

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF MULTIPLE SOCIAL ROLES

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This research relies on data from a survey conducted in 1981 to explore the potential negative and positive consequences of having multiple roles. The responses of 500 employed women to questions about self-esteem, satisfaction with careers, partners, and children, and perceptions of life stress and pleasure were examined. The number of roles held by respondents ranged from 1 to 5 (worker, partner, parent, volunteer, and student). The results indicated that higher self-esteem and greater job satisfaction were associated with holding more roles. However, neither marital nor parental satisfaction was consistently related to the number of roles held. Although the majority of working women reported their lives to be stressful, this finding was independent of the number of roles held, and women with more roles did not consistently report a greater number of stressful life domains. These findings suggest that, for employed women, having multiple roles may enhance psychological well-being.

What is the relationship between having multiple social roles and psychological well-being? This question has become increasingly significant for women. Nearly 65% of American women between the ages of 20 and 54 currently are working outside the home, and approximately 50% of all married women and 43% of married women who have preschool children are employed (U.S. Department of Labor, 1980). Because so many women are enacting roles that simultaneously demand responsibility and commitment, it is important to understand whether holding multiple roles increases or reduces psychological risks.

Traditional role theories suggest that the competing demands of different social tasks produce role strain or conflict (Goode, 1960; Merton, 1957; Sarbin & Allen, 1968; Slater, 1963). These theories imply that people have limited

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energy and resources and may become overburdened by too many role relationships. Psychological distress is apt to emerge when people fail to reduce role tension or overload by implementing strategies such as eliminating role relationships or setting up barriers to preserve their time. From this perspective, women who are trying to maintain several roles would be expected to experience negative, stressful feelings.

In contrast, more recent theories suggest that individuals may profit from enacting multiple roles (Marks, 1977, Sieber, 1974, Thoits, 1983). Performing several roles may increase individuals' privileges and resources in their social environment, assist in establishing social and economic status and security, act as a buffer for problems or failures in any single life domain, and enhance feelings of self-worth (Linville, 1982, Sieber, 1974, Thoits, 1983).

Recent studies of the risks and benefits of having multiple roles indicate that people who hold more social roles experience less psychological distress and mental illness (Gurin, Veroff, & Feld, 1960, Thoits, 1983), greater life satisfaction and well-being (Barnett & Baruch, 1981, Manis, 1982), and fewer physical ailments (Verbrugge, 1982). Enacting multiple roles thus appears to promote global well-being, but many questions remain about the precise nature of the process by which it does so. The purpose of the present research is to analyze further the relationship of multiple roles to subjective well-being by focusing on several questions: (1) Does enacting multiple roles influence women's self-esteem? (2) Does having many roles increase satisfaction globally, or only in some life areas? (3) Is the number of roles a woman holds related to how stressful or pleasurable she perceives her life to be?

With respect to the first question, we anticipate several ways that having multiple roles may influence self-esteem. On the one hand, if women who have taken on a number of roles experience role conflict or strain, they may fail to perform all of their tasks satisfactorily and may lose confidence in themselves. On the other hand, managing many tasks may generate a sense of competence and worth. Thus, women who have several roles may show more positive feelings toward themselves.

The second question concerns the possibility that engaging in many roles may influence satisfaction only in specific life domains—for example, in work, marital, or parental spheres. Women who have several roles may feel constrained by their vast array of duties, which may lower their satisfaction with some or all of their roles. Or, if engaging in many activities induces a generalized well-being, then these women may be more satisfied in all areas of life.

The third question asks whether women who have more roles experience greater stress than women who have fewer roles. Older role theories suggest that holding multiple roles produces conflict and strain, but this idea is inconsistent with recent work suggesting that multiple roles may be associated with enhanced well-being. We consider the possibility that both stress and pleasure result from enacting multiple roles.

These questions were investigated using a sample of employed women

who participated in a survey. The survey data included information about the number and type of social roles held by respondents and about self-perceptions, satisfaction with careers, partners, and children, and perceptions of life stress and pleasure. Work, partner, parental, student, and volunteer roles were studied. Previous research has shown that women employed outside of the home have higher self-esteem and well-being than those who are not employed (Coleman & Antonucci, 1983, Feld, 1963, Kessler & McRae, 1981). The present study extends past research by investigating whether women who are working gain any further benefits by holding additional roles.

METHOD

Sample

The data analyzed in this study were part of a survey conducted in June 1981 by the Center for Continuing Education of Women (CEW) at the University of Michigan. The majority of respondents were employed women. From a total sample of 1044 women and 137 men, we selected 500 employed women who had supplied complete data on the control variables (age, education, and income) and on the variables determining the number of social roles. All respondents had received a graduate or professional degree from the University of Michigan in 1977 or 1978 or had come to CEW for information or advice during 1974–1977. Most of the CEW participants also held degrees from the University of Michigan.

The age range of the sample was 22 to 66 years ($M = 34.1$, $SD = 7.8$). The sample was unusually well-educated, only 4.8% of the respondents had *not* received a college degree, and the percentages of respondents holding bachelor's degrees, master's or graduate professional degrees, or Ph.D.'s were 29.8%, 55.8%, and 9.6%, respectively.

Measures

Number of social roles. The social roles studied were worker (full-time or part-time), partner (married or living with a partner), parent (one or more children), student (full-time or part-time), and volunteer (e.g., active in community, service, or political groups). Subjects were assigned a role level depending on their number of roles, each role level consisted of only one specific role or set of roles. The role combinations assigned to each level were chosen because they were most representative of those held by women in our sample. The role combinations (levels) were (1) working only ($n = 130$), (2) working and partner ($n = 133$), (3) working, partner, and parent ($n = 118$), (4) working, partner, parent, and student or volunteer ($n = 99$) and (5) working, partner, parent, student, and volunteer ($n = 18$).

Self-esteem The self-esteem measure consisted of five positive and five negative items such as "I take a positive attitude toward myself," "I have always felt that my life would work out pretty much the way I wanted it to," "I feel that my life is not very useful," and "Sometimes, I feel that I can't do anything right." Half of the items were adapted from the Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale. The statements were embedded within a larger set and appeared in randomized order. Answers were given on a five-point Likert scale from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree*. The self-esteem index was formed by computing mean scores from the 10 items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$), and larger values were associated with higher self-esteem.

Job satisfaction Job satisfaction was assessed by asking respondents "How satisfied are you with your job?" for each of 14 different job characteristics, such as salary, authority and level of responsibility, sense of personal growth and development, opportunity for recognition of work, relationships with colleagues and co-workers, contact with others in field, and opportunity for input regarding employer policies and procedures. These items were rated on a 6-point Likert scale from *very satisfied* to *very dissatisfied*. Responses indicating greater satisfaction were assigned higher values, and a mean job satisfaction score was formed from the 14 items (Cronbach's $\alpha = .87$).

Satisfaction with marriage or partnership and children Satisfaction with one's marriage or partnership was determined by respondents' answers to the question, "In general, how do you feel about your marriage or partnership?" Responses were made on a 6-point Likert scale ranging from *very satisfied* to *very dissatisfied*. Satisfaction with one's children was measured by how much respondents agreed with the statement, "The rewards and satisfactions of having children are an important source of pleasure and enjoyment in my life." Answers were given on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*.

Perceptions of life stress and pleasure One measure of life stress was how much respondents agreed on a 5-point Likert scale with the statement, "My life today involves a fairly high level of stress." Perceptions of life stress and pleasure also were assessed with two open-ended questions: "What is the greatest source of uncertainty, stress, or conflict in your life today?" and "What aspects of your life currently give you the most pleasure or enjoyment?" Response content was coded for the specific life domain to which it referred (e.g., work, partner, children, relationships with friends, hobbies, self). Note that some life domains directly correspond to the roles measured (e.g., work, partner), while others do not (e.g., hobbies, self). Thus, women who did not hold a given role could list domains that were not role-related, or they could list *not* having a particular life domain (e.g., not having a partner or children) as a source of stress or pleasure. The *number* of life

domains listed in response to these questions indicated how many were considered to be very stressful or very pleasurable

Control variables The effect of the number of social roles held was assessed while controlling for age, education (1 = no degree, 2 = bachelor's degree, 3 = master's or professional degree, and 4 = Ph D), and income. For respondents with partners, income was defined as the sum of both salaries

RESULTS

Self-esteem

Does having multiple roles influence women's self-esteem? Self-esteem was markedly higher for women who held more social roles. An analysis of covariance of self-esteem by number of roles, using age, education, and income as covariates, indicated that self-esteem increased significantly with the number of roles held, $F(4,490) = 6.51, p < .00001$. Mean self-esteem scores increased consistently as the number of social roles rose. The adjusted means were 3.84 ($SD = .06$), 3.93 ($SD = .05$), 4.04 ($SD = .06$), 4.16 ($SD = .06$), and 4.48 ($SD = .13$) for role levels 1-5, respectively. Scheffé comparisons indicated that women with five roles had higher self-esteem than women at all other role levels ($p < .05$ or better for all contrasts), women with four roles had higher self-esteem than those with one ($p < .0004$) or two ($p < .02$) roles, and women with three roles had higher self-esteem than those with only one role ($p < .02$). Thus, women who were working but who did not hold any of the other social roles showed the lowest self-esteem. In contrast, women who worked, had a partner and one or more children, were students, and engaged in at least one volunteer activity reported the most positive feelings about themselves.

Satisfaction with job, partner, and family

Job satisfaction Women with three, four, and five roles expressed the greatest satisfaction with their jobs, while women with one or two roles were the least satisfied. The adjusted means were 4.61 ($SD = .09$), 4.48 ($SD = .08$), 4.84 ($SD = .09$), 4.78 ($SD = .09$), and 4.76 ($SD = .20$) respectively. The analysis of covariance indicated that these means differed significantly by number of roles, $F(4,491) = 2.35, p < .05$. Scheffé comparisons showed that women with one role were slightly less satisfied than those with three roles ($p < .09$), and women with two roles were less satisfied than those with three ($p < .004$) or four roles ($p < .02$).

A stronger pattern emerged when the sample was restricted to women employed full-time, $F(4,377) = 3.07, p < .02$. The adjusted means were

4.56 ($SD = .09$, $n = 123$), 4.51 ($SD = .09$, $n = 118$), 4.95 ($SD = .11$, $n = 73$), 4.85 ($SD = .12$, $n = 60$), and 5.03 ($SD = .26$, ($n = 11$)), for roles 1–5, respectively. Scheffé contrasts revealed that, for full-time workers, women with one and two roles were less satisfied than those with three ($p < .02$ for both contrasts), four ($p < .10$, $p < .002$), or five roles ($p < .10$ for both contrasts).

Satisfaction with partnership and children For the 368 respondents with partners (role levels 2–5), women with more roles were *not* more satisfied with their marriage or partnership than those with fewer roles ($F < 1$, overall adjusted $M = 5.26$, $SD = 1.0$).

Satisfaction with parenthood was related to number of roles but did not increase consistently, $F(2,227) = 5.24$, $p < .006$. The adjusted means were 4.55 ($SD = .06$, $n = 117$), 4.70 ($SD = .07$, $n = 99$), and 4.14 ($SD = .16$, $n = 17$), for role levels 3–5 respectively. Scheffé comparisons revealed that satisfaction rose slightly from 3 to 4 roles ($p < .09$) but dropped for women with 5 roles in contrast to those with 3 ($p < .02$) or 4 ($p < .002$) roles. Given that only 17 women at levels 3–5 held 5 roles, the lower satisfaction of this group will require further empirical confirmation.

Perceptions of stress and pleasure

Most respondents agreed that their lives involved a fairly high level of stress (adjusted $M = 3.75$, $SD = 1.18$, $n = 496$), but this finding was independent of the number of roles held, $F < 1$. Women at all role levels designated about the same *number* of stressful life domains (e.g., work, partner, family, self, health) in response to the question, "What is the major source of stress, uncertainty, or conflict in your life today?" ($F < 1$, overall adjusted $M = 1.36$, $SD = .07$, $n = 468$). Typical responses from women without partners and children were that *not* having a partner or children was stressful, while those with partners and children mentioned problems in relationships with family members. Women who had three, four, or five roles mentioned a slightly larger number of positive domains (e.g., work, family, hobbies) than women with only one or two roles, however, these differences did not reach significance, $F(4,464) = 2.20$, $p < .07$. The adjusted means for number of positive domains were 1.88 ($SD = .09$, $n = 119$), 1.93 ($SD = .08$, $n = 127$), 2.22 ($SD = .08$, $n = 112$), 2.14 ($SD = .09$, $n = 96$), and 2.22 ($SD = .20$, $n = 18$), for role levels 1–5 respectively.

Role histories

It could be argued that women who hold multiple roles may be better copers or less susceptible to psychological distress, and women who have fewer roles may be more psychologically vulnerable and drop or lose roles. To test this idea, we determined how many women with one or two roles had

experienced role loss. The data included information about the respondent's marital and educational history (including whether the respondent had discontinued enrollment before completing a program), and the timing of current and past work, marital, and student roles. Since only 15 of the 263 women with one or two roles had experienced role loss, our data were insufficient to test this hypothesis. However, analyses excluding women who had undergone role loss were virtually the same as those reported above.

DISCUSSION

Our findings suggest that, for employed women, having multiple roles may be psychologically beneficial. For our sample, holding more roles was associated with higher self-esteem and job satisfaction. Furthermore, while women who held more roles did not consistently report more satisfaction with marital or parental roles, they also did not report greater life stress. Still further, women holding multiple roles showed a slight (but nonsignificant) tendency to list more life arenas as pleasurable. Since significant relationships were found for the two scaled dependent measures but not for the single item dependent measures, further exploration will be required to rule out a methodological explanation where differences among role levels were weak or absent.

Since the majority of our sample were highly educated and career-oriented middle-class women, it also will be important to investigate the extent to which these findings apply to women with less education and income, to women who are *not* career-oriented, and to women who are not employed outside the home. For example, full-time employment does not enhance self-esteem and well-being for women who are not career-oriented but does for career-oriented women (Pietromonaco, Manis, & Markus, 1985). Thus, the effect of multiple roles may differ among employed women depending on their career orientation.

One reason that having multiple roles may contribute to self-esteem is that performing a variety of tasks and interacting with more role partners increases one's sense of competence and facilitates the development of a richer, more complex view of self. A well-elaborated view of self, in turn, may enhance well-being and mental health (Linville, 1982, Pietromonaco, 1985). Alternatively, women who have higher self-esteem may be more likely to acquire or preserve a large number of roles. In our sample, the majority of women with one or two roles had not experienced role loss but may have had difficulty attaining more roles. Although we cannot be certain about the direction of causality, Thoits's (1983) research suggests that having many roles may have a direct impact on well-being. In her longitudinal study, psychological distress was increased when an individual lost a role and reduced when the same individual gained a role. One challenge for future research will be to identify the process linking multiple roles to self-esteem.

and well-being and to understand the independent contribution of multiple roles to this process

From our findings and those of others (e.g., Barnett & Baruch, 1981, Thoits, 1983), we can conclude that multiple roles are related to self-esteem and well-being, yet a number of issues still need to be addressed. First, consideration should be given to whether individuals perceive a role as important or central in their lives, the specific tasks that individuals believe define a role, and the time or effort that individuals devote to a role. Second, it will be valuable to ask whether women with a large number of roles differ from those with few roles both in amount of life stress and in how they construe and cope with stress. Women with many roles may actually have more stressful lives, but they may reduce stress by redefining what they consider to be stressful or by changing their expectations. Finally, how role partners, such as spouses, view one's other role responsibilities also may influence one's ability to manage multiple roles successfully. Exploring such issues will help us to make an accurate assessment of how multiple roles contribute to psychological well-being.

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