties balancing home and work life therefore exposing them to higher levels of stress. Strict work schedules refers to the inability to take time off when needed, always

feeling under pressure with deadlines, and the incapability to create their own hours. An employee who is high up in the vocational hierarchy can affect and change the circumstances and the rules of his or her work situations, whereas an employee low in the hierarchy does not have the same freedom (Ahola et al 2006). The variation in mothers with low education and thereby less power over their job hours and schedules emphasizes the importance in job control for decreasing stress. Mothers in one study with more education tended to have better paying jobs and less time constraints than mothers with less educational background (Olson and Banyard 1993). Thus, it can be inferred that the better educated you are, the more likely your job will be flexible and in return, you will have less stress than someone with a less flexible job.

In another study, mothers who felt their workplace had high levels of pressure to meet deadlines were more likely to suffer psychological distress (Goodman and Crouter 2009). Furthermore, it was found that mothers with strict work schedules were more likely to have difficulties balancing home and work life therefore exposing them to higher levels of stress. Arendell, in her study, investigated the concept of “mothering” in the United States to understand what is involved with this loaded term. Arendell found that parenthood is associated with wellbeing and healthy lifestyle choices, which in turn, is linked to a flexible environment (Arendell 2000). Further, it can be assumed that mothers with more leeway to take time off and adhere to their personal responsibilities if needed will feel less stressed than those with less flexibility at work.

2. *Social Class women=stress=burnout*

High stress levels at work are one of the early signs of burnout, or a chronic stress syndrome which develops gradually as a consequence of prolonged stress (Ahola et al 2006). One particular study linked education, socio economic status, and work experience to predict the

vulnerability of burnout in participants. They found that participants with more than 19 years at one job were more likely to experience burnout than those working at the same place for less than 19 years (Kalimo et al. 2002). Other studies found that low education levels, low social status at work, being single, divorced, or widowed carries an increased possible risk for burnout in women (Roxburgh 2002; Ahola et al 2006;). Also found in the same study, women who always feel rushed or continuously multi task are more subject to burn out than those who take their time and don't feel rushed (Roxburgh 2002). This is important because women who are always rushed or feeling out of control are more likely to perceive their stress levels to be higher than those who feel more in control of their lives (Schor 1992; Shields 1999; Robinson and Godbey 1997). Education levels, socioeconomic status, and marital status are closely linked to stress levels in working women (Frankenhaeuser et al. 1991; Bianchi et al. 2006; Hays 1996; Munro 1981).

3. Women have more stress than men at workplace

Role conflict is classified as the event for which one experiences contrary or incompatible role expectations in various social statuses (Johnson 2000). As a product of the role conflict working mothers experience, husbands and male counterparts are believed to have less stress due to the work mothers are putting into their family. Therefore, when compared with men at the same jobs, women are believed to have more stress and time constraints. The burden of family responsibility as a handicap for these women still remains unspoken about by the public (Bianchi et al. 2006). Women biologically see themselves as nurturing beings which affects their social identity in the workplace (Munro 1981; Hays 1986; Hochschild 1989). For example, if a woman perceives her colleagues in need of support for any reason, she will most likely take on the role of bearing the situation's stress until she has helped the problem in some

way, shape, or form (Shaffer et al 2000). The pressure to give oneself over to the job in hopes of advancing one's career and the constraints of the strong biological pull that highly educated mothers experience serves as a contradiction in itself (Bianchi et al. 2006). Hays brings to our attention that the norms for motherhood and ideal intensive role serves as our society's needs for capitalism and the state to be in control. The idea that women naturally and socially are constructed to be in the home is at the root of an unfair system. Women who want to be both the ideal worker and the ideal mother are constantly competing in an unreasonable battle with their male counterparts (Hays 1996; Crittenden 2001).

Hochschild's *Second Shift* demonstrates how working women attempt to balance both aspects of their lives even if they are receiving little to no help from their husbands. Furthermore, the failed attempts for husbands to help out around the house leads to working womens' increased stress. Women are stressed because of their role overload and are being forced to put in extra hours when they cannot afford these extra responsibilities (Crittenden 2001; Hays 1996; Wilk 1986). Women who felt that they had equal amount of help around the house tended to feel less stressed. Another study focused on the poverty of single-mothers and the stress that is endured by the many obstacles of raising a child single-handedly (Olson and Banyard 1993). Mary Munro has interviewed and told the stories of five women who are balancing a career and a family in her book, *The Balancing Act II*. This study found that mothers are often put in tight situations of choosing between work and personal responsibilities at home, yet in the end they were more enriched with both of these aspects in their lives (Munro 1981). A more recent study found that it is not the number of roles a woman has in her life, but the quality of those roles for which she experiences that measures the benefits of those roles (Roxburgh 2002).

Contradictory findings include that women are less prone to work related stress due to number of “resources” (Ben-Zur and Michael 2007; Ahola et al 2005; Kalimo et al 2002). Resources, as defined by a couple studies, include relationships at work and ability to rely on co-workers to support individuals in times of stress or overwhelming measures (Ben-Zur and Michael 2007; Ahola et al 2005; Kalimo et al 2002). Factors related to the relationships found in the workplace are exemplified by social support appreciation from workmates and superiors. One study found that less personal resources are correlated with workers experiencing stressful events at work more strongly than those who have more resources (Pahkin et al 2002). In the discussion about these findings, it was stated that women are more likely to make use of resources and use open communication in the workplace than men are. This research suggests that women are less prone to stress than their male counterparts due to ability to use resources.

Secondly, industrial societies tend to be male-dominated and women are often excluded from important political and economic decisions being made in the workplace (Shaffer et al 2000). Over the past decade, women have moved into jobs that were traditionally male centered for a long period of time. These jobs included law, business, and medicine. At first these workplaces were found to be unwelcoming, unreceptive, and hostile. But overtime, places became more inviting to those who were talented or well trained.

4. *Stress experienced is linked to health problems*

Numerous studies have shown that women's health problems are linked to the workplace (Roxburgh 2002; Ahola et al 2006; Barnett and Brennan 2005; Carey 2009; Eisler and Hersen 2000; Goldman and Hatch 2000; Goodman et al. 2009; Jacobs and Winslow 2000; Kalimo et al. 2000; Frankenhaeuser et al. 1991; Schor 1992; Shaffer et al. 2000; Shields 1999). One study labeled stress as "*the women's occupational health problem*" (Frankenhaeuser et al. 1991). A

cross-sectional study found that low levels of control and perceived challenge at work was linked to psychological stress and discomfort for working women (Barnett, R.C., and Brennan, R.T., 1995). Earlier research has also suggested that low-income individuals with little education face limited job opportunities typically with low wages (Gibbs, Kusmin, and Cromartie, 2005). As a result, it is more likely that these individuals will experience stress greater than individuals with managerial positions and better paying jobs. Other research shows that working mothers have higher self-esteem and are less prone to depression than housewives but compared to their husbands and peers, working mothers get sick and tired more often (Hochschild 1989; Jacobs and Winslow 2004; Kalimo et al. 2002).

This is important because there is a strong link between the role that health factors play in the relationship of the mother to her family (Presser 2003). One particular study that investigates the role of the labor market on the family relationships found that women who work the night shift, weekend shift, or any other odd times have suffered from health implications. Perhaps this is because there is a greater health risk associated with changes to an individual's circadian rhythms, biological functions, hormone levels, and sleep (Eisler and Hersen 2000). Greater evidence has also linked stress to greater evidence of gastrointestinal disorders, higher rates of cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic sleep disorders, breast cancer, miscarriage, preterm birth, depression, and anxiety (Frankenhaeuser et al. 1991; Eisler and Hersen 2000; Expanded Reporting 2008).

5. Stress levels Effects on Family

With the increase of women in the labor market, researchers would assume that the amount of time parents spend with their children has decreased. According to the 1990 General Social Survey, 85% of participants answered true to the statement, "parents don't spend enough time

with their children.” Yet in her study, Presser found that this hypothesis was not true. Parental time interacting with children has actually increased since mothers started becoming more involved with the labor force (Presser 2006). In her book, *Changing Rhythms of American Family Life*, Presser demonstrates that parents are spending as much time, if not more interacting with their kids on a daily basis than parents back in the stay-at-home-mom time frame. They spend just as much time with their families by increasing their multitasking skills and incorporating their children into their daily leisure activities. What seems to be suffering is the house work that so many mothers slaved away at in earlier years (Presser 2006). Therefore, this study has proven that the family is not getting less attention in the light of women’s job responsibilities. The change is in the quality of interaction and the environment for which the family lives. Along with the feelings of rushed and over-whelming schedule conflict, many mothers feel that this interferes with the time spent with their families, especially children (Hochschild 1989).

Further, studies have shown that the more highly educated parents tend to spend more time with their children and expose them to more intellectually stimulating activities (Leibowitz 1977; Hill and Stafford 1974). The ideology behind motherhood is increasingly romanticized through the media (Presser 2006; Behrman 1982). Many women have internalized the view that the family relies on the mother to raise healthy, successful, happy children and meeting this goal traditionally is a full time task (Behrman 1982). Hays argues that the social determinant for good mothering revolves around the ability for the mother to give attention to her children. In her study, she found that participants believed mothers to be the strongest influential force when nurturing, caring, and loving their children. Caretakers were said to not have the commitment and ability to replace mothers. Fathers were even found to not have as much impact as a mother

would on the care for their child (Hays 1996). These results may add to the pressure women experience to be at home and adhere to their children. Women, particularly educated mothers perceive their responsibilities to be child-focused in their undying efforts to raise quality, happy, and successful children (Bianchi et al. 2006).

6. *SES Impacts Stress levels*

As Goldman and Hatch put it, "SES captures living conditions and life chances, skill levels and material resources, relative power and privilege. It is this very capturing of so many aspects of life history and everyday experience that make SES such a powerful predictor of health status" (Goldman and Hatch, 2000). Studies have shown that women with lower education levels and lower income levels are associated with worse perceived health and with a limitation on activity levels amongst US working adults (Goldman and Hatch, 2000). Hays, in *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, points out that the natural tendency to fulfill the home responsibility as a mother is consistent across both middle and lower class families (Hays 1996). Crittenden adds that inequality that women experience is rooted in the expectation that mothers have responsibility for both the home and workplace (Crittenden, 2001).

One study found that education in higher and middle income countries explains a number of dimensions of women's lives: "their relative poverty or privilege growing up, their likely occupational standing and marriage prospects, their access to information, and their cognitive ability" (Hatch and Goldman, 2000). Another study found that more highly educated women were more likely to work in higher demanding jobs (Bianchi et al 2006). Another study examined the work-family spillover across a wide range of socioeconomic groups. They found that respondents in the top quartile experienced more positive spillover from work to family than those in the lower income categories (Grzywacz et al. 2000). In other words, it has been

predicted that individuals with lower SES is more likely to endure higher levels of stress than individuals with higher SES. One study also made the connection between monotony in the workplace and stress. A routine job that does not stimulate the mind nor challenge the individual is comparably detrimental to a job in which the employee is over stimulated or has an over workload (Thackery 1981).

Theory

My study is based on the idea that stress levels are not contingent upon one's socio-economic status. The way I am looking at class is through socio-economic stratification theory. It is the idea that people's perceptions of different social classes and the relations among them are based on three systems: the power model, prestige model, and money model. The power model is based on Marxist theory and the money model most closely relates to Weber. For the purposes of this study, I will most closely focus on the prestige model, which corresponds to Social Economic Status and class differentiation. The prestige model does not place the upper class and lower class people in separate groups based on an economical income factor. Instead, this model aims to rank people individually in terms of prestigious characteristics such as occupation, education, and travel. This is important for my study because I want to classify into two groups the socio-economic status of participants in my study.

The importance of viewing class through education, occupation, and number of incomes is to place subjects in categories after they have been interviewed so that I may use socio-economic status as a variable. I will measure SES by asking subjects about their travels, whether they've been abroad and whether their family regularly goes on vacation. I will also ask about their education background, job status, number of incomes currently generated in their family, and very blatantly whether they would consider themselves to be lower, middle, or upper class

citizens. Without differentiating between occupation, education, and number of incomes, placing subjects in different groups would be difficult given I will not be asking a qualitative measure of income.

I am interested in the relationship between class and stress and whether or not class has an effect on the perceived levels of stress, pressure, and constraints working women experience. I hope to challenge the findings already established in other studies that individuals from lower SES backgrounds have higher stress levels. I hope to find and document whether higher stress levels, amount of pressure felt, and overall feelings of constraint exist in both upper and lower/middle class families. My project will address class and its relationship with stress in the workplace by means of control on the subjects as current working mothers in the Chicago land area.

Data/Methods

It is difficult to put a quantitative measure on stress levels found in working mothers. Surveys have been taken in the past that aim to put a measure on experienced stress levels but the concept remains abstract. Because I am not doing a psychological experiment, which would focus on the physiological determinants of stress, I focused on perceived societal determinants of stress from the viewpoint of my participants. I performed 20 interviews with full-time working mothers in the Chicagoland area, each having their own unique jobs and living situations. The control for the participants was that 10 were considered middle/upper class and 10 were considered middle/working class by reason of the prestige model and self-identification.

I used a snowball sample technique in order to try to get a group of upper class individuals versus a group of middle class/working individuals. First I phone-interviewed a working middle class mother recommended to me by a friend as my starting point for group A. I also interviewed someone whom would be referred to as an upper/middle class participant by the

Prestige Model to start off my group for section B. Each participant was asked to recommend two friends for whom I could call and receive data through. The idea behind the snowball sample was the thought that people in similar classes associate with each other and thereby share similar economic interests. By interviewing an upper/middle class and middle/working class individual each separately to start their respective groups, I was somewhat controlling for the SES of the sample. The small size of my sample coupled with the snowball technique means that these results cannot be claimed as representative or wholly generalizable, although I do expect that some of the information found in each group can be matched in numerous other working mothers' bios. Although this study is not a representative sample of the population of full-time working mothers, I hope that it will shed some light on the kinds of stress perceived by a distinct population.

The subjects were 20 working mothers from the Chicago land area, ranging in age from 27-54. All of the participants were working full time and had been employed anywhere from 3-28 years in their respective jobs. Each participant was asked to classify themselves as upper, middle, or lower class. Each interview took about 30-45 minutes and was performed over the phone.

The specific ages of the middle/working class participants were 43, 38, 53, 54, 30, 38, 51, 32, 27, and 33 with an average age at 39.9 years. Nine out of ten of these working women were still married and had two sources of income. The range of number of children was two to seven children. Ages ranged from two to twenty-four. The participants self-classified their jobs as banking management, Vice President of Risk Management, Real Estate Appraiser at home, sales management position, medical record department manager in a hospital, catering and special events coordinator, instructional technology at Loyola University, UPS employee, Banking

Loans department, and Nail Salon employee. Half of the middle/working class had their highest form of education in High School. The other half attended Court Reporting School, some college, received their Bachelors degree, or received their Associates degree. This group of participants had also described their vacations as once a year, every couple years, twice a year, or not at all. Most vacation spots tended to be places in the United States with the exception of a few participants.

The middle/upper class participants included a human rights lawyer, dentist with private practice, professor at the Art Institute, Physicians Assistant, Teacher for Private high school, civil court lawyer, volunteer with women's abuse center, psychologist with a private practice, executive manager of the Trump Tower, and owner of a Hair Salon. Education levels of these participants were much higher on average than the middle/lower class participants. The highest education levels included law school, med school, schooling abroad in France, PA school, Education Masters, Bachelor of Arts, Master of Psychology, Bachelor of Fine Arts, and some college. Vacation taken by these individuals tended to be abroad on average to places such as Europe, South America, and Asia. These participants seemed to travel more regularly with answers such as over the holidays, summers, winter break, and every year. Their children were age three to fourteen and all had between two and four children.

Interview questions were mainly open ended to begin with the exception of a few specifically targeted questions. The topics covered aimed to get a sense of the relationship between stress and class by investigating job stress, family, and personal enjoyment for hobbies and relaxation time. The first couple questions covered basic information such as marital status, education level, number of incomes for the household, socio economic status classification, and number of children and their respective ages. I also asked about family vacations taken, places

travelled, and whether they had a specific place they went to every year. This question was aimed to understand class of the family based on resources available for personal enjoyment.

This would essentially put the executives, law makers, and medical field employers at higher risk for over bearing stress levels. I based these category placements on the subject's career, given the statement, "tell me about your job." Further, I attempt to understand their work situation in terms of job demands, pressure, flexibility, social status, and committed number of hours.

Given the question, "do you feel your work is flexible?" I got a sense of how open their workplace is to scheduling conflicts. "Nonflexible work arrangements" as described in one study is directly linked to depressive symptoms and stress levels in working mothers (Goodman and Crouter 2009). I asked whether subjects feel pressure to choose between advancing their work and devoting attention toward personal responsibility.

Immediately following the open ended question about participants' jobs, I asked whether or not they enjoyed their job. The focus of this question was how negative or positively they responded. Later I would code the responses to look for patterns or connections between class and groups of participants.

A cross-sectional study found that low levels of control and perceived challenge at work was linked to psychological stress and discomfort for working women (Barnett and Brennan, 1995). One of the interview questions aims to understand the satisfaction with the job by asking whether or not their work is challenging and/or stimulating. This question was derived from existing literature about the level of satisfaction women feel with their careers. Although the common misconception is that women who feel their work is more challenging would feel more stressed, it has been predicted to be the other way around. A more challenging and stimulating

environment would lead to less stress overall because these components affect an individual's sense of self-worth. Some of the responses expected are that work is challenging and stimulating at times, but can also be very stressful and overwhelming and cut into other dimensions of their personal life. By asking about the subject's family and whether or not they have time to attend their children's activities, I got a sense of whether or not they feel they have control over their responsibilities to the home and workplace. I also examined time spent with children and stress levels on a daily basis because family time is linked with perceived levels of stress.

One of the important topics in the interview was when I asked participants to describe the social setting at their workplace. This question was aimed to understand how connected participants felt at the workplace and whether or not they had a strong support system. Existing literature has linked women who use their "personal resources" at work, meaning their peers and co-workers, with better coping strategies for stress than those without resources. By asking about the social network at their jobs, I was able to code for positive or negative feedback about the kinds of relationships and ways that these relationships were used.

The last couple questions of the interview aim to get a sense of whether or not subjects really feel they have time for themselves. Relaxation and down time are vital parts to a healthy well-balanced life and it is important to incorporate these into our hectic schedules. I wanted to get a sense of the kinds of activities participants choose for relaxation. Would they choose hobbies and activities that were solely for themselves and by themselves? Or would they consider something they did for the family or as another chore as something for themselves? Further, the responses helped generate ways to improve upon availability of preferred places and activities to unwind.

At the end of each interview, I asked that the participant to recommend two other full-time working women in the Chicago land area with small children for my study. Most of the time the participants were pretty willing to give me names of their friends, family, neighbors, or peers. Sometimes they would call first and then let me know if it was okay to proceed with the contact.

Results

Hypothesis one predicted that working mothers with lower socio-economic status have less flexibility with work and jobs and will experience more perceived stress than mothers with more flexibility. Results of hypothesis one were derived from answers of both groups of participants to the question, “do you feel that your work is flexible?” Results found to this question were somewhat in support of the hypothesis. Within the middle/lower class group, women reported that they felt their work was flexible to a degree. Many felt that if something important with their personal lives came up, it wouldn’t be a problem to change their schedule. Others reported feelings of no flexibility and that it was frowned upon to take time off. Some of the responses are as follows: “Daily duties need to be done, but I think they’re forgiving in that aspect.” “Men have a more flexible schedule because they can work weekends.” “No not at all. I am frowned upon for taking time off.” “They almost didn’t let me attend my son’s graduation.” “Yes, I’ll work odd hours if I need to catch up.” When middle/upper class participants were asked the same question, responses tended to voice feelings of less pressure and more flexibility although answers did vary from person to person. Some examples of the responses evoked from the middle/upper class included: “If I need to do something outside of my profession it is not a problem.” “As long as the work gets done, my job is very flexible.” “Yes, I make my own hours and my own schedule.” “Others rely on me so I have to adhere to the allotted work time on my

schedule.” “Yes to a degree, my work is flexible by scheduling work hours but not by work load.”

Hypothesis two predicted that working mothers who find work to be challenging and/or stimulating will experience less perceived stress than those who find their jobs to be monotonous. Results found were based on the question, “do you find your work to be challenging and/or stimulating?” Almost all of the participants found their work to be stimulating and/or challenging in one way or another. Middle/lower class responses to this question included answers such as: “Yes, some days are more challenging than others but I like learning new things and having an increased responsibility.” “Yes, I like training other people and taking the time to teach them what I know.” “Each day is different and I do not know what I will face. I do not have previous knowledge in the field so it is always a new challenge learning new material.” “Yes, it is like a rubix cube. It is hard to satisfy customers and the pieces never quite fit right.” “Yes, learning new things takes a lot of brain power.” Whereas middle/upper class responses included answers such as: “Yes, computerization of everything is very challenging in this day and age.” “Yes, always a new scene.” “Yes, technology is always changing.” “Yes, I enjoy talking with people and getting to know my patients.” “Yes, trying to explain new concepts can be difficult at times.”

Hypothesis three predicted that working mothers who describe their work social setting in a positive manner and feel more connected will have experienced less stress than those who feel disconnected from their work social setting. Results for this question were sporadic but did not disprove the hypothesis. Most women found their work to have open communication and a positive atmosphere at work in which they wouldn’t hesitate to ask co-workers for help or questions that might arise. Answers were in response to the statement, “Describe the social

setting at your work.” Middle/lower class mothers responded: “We’ve all worked here together for a long time and keep in touch on a regular basis.” “Has become less friendly and more of a corporate office. Management has caused damage to relationships within the company.” “No one is isolated. A lot of interaction at work but no socialization outside work.” “We have open communication and wouldn’t hesitate to ask for help on any given issue.” “Very isolated. Most have a one person office. This is the nature of the job.” Whereas upper/middle class reported responses were: “I try not to associate with the younger workers at my job. It’s a respect thing.” “Yes communication is very fluent at my job. My clients report to me on a daily basis.” “I speak regularly with students about issues they are having with the material. We have weekly staff meetings as well.” “We talk regularly and are in constant communication.” “Yes, this work atmosphere is contingent upon human interaction and exchange of ideas.”

The results of other questions asked in the interviews were also of importance for analyzing perceived stress levels in working mothers. One particular question of importance was, “do you enjoy your job?” Middle/lower class responses tended to report answers about enjoying their jobs for what the job does for them and how it is a part of their life. A few responses included, “It’s easier to come to work than to be at home.” “I come to work so I can relax. Home is very unexpected.” “Didn’t enjoy it at first but after 5 years it became a little bit easier.” The overall enjoyment of these participants seemed positive. Middle/upperclass respondents tended to reflect more about their jobs in terms of what they have done for the community and how their enjoyment has been lived through their contribution. For example, “Yes, the medical field is growing at a very rapid pace and I enjoy being a part of this very important phenomenon.” “It has taught me a lot about myself and the world.” “Yes, each day I learn something new.” “I don’t have another option.” “I must like the job, I’ve been in the profession for 15 years!”

Almost all participants felt that they had time to spend on their personal activities. Participants' kids were involved in many similar activities. Most were sports related, educational, and typical family activities. These activities mentioned included soccer, baseball, religious education, bike riding, movies, board games, boating, the beach, museums, playing in the park, arts and crafts, boy scouts, girl scouts, and music. Participants in my study reported baking, walking the dog, meditating, watching movies, reading, sewing, yoga, arts and crafts, chores, talking with friends, internet surfing, eating, cooking, spending time with family, praying, exercise, and gardening to be the number one thing they either do or would do to relax in their free time.

Discussion/Conclusion

My study was designed to investigate the effects that class has on perceived stress levels in full-time working mothers in the Chicago land area. The purpose of asking about income, vacation, education levels, jobs, and marital status was to classify participants into two different class groups. Group A is considered middle/working class participants whom rarely travel outside the United States, if they travel at all. Travel locations tended to be over the holidays, once a year, or every couple years. These individuals also classified themselves as middle/working class and have experienced at most some college or received a Bachelors Degree. Half of these participants had finished high school as their highest level of education. Participants of group A worked in managerial positions, 9-5 jobs for which they did not seem to have as much flexibility over their time schedules and non-professional jobs. Although there were some situations where group A participants could have been part of group B and vice versa, I used systematic coding to place individuals in their respective groups.

It is also important to note that neither elite upper class individuals nor lower class poverty line individuals were part of my study. The lack of accessibility to these individuals prevented me from interviewing both extreme lines of socio-economic status. I chose to break individuals into two groups, middle/upper and middle/working class. The reason I did not do upper and lower class distinctions is because I did not consider any of the women to be specifically upper or lower class. Because the middle class is so large, individuals can easily be part of opposite extremes. While they are all middle class, some are considered middle/upper and some considered middle/lower. For this reason, I divided participants into their respective groups according to job, education, marital status, and vacation.

Because I did not have an external incentive to offer, it was difficult to get participants to find time in their day for my interview. Aside from the external incentive, participants were also usually very busy and had difficulty finding time to be interviewed. Often I found that because of the population I was studying, rarely were participants available during the day for interviewing. I had to contact them numerous times to set up an interview and often felt like I was pestering or cutting into their day even though they would assure me it was not a problem. I also felt some sense of irony while interviewing working women about their busy schedules because I was asking them to take time out of their day to tell me about the stress they were experiencing. This was one of the obstacles of interviewing the population I chose. The only times I could reach them were late at night and on the weekends.

As predicted, women of higher socio-economic status were found to have more flexibility in their work schedules. These women tended to be from group B, the middle/upper class mothers. Jobs such as a dentist, professor, volunteer, lawyer, physicians assistant, psychologist, etc. tended to have more of a free flowing time schedule. Group B working mothers reported

having more leeway in the hours they work, which seemed to be a result of their professions. Most were private businesses or professional jobs that still took a great deal of work and time, but could be molded to their convenience. The relationship between flexibility and perceived stress in the workplace is analyzed in the literature as women whom have more pressure to adhere to strict schedules and guidelines are more likely to experience higher levels of stress. Another hypothesis was that women who are better educated will in turn receive better jobs and have more control over the flexibility of their hours. This was proven somewhat true given participants in the middle/upper class group had more education experience and reached higher levels of their profession. They also were more likely to have flexibility at their jobs and seemed more in control of their schedules. One participant reported, "I never really get too stressed. I know what I can handle and I do not take on more than my limit. I believe I learned how to manage my time and workload when I was in college and it has continually helped me in my career." The reported responses demonstrated this hypothesis to be true, especially when compared with the responses received by the middle/working class participants.

Responses by the middle/working class participants tended to be less confident and precise in their assessment of work flexibility. Many responses teetered back and forth between, "yes, I'll work odd hours if I need to catch up," and "I think they are forgiving in that aspect." When asked if their job was flexible, middle/upper class participants did not hesitate to respond with confidence that they could arrange their time schedule to the most convenience for them. Yet middle/working class participants could not really assure this. Many complained about how they are frowned upon for taking time off and that men had it much easier because they could work on the weekends, whereas mothers had to be home with the kids and taking care of personal issues. Some reported that they were worried to ask for sick time or days off if needed

for personal issues because of the current economy. They did not feel secure in their jobs did not want to compromise losing their source of income. Therefore, if asked to put in extra hours, even if this would increase their stress levels exponentially, middle/working class mothers would put the extra time in.

In response to hypothesis two, that working mothers who find their work to be challenging and/or stimulating will experience less perceived stress than those who find their jobs to be monotonous, there was not much variation between middle/upper class and middle/working class participants. Almost all of the participants found their work to be challenging and/or stimulating in one way or another. Most participants in both classes talked about the ways in which technology keeps their jobs interesting as they learn new information and operate on new gadgets day in and day out. These working women were constantly being taught how to do the same work they have always done but in a different manner.

It was interesting that many women explained the stimulating aspect of their work to be teaching others about the skills they know. As found in the existing literature, women naturally want to nurture and teach other people what they know. In response to hypothesis three, almost all women, whether from group A or B found comfort in the social situation at work. Most described holiday parties, board game night, and dinners as their reasoning for feeling connected toward their co-workers. There was not much variation between the two classes for their description on social setting. Perhaps this can be explained through some of the existing literature on women and the workplace as a social network. The belief that women tend to use their workplace as a social network and more openly communicate on a daily basis when compared to men leads me to think that my results would have been different had I compared groups of men and women. But because I was comparing groups of women at the workplace, I

found that most tended to fit the literature findings about using their resources at work for social support. It is second nature for women to feel satisfied by helping out other people in the office. Therefore, the responses that women in my sample gave about training other people and explaining new concepts to co-workers as a stimulating part of their jobs matched the findings in existing literature for both a challenging aspect and social resource aspect.

The small size of my sample coupled with the snowball technique means that these results cannot be claimed as representative or wholly generalizable. However, there are reasons to believe that the ideology behind stress perceived by these mothers is not limited to this small group. Despite the diverse backgrounds and status of these working women, they tended to share similar experiences with family stress and work stress. The interviewees seemed to have medium amounts of stress in their lives. Most seemed pretty satisfied with their jobs and family balance. Most also seemed to have allotted time for themselves in which they could tend to hobbies or other small relaxing enjoyment activities. Aside from one interviewee, all seemed to have stress managed very well and to have satisfaction with their jobs. Yet this could easily be masked to a person like myself who only spoke with them once or twice at the most over the phone. Here in lies the difficulty with measuring stress. It is very ambiguous and varies from case to case.

Further implications touch on the fact that stress in women is directly linked to the overall decrease in health and well-being. Women are believed to live on average 7 years longer than men, but their overall quality of life has been found to be lower (Eisler and Hersen 2000). In addition, women are experiencing more health problems but are not receiving the adequate care they need to resolve these problems. Women are less likely to have adequate healthcare than men and are therefore only perpetuating the cycle of a lowered quality of life. But it can be

argued that women's stressors are socially constructed and perpetuated through existing power structures (Eisler and Hersen 2000; Hays 1996; Behrman 1982). The issue of women's stress as it pertains to their lifestyles is an important issue as it is compromising their overall quality of life.

My results were not in line with what I had expected. Flexibility was proven to be the most influential factor of stress as compared with the other two hypotheses. Whether or not a workplace was challenging and/or stimulating did not vary across the population of participants; perhaps this is because I did not have enough variation in the socioeconomic status of my participants. Whether or not participants tended to use their social networks at work also did not vary in my results. This can be explained by the existing literature about uses of social networks between men and women. If I had to repeat my study, I would change the population of participants and include more variation in socioeconomic status. With the ever increasing population of the baby boomers, many families are deciding to have their grandparents live with them as opposed to sending them to the nursing homes. This has received little attention in the light of impact on women's stress levels. It would be beneficial for future research to investigate the impact of grandparents moving into their children's home as opposed to nursing homes and the effects on working mother's stress. Because my study mainly focused on stress in the workplace, studies furthering the research on stress incurred at home are needed to better understand this population. With the help of new research, my hopes are that better and more accommodating ways for women to relieve and control stress can be implemented.

Consent to Participate in Research

Dear Participant,

Thank you for taking the time to participate in my study.

The purpose of this research is to understand the kinds of stress that working mothers experience. Interviews with working mothers of the Knox County Community will be conducted with aims to identify and suggest ways of combating stress. I hope this study will benefit working mothers by beginning to identify causes of stress particular to working mothers. As I begin looking at this issue, your participation will be an important part of the project. For your benefit, I will be using pseudonyms to maintain anonymity.

Participation in this research project is totally voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may choose to not answer any questions you do not feel comfortable with and you may choose to discontinue participation at any time.

If you agree to participate, I will ask about your job, family, stress, and relaxation techniques. I expect the interview to take about 20-30 minutes.

Everything discussed in the interviews will be confidential and used anonymously for this study's purposes only. Risks of participation in this study include reflection on the stress levels incurred in one's life, but these are not expected to be severe.

Once again, I appreciate your voluntary participation in this study.

If any questions should arise before, during, or after the interview, please do not hesitate to contact me at couchmans@kenyon.edu, or my faculty adviser, Professor Johnson at johnsonj@kenyon.edu. Complaints on how the Interview is conducted or any questions about your rights as a participant may be directed to the Kenyon College Institutional Review Board (IRB) Administrator at peelle@kenyon.edu or 740 427 5748.

I agree to volunteer for the Working Mothers Interview

Signature

Date

I agree to keep everything discussed in the interview confidential and information will be used in this study only

Signature

Date

Debriefing Sheet

Stress in Working Mothers

Thank you for participating in this study.

One of the main aims in this study was to explore the kinds of stress experienced by working mothers.

I used interviews in order to best explore thoughts and feelings of the interviewee on stress in his or her life.

One of the reasons for studying stress in working mothers' lives is so that we can best assess ways to combat that stress and continue to add to the existing literature on the topic.

The reason for including questions about your job and family was because past research links job demands and work pressure to stress levels. These associations will help me to get a better sense of the relationships of working mothers, type of work, working conditions, and stress.

Your contribution to this study is therefore very valuable and very much appreciated.

If, for whatever reason, you later decide that you no longer want your responses to be part of this study, then please contact Stefanie Couchman (see details below) to have your data removed from the study and destroyed. As a final point, your responses will not be singled out. You will remain anonymous.

Thank you again for participating and helping with this study. However, **please do not show this debriefing sheet or discuss any aspect of the study with other mothers.** In order for this study to work, it is important that future participants do not have this information or any particular expectations. Thanks!

If you would like more information, or have any further questions about any aspect of this study, then please feel free to contact **Stefanie Couchman**:

Ph. 773. 934.8294

Email: couchmans@kenyon.edu

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