

Journal of Black Studies

<http://jbs.sagepub.com>

Work Stress in the Family Life of African Americans

Clifford L. Broman

Journal of Black Studies 2001; 31; 835

DOI: 10.1177/002193470103100608

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://jbs.sagepub.com>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *Journal of Black Studies* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://jbs.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://jbs.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations <http://jbs.sagepub.com/cgi/content/refs/31/6/835>

WORK STRESS IN THE FAMILY LIFE OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

CLIFFORD L. BROMAN
Michigan State University

Researchers have documented how work outside of the home has an impact on family life. These effects are both positive and negative. The obvious positive effects are the income and social status it brings. Not as obvious, but still important, is identity. Work provides people with an important sense of identity. It is not uncommon that people invest themselves in their work identity and thus become publicly and privately known by the work they do (see Thoits, 1999, for a further discussion of identity). This helps to give meaning and a sense of coherence to life.

The literature that has focused on work outside of the home has been primarily concerned with three aspects: (a) unemployment and economic hard times, (b) home-to-work stress contagion and spillover stress from work to the home, and (c) stressful work experiences in the workplace that are reflective of job-related characteristics. This third area is the focus of this article. By *job-related stressors*, we refer to demands of a particular job. These demands have been conceptualized as consisting of three aspects: physical demands; psychosocial demands; and job decision-making capac-

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This is the revised version of a paper presented at the National Council on Family Relations annual meeting in November 2000. The data used in this report are from America's Changing Lives Survey. The data were originally collected by James S. House at the University of Michigan and are available through the Inter University Consortium for Political and Social Research at the University of Michigan. The author is solely responsible for all analyses and interpretations. Address communications to Clifford L. Broman, Department of Sociology, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824-1111; e-mail: broman@pilot.msu.edu.

JOURNAL OF BLACK STUDIES, Vol. 31 No. 6, July 2001 835-846
© 2001 Sage Publications

ity, also discussed as job-latitude (Karasek, 1979; Karasek & Theorell, 1990). In this article, I investigate the link between job-related stressors and family life among African Americans.

WORK IN THE FAMILY LIFE OF AFRICAN AMERICANS

The literature on work has investigated results for African Americans, and there are some clear findings from this research. First, Blacks are more likely than Whites to suffer underemployment and unemployment (Broman, Hamilton, Hoffman, & Mavaddat, 1995; Hamilton, Broman, Hoffman, & Renner, 1990). Blacks are overrepresented in unskilled occupations (Farley & Allen, 1987; Swinton, 1989; Wilson, 1987), with low wages (Halpern, 1987), poor working conditions, and job instability (see Bowman, 1991). Blacks are disproportionately vulnerable to unemployment (Hamilton et al., 1990), with rates twice that of Whites (McLoyd, 1990), and are more likely to experience prolonged unemployment (Kletzer, 1991) and greater economic hardship as a result of joblessness (Brimmer, 1985). Last, African Americans are more vulnerable to job displacement due to recessions and economic changes (Simms, 1987; Wilson, 1987). As a result of the change from a manufacturing to a service economy, income wages over the past two decades have declined for Black Americans, particularly for Black men (Duncan & Rodgers, 1988).

One consequence of Black males' greater probability of underemployment and unemployment in recent years has been a rise in Black female-headed families (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1986; Staples, 1986). Black families headed by women have tripled since the 1960s (McLoyd, 1990), and research demonstrates that Black males' increased unemployment and underemployment predicts this increasing percentage of female-headed families (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1986). Many Black children live in households headed by women; currently about *half* of Black children live in female-headed households (Randolph, 1995). Single parent households are vulnerable to economic hardship and

poverty. About 70% of all Black children living in single parent households are poor (Center for the Study of Social Policy, 1986).

Thus, Black men, women, and children are more likely than their White counterparts to experience economic hardship. Many studies have demonstrated negative impacts for children living under conditions of economic hardship. For instance, poverty has been linked to socioemotional problems in both Black and White children such as depression, strained peer relationships, and overall psychological disorder (see McLoyd, 1990). Furthermore, research demonstrates that children from single-mother households are more vulnerable to negative outcomes such as poorer academic achievement, lower earnings in young adulthood, higher rates of poverty, and higher rates of drug and alcohol use (for a review, see McLanahan & Booth, 1991). Other research has shown that Black adults suffer poorer mental health as a consequence of economic hard times (Broman et al., 1995; Hamilton et al., 1990).

Research has also shown how job demands can negatively affect workers. Karasek (1979) and Karasek and Theorell (1990) demonstrated how, when workers cannot meet the demands imposed on them by their jobs, individual distress results. This is particularly true when a job possesses a high level of demand and a worker is unable to control the pace of his or her work (low job latitude). Blacks are more likely to have jobs with low job latitude (Farley & Allen, 1987), and workers with low job latitude and high physical demands are more likely to experience boredom, anxiety, and depression (Karasek & Theorell, 1990). Job satisfaction also has an impact; lower levels of job satisfaction are related to lower marital quality. Hughes, Galinsky, and Morris (1992) found that psychosocial characteristics of the job are related to marital quality. Workers who reported less job enrichment and more job pressure had lower marital quality.

Family impacts of poor job circumstances are reported to be negative. The stress and tension in a household because of work problems are high (Broman, Hamilton, & Hoffman, 1990; Hughes et al., 1992). In this study, we seek to examine specific characteristics of jobs to understand how this affects family life among African

Americans. In general, we expect a negative relationship, but this study seeks to uncover what specifically it is about jobs that may have such a negative impact on family life.

METHOD

DATA

The data used in this study are from the American's Changing Lives survey (ACL). The data are from a two-wave panel study of the U.S. population. The data for the first wave were collected in 1986 using a face-to-face survey. The second wave of data were collected in 1989. Data were collected under the direction of the Survey Research Center at the University of Michigan. Respondents had to be at least 25 years of age. The overall response rate for the survey was 76%. The first wave of data were collected from 3,617 respondents, whereas 2,867 respondents were reinterviewed for the second wave. The data are based on a multistage area probability sample of people living in noninstitutionalized housing in the continental United States. Blacks and persons 60 and older were sampled at twice the rate of Whites and people aged between 40 and 59. Length of interviews averaged 86 minutes. See House (1995) for more details.

The sample used for this analysis is based on only respondents who are currently working and, with the exception of those presented in Table 2, African Americans. This represents a maximum number of cases of 557 people.

MEASURES

Two measures of family well-being are used in this analysis. The first is a measure of marital quality. The scale is constructed using four items designed to tap harmony in marriage. Respondents were asked to indicate, on a continuum from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* their responses to the following statements: (a) There is a

great deal of love and affection expressed in our marriage, (b) My spouse does not treat me as well as I deserve to be treated, (c) I sometimes think of divorcing or separating from my spouse, and (d) There have been things that have happened in our marriage that I can never forgive. Each was coded from 1 to 4, with 4 representing *high marital harmony*. Responses to the measures were then summed to create a scale ranging from 4 to 16. The alpha reliability coefficient for this scale was good at .72. The second measure was a measure of parental well-being. This scale is constructed using three questions. The first asked how satisfied the respondent is with being a parent. Responses ranged from 1 (*not at all satisfied*) to 5 (*completely satisfied*). A second question asked how often the respondent is bothered or upset as a parent. Responses ranged from 1 (*almost always*) to 5 (*never*). A third question asked how happy the respondent is with the way his or her child has turned out. Responses ranged from 1 (*not at all happy*) to 5 (*very happy*). Responses to the measures were then summed to create a scale ranging from 3 to 15. The alpha reliability coefficient for this scale was adequate at .63. For both of these scales, higher scores indicate greater marital harmony or parental well-being, respectively.

Age, sex, race, and education are used in the analysis. Age and education are measured in years, education ranging from 1 year to 17 or more years. The variables sex and race are dummy coded. For sex, 1 = male; for race, 1 = Black. Job characteristics are measured using several variables. First, there is a measure of the classification of the respondent's job. This is based on the census coding of occupation. This measure is called *job type*, and it is scored from 1 to 8, where 1 corresponds to the professional/technical category and 8 to the service category. Intermediate numbers indicate the job classifications of managerial, sales, clerical, crafts, operatives, and laborer. Psychosocial demands of the job are measured using two questions that ask whether the respondent has enough time to do the work and whether he or she is free from conflicting demands. Physical demands of the job are measured using three questions that ask if the work requires moving very fast, a lot of physical effort, and rapid and continuous physical activity. Decision latitude is mea-

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics

<i>Variable</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>Range</i>
Age	44.23	12.83	25-86
Sex (1 = male)	0.43	0.50	— ^a
Education	11.83	3.10	1-17
Job type	3.72	2.43	1-8
Psychosocial demands	4.08	1.52	1-8
Decision latitude	9.24	2.13	3-12
Physical demands	8.02	2.54	1-12
Bothered by job	2.54	0.95	1-5
Enjoy job	4.04	1.18	1-5
Chronic financial stress	6.83	2.38	2-13
Marital harmony	12.90	2.89	4-16
Parental well-being	11.58	2.15	3-15

NOTE: *ns* range from 467 to 557, except for marital harmony (*n* = 288).

a. Dummy variable.

sured using three questions that ask if the respondent gets to decide how to do the work, gets to do a variety of things in the work, and has a lot of say about what happens in work. All of the job measures are asked as *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree* questions and range from 1 to 4. The questions were simply summed to form the various indexes, and high scores are indicated as in the title. Therefore, high scores on the demands measures indicate a high level of demands, and high scores on decision latitude indicate high latitude. Two single-item measures of job satisfaction are used. The first asks how much respondents enjoy their jobs and is coded from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*). The second question asks how often the respondent is bothered or upset by the job and is coded from 1 (*almost always*) to 5 (*never*). A measure of chronic financial stress is also used. This is composed of three questions that ask how satisfied the respondent is with his or her family finances, how difficult it is to pay monthly bills and expenses, and whether there is money left at the end of the month. As in the job measures, these questions are simply summed to form the index of chronic financial stress. High scores indicate more financial stress. Table 1 presents descriptive data for the study variables.

TABLE 2
Regression of Family Outcomes on Race and Other Predictors

	<i>Marital Harmony</i>	<i>Parental Well-Being</i>
Age	.01*	.01*
Sex (1 = male)	.53**	.00
Education	.00	.00
Number of children	.00	-.14**
Race (1 = Black)	-.85**	-.45**
Constant	12.90	12.20
R^2	.04	.03
<i>n</i>	1,042	1,328

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

FINDINGS

Table 2 presents the regression of family outcome variables on control variables. This table reports results for the entire sample and shows that race is a significant predictor of family outcomes. Blacks have lower levels of both marital harmony and parental well-being than do Whites. In both equations, age is a significant factor—the older respondents report greater marital harmony and parental well-being. Men have higher levels of marital harmony and those with a larger number of children have lower levels of parental wellbeing.

The next set of analyses investigates the role of job factors on family outcomes. Table 3 presents regression results for marital harmony and Table 4 for parental well-being. The analysis is conducted in stages. The first equation uses control variables only. The second adds in job characteristics and job type. The third adds in the job satisfaction and financial stress measures. Job characteristics are the only factor of significance in marital harmony among Blacks. People with greater decision latitude have higher levels of marital harmony. Also, a lower level of physical demands is associated with a higher level of marital harmony. In the third equation, we can see that the inclusion of the job satisfaction and financial stress measures does not change this pattern.

Table 4 presents the regression of parental well-being on the predictor variables. The results are unlike those for the marital har-

TABLE 3
Regressions of Marital Harmony on Predictors

Age	.00	.00	.00
Sex (1 = male)	.82*	.58	.62
Education	.00	.01	-.01
Number of kids	.01	.17	.18
Job type	-.01	-.01	-.01
Psychosocial demands		.00	.00
Decision latitude		.32**	.31**
Physical demands		-.24**	-.21**
Bothered by job			.00
Enjoy job			.00
Chronic financial stress			-.12
Constant	11.96	12.59	13.74
R ² =	.03	.12	.12
n	286	269	267

NOTE: Data for Blacks only. The first column factors in control variables only. The second adds job characteristics and job type. The third adds job satisfaction and financial stress measures.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

TABLE 4
Regressions of Parental Well-Being on Predictors

Age	.00	.00	.00
Sex (1 = male)	.00	.00	.00
Education	.01	.00	.00
Number of kids	.00	.00	.00
Job type	.01*	.01	.01
Psychosocial demands		-.15*	-.12
Decision latitude		.00	.00
Physical demands		.00	.00
Bothered by job			-.46**
Enjoy job			.01
Chronic financial stress			-.15**
Constant	11.37	11.99	14.69
R ² =	.01	.02	.09
n	463	426	421

NOTE: Data for Blacks only. The first column factors in control variables only. The second adds job characteristics and job type. The third adds job satisfaction and financial stress measures.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

mony outcome measure in several ways. First, job type is a significant predictor. The higher the socioeconomic status of the job, the higher the level of parental wellbeing. Second, among the job characteristics, only psychosocial demands is a significant factor. The negative relationship indicates that as the psychosocial demands of the job increase, parental wellbeing decreases. Third, we see that the job satisfaction and financial stress measures are significant in predicting parental well-being. Feeling bothered by one's job and suffering chronic financial stress negatively affect parental well-being. These latter variables explain away the previous relationships for job type and psychosocial demands.

DISCUSSION

This research has shown that job characteristics play an important role in family life among African Americans. First, for marital harmony, the results show that job latitude has a positive association with marital harmony, whereas physical demands have a negative relationship to marital harmony. Consider for a moment what job latitude represents: It measures a worker's ability to exercise decision making on his or her job. This decision-making ability connotes an ability to control the pace and demands of the job. A component of this ability to exercise some control over time worked, the ability to take breaks, likely translates into lower stress levels associated with a particular job. This lower level of stress, as well as the positive functions of being able to exercise decision-making ability, has salutary effects on one's marriage, as might be expected.

On the other hand, physical demands have a negative relationship to marital harmony. A physically demanding job is a job that is physically exhausting—and it is not unreasonable to think that a person with a physically demanding job comes home tired, distracted, and “stressed-out.” Such people may lack the capacity to engage in meaningful interactions with their family. Their daily focus may be on recovery from the physical demands of an exhausting job.

Results for parental well-being show that psychosocial demands, job bother, and chronic financial stress negatively affect parental well-being. I speculate that these are stressors that may function to afford people less time to spend with their children as well as increasing the sense in which children are simply seen as a financial burden. Parents with little time to spend with their children do not always derive the emotional benefits and pleasures that children can bring. When this happens, children may be more likely to be seen simply as more mouths to feed. Using this logic, financial stress (again, as measured from the worker's own point of view) should have negative effects on parental well-being.

This study has identified factors that affect family outcomes and offered some speculations about why these patterns exist. However, these are only speculations—future research needs to be conducted to fully identify the actual mechanisms by which job characteristics affect the family life of African Americans. This will require longitudinal data and better measures of several key constructs, such as how job stressors are translated into poor family outcomes.

These results have implications for practitioners. First and foremost, stress management techniques are critically important to help people learn to cope with stressful job environments. There are a number of people who bring their job stress home with them, and their characteristic way of dealing with that stress is usually negative (Barnett, 1994; Broman et al., 1990; Voydanoff & Donnelly, 1988). Learning to deal with this stress in a more positive way will undoubtedly improve family life.

However, there is a bigger issue, and this involves job redesign. Many jobs and employers are simply not family friendly. Jobs are often not designed with families in mind, and this may be an understatement. Often workers are treated as if their families were irrelevant. Thus, increasing overtime, shift work, early morning starting hours, extensive travel, minimal vacation time, poor health benefits—these are just a few of the features that ignore worker's families at best or are actually hostile to families at worst. Job redesign and changing employer policies are the only ways to improve work life for all families at the societal level.

REFERENCES

- Barnett, R. (1994). Home-to-work spillover revisited. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 56, 647-656.
- Bowman, P. (1991). Joblessness. In J. Jackson (Ed.), *Life in Black America*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Brimmer, A. F. (1985). *Trends, prospects, and strategies for Black economic progress*. Washington, DC: Joint Center for Political Studies.
- Broman, C. L., Hamilton, V. L., & Hoffman, W. S. (1990). Unemployment and its effect on families: Evidence from a plant closing study. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 18, 643-659.
- Broman, C. L., Hamilton, V. L., Hoffman, W. S., & Mavaddat, R. (1995). Race, gender and the response to stress: Long term unemployment among autoworkers. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 23, 813-842.
- Center for the Study of Social Policy. (1986). The "flip-side" of Black families headed by women: The economic status of Black men. In R. Staples (Ed.), *The Black family: Essays and studies*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Duncan, G., & Rodgers, W. (1988). Longitudinal aspects of childhood poverty. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 50, 1007-1021.
- Farley, R., & Allen, W. R. (1987). *The color line and the quality of American life*. New York: Russell Sage.
- Halpern, R. (1987). Major social and demographic trends affecting young families: Implications for early childhood care and education. *Young Children*, 42, 34-40.
- Hamilton, V. L., Broman, C. L., Hoffman, W. S., & Renner, D. S. (1990). Hard times and vulnerable people: Initial effects of plant closing on autoworkers' mental health. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 31, 123-140.
- House, J. S. (1995). *Americans' Changing Lives: Wave I* [Computer file]. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter University Consortium for Political and Social Research.
- Hughes, D., Galinsky, E., & Morris, A. (1992). The effects of job characteristics on marital quality. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 54, 31-42.
- Karasek, R. A. (1979). Job demands, job decision latitude, and mental health. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 24, 285-306.
- Karasek, R. A., & Theorell, T. (1990). *Healthy Work*. New York: Basic Books.
- Kletzer, L. G. (1991). Job displacement: Black and White workers compared. *Monthly Labor Review*, 114(7), 17-25.
- McLanahan, S., & Booth, K. (1991). Mother-only families. In A. Booth (Ed.), *Contemporary families: Looking forward, looking back*. Minneapolis, MN: National Council on Family Relations.
- McLoyd, V. C. (1990). The impact of economic hardship on Black families and children: Psychological distress, parenting, and socioemotional development. *Child Development*, 61, 311-346.
- Randolph, S. M. (1995). African American children in single-mother families. In B. Dickerson (Ed.), *African American single mothers: Understanding their lives and families*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Simms, M. (1987). How loss of manufacturing jobs is affecting Blacks. *Focus: The Monthly Newsletter of the Joint Center for Political Studies*, 15, 6-7.

- Staples, R. (1986). Changes in Black family structure: The conflict between family ideology and structural conditions. In R. Staples (Ed.), *The Black family: Essays and studies*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Swinton, D. H. (1989). Economic status of Blacks in 1987. In J. Dewart (Ed.), *The state of Black America 1988*. New York: National Urban League.
- Thoits, P. A. (1999). Self, identity, stress, and mental health. In C. S. Aneshensel & J. C. Phelan (Eds.), *Handbook of the sociology of mental health*. New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum.
- Voydanoff, P., & Donnelly, B. W. (1988). Economic distress, family coping, and quality of family life. In P. Voydanoff & L. C. Majka (Eds.), *Families and economic distress: Coping strategies and social policy*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Wilson, W. J. (1987). *The truly disadvantaged: The inner city, the underclass, and public policy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Clifford L. Broman is a professor of sociology at Michigan State University. He is currently involved in research on marital and relationship satisfaction, work-family stress, racial identity, and adolescent mental health.