



Have children adapted to their mothers working, or was adaptation unnecessary? Cohort effects and the relationship between maternal employment and child well-being

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on previous theoretical and empirical work, we posit that maternal employment influences on child well-being vary across birth cohorts. We investigate this possibility by analyzing longitudinal data from a sample of children and their mothers drawn from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. We introduce a series of age, cohort, and maternal employment interaction terms into multilevel models predicting child well-being to assess whether any potential short-term or long-term effects of early and current maternal employment vary across birth cohorts. Results indicate that maternal employment largely is inconsequential to child well-being regardless of birth cohort, with a few exceptions. For instance, children born in earlier cohorts may have experienced long-term positive effects of having an employed mother; however, as maternal employment became more commonplace in recent cohorts, these beneficial effects appear to have disappeared. We discuss theoretical and methodological implications of these findings.

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1. Introduction

One of the most prominent demographic trends in contemporary family life is the rate at which American women have entered the paid labor force over the past several decades (Bianchi, 2000). In fact, the most recent data suggest that women now stand to outnumber men in the work force if current recessionary trends continue with men experiencing unemployment at a higher rate than women (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2009). Even though women's employment is a normative feature of contemporary families, controversy continues to surround the issue, with special attention given to mothers' employment. Maternal labor force participation is still scrutinized and questioned in the popular media, and child outcomes are often placed at the center of these debates out of concern over the consequences of maternal absence from the home (Hirshman, 2006; Sayer et al., 2004).

Even scholarly research frequently approaches the issue of maternal employment from what Gottfried and Gottfried (2006) call a deprivation perspective, where researchers search for negative outcomes related to mothers' labor force participation without placing this family process within a sufficiently broader context. In this study, we place maternal employment and its potential influences on child well-being within such a broader context—in this case, the context of birth cohorts. The contemporary milieu of maternal employment is different than it was decades ago. For instance, child care now is more readily available and arguably of higher quality, cultural attitudes about women's work roles have become less traditional as women have established rewarding and successful careers, and fathers have assumed more active parenting responsibilities

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within families. Therefore, children born in more recent cohorts likely experience their mothers' labor force participation differently than children born in earlier cohorts did, and we suspect that this effect of historical time is consequential for children's developmental trajectories.

By contextualizing child outcomes associated with maternal employment within birth cohorts, we seek to reconcile some of the mixed findings so common within the maternal employment and child well-being literature. Especially when negative effects of maternal employment are documented using data from the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY79), researchers tend to rely on subgroup analyses and restricted samples—for instance, only examining White children (Waldfoegel et al., 2002) or 10 and 11 year olds (Ruhm, 2008)—and an inconsistent array of categorical measures of maternal work hours (cf. Burchinal and Clarke-Stewart, 2007). In contrast, we conduct longitudinal analyses using a fully inclusive sample from the NLSY79 that permit us to correctly account for age and timing effects associated with comprehensive measures of maternal employment as we investigate cohort differences. As such, a focus on birth cohorts, in addition to being theoretically and empirically justified, requires us to use analytic techniques that allow us to avoid many of the shortcomings of previous research in this area.

2. Background

The majority of American women—wives and mothers—are employed. About 60% of all women over age 16 and over 70% of mothers are currently employed, compared to just 42% and 47% respectively in 1975 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006, 2007). Wives' contributions to total family household income grew from a median of about 27% in 1970 to 35% in 2004, and now about 25% of married women out-earn their employed husbands, compared to just 18% in 1987. These changes in women's labor force participation and concomitant economic independence over the past several decades might have implications for how household resources are accumulated and invested in contemporary families to produce child well-being outcomes.

Mothers' labor force participation is often theoretically treated as an issue related to the allocation of time and money as household resources (England and Farkas, 1986). Given traditional expectations about gender-based parenting responsibilities within families, it has been a matter of concern when mothers' time investments are directed toward the workforce and away from the household. The customary assumption is that time allows the proper attachment to develop between mother and child and gives children access to opportunities for the transmission of social, cultural, and intellectual capital from one generation to the next (Han et al., 2001; Harvey, 1999). Following this logic, mothers' investment of their time in the labor market has the potential to disrupt family resource allocation processes. Additionally, when employment is extensive and stressful, maternal time in the labor force might lessen mothers' parenting effectiveness (Cooksey et al., 1997).

Bianchi (2000) argues, however, that allocating mothers' time to the labor force and away from the home has not disrupted family processes related to child development. Contemporary mothers, regardless of their employment status, actually spend more time with their children than mothers did in the 1960s when they were less likely to be employed (Sayer et al., 2004). Moreover, mothers' paid employment may increase the financial resources that families can devote to their children's successful development (Bianchi, 2000; Heckman, 2000). Even so, many scholars remain concerned about the potential negative effects of mothers' labor force participation on child well-being (Berger et al., 2005; Gregg et al., 2005). This is especially the case when mothers with young children are employed, as children's early years (typically years 0–3) have been identified as a critical period of brain development (Knudsen, 2004), during which children's experiences and family environments might exert lasting effects on learning (Farkas and Beron, 2004; Hoff, 2003; Ruhm, 2008).

Earnest scientific research on the relationship between maternal employment and child well-being started in the 1960s (Hoffman, 1974) and continues (for reviews, see Harvey, 1999; Goldberg et al., 2008). However, despite such a sustained record of inquiry, research on the link between child well-being and mothers' labor force participation has led to mixed conclusions. Some research shows that child well-being is harmed by maternal employment (Belsky and Eggebeen, 1991; Bernal, 2008; Desai et al., 1989; James-Burdumy, 2005; Ruhm, 2008; Vandell and Ramanan, 1992), while other research demonstrates that negative effects associated with maternal employment are either overstated in previous studies or explained by selection factors such as maternal education and economic background characteristics (Greenstein, 1993, 1995; Harvey, 1999; Parcel and Menaghan, 1994a). Still others find positive effects of maternal employment on child well-being, especially when maternal employment increases family income (Baum, 2003; Blau and Grossberg, 1992; Harvey, 1999).

We refer readers to Harvey (1999) and Goldberg et al. (2008) for comprehensive reviews of the maternal employment and child outcomes research literature. There are two salient issues within this literature that we attempt to address here. First, empirical trends point to cohort effects as a potential source of variation in the observed influences of maternal employment on child well-being. Second, it is common in extant research where negative effects for maternal employment are found to use restricted samples of mothers and their children, which potentially over-emphasizes the true consequences of maternal employment for the average child who experiences it within the broader context of child development. Testing for cohort effects requires the use of a comprehensive sample and longitudinal models, thus allowing us to address our second concern about the use of restricted samples within the same analysis.

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