
Perceptions: The Story of a Working Mother

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Introduction

As the term “working mother” becomes a customary part of our everyday language it has become increasingly important for us to understand these women as they strive to perform their many roles: wife, mother, and worker. Therefore, the primary research question for this effort is what is the perception of a working mother?

Women continue to increase their participation in the labor force due to the economic climate and with the stresses of modern day life there has been a great deal of interest in the social sciences research community to begin exploring the challenges of women in their attempts to manage their public (work) and private (home) spheres. According to Berke (2003), there have been extensive changes in our society’s economic, social, and demographic realms, which have altered both the family and the workplace. Managing the pressures of both the work and family spheres has forced people to identify new ways to balance both their employment and home lives. Also, those who work at home face a unique set of challenges and boundaries that impact one’s ability to manage both personal and professional. Berke (2003) states,

...there are two different boundaries that home-located producers confront and negotiate. These include the management of boundaries between the household and the outside world [external boundaries] and the organization of boundaries among activities conducted within the household [internal boundaries]...home or work roles intrude on the time and space that is equated with the opposite realm’s roles, particularly for women. (p.515)

Home is often a place of unpaid work for women, especially with respect to nurturing, caring, and expending emotional labor. Because of the gendered nature of household regimes, under certain circumstances, woman may perceive paid employment at home as affording them power and control. (p.517)

The experience of females as mothers and workers in interaction with home and work responsibilities is very different from men’s experiences. Where men are more likely to see home as a place for respite, women tend to view home as additional work—a place of stress, demands, and prohibiting a private place for leisure time (Grant, 2000). As social workers, this area of study becomes increasingly important to our profession because if we are to understand and provide services to the working mother population it behooves us to get a sense of the stresses they face, their feelings regarding the challenges, and their perceptions of their various roles. From a social policy perspective, we must comprehend the challenges, barriers, and nuances of this population in order to advocate for and assist in developing policies and programs which are more worker/mother familiar.

Overview of Design

Grounded theory was the chosen methodology for this qualitative research study. This methodology was the most appropriate in the effort because the researcher wanted to approach data collection from an inductive perspective and wanted to identify and compare what themes, such as gender roles, familial support, and familial expectations that were offered by the research study participant’s responses to the interview questions. According to Padgett (1998),

One of the most commonly used methods of coding is constant comparative analysis, a technical associated with grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In practice, it is iterative, beginning as inductive, then becoming deductive, then returning to an inductive approach. As themes emerge from the initial coding [inductive phase], one goes back over the data to ensure that it is coded in accordance with these themes [deductive phase]. As one combs back through the data, new codes often emerge [inductive phase]. (p.77)

Due to the fact that the research effort was to understand the perceptions of a working mother, grounded theory using an inductive approach in order to identify themes is the most appropriate methodology at this time. The sample chosen for this effort was a working mother with a young child (seven years old). The interview took place at a local coffee shop in the mid-afternoon. Unfortunately, due to the participant's time constraints the interview only lasted a half of an hour.

The measures included in the interview covered the domains of work, family, and personal attributes and experiences. These measures were chosen in order to glean from the participant themes that would provide evidence of feeling empowered by work, possibly challenges in obtaining work-life balance, and themes regarding support from family members. In analyzing the data, I used open coding to identify themes for further investigation using grounded theory in order to identify the major themes and this served as the framework for data analysis.

Report of Findings

The most interesting findings from the interview was the strongest theme Based on the interview, we learned that the study participant is comfortable serving in the more traditional role of wife and mother, which is evidenced by the interaction between the me as the interviewer and the participant,

- I: So, does your husband view women and work as the same as you do?
S: Kind of... (pause), he definitely wants me to bring in some sort of income. But, he is traditional in that I clean the house, cook, do the laundry... (pause), you know the regular household chores.
I: Does he contribute to maintaining the household?
S: Oh sure, he mows lawn and helps with my daughter.
I: Is that enough for you?
S: It's no problem. He works so hard...sometimes 70 some odd hours a week. (pause), I guess if I worked outside of the home I might feel differently. But, we manage. Though, we just moved to a bigger house...so I have a lot more to do around here. But XXXX (daughter) is getting to the age where she can help me some... (laugh) especially keeping her room clean.

This statement suggests that study participant is comfortable with the role she plays. However, based on the fact that her professional life is in the home, it is curious as to whether or not she would feel the same way if she worked outside of the home. In fact, she questions that herself. In addition, the study participant seems to have been able to balance work and home life, which is evidenced by five instances of work-life balance in her statements and four instances of work satisfaction. The study participant states,

I: How do you feel that this type of work [medical transcription] adds to your life?

S: I need to think about that one. (pause)...well, it is fast paced, which I enjoy and it changes everyday. I guess I just feel like I am adding to someone's wellbeing when I am supporting the doctor. (Laugh) That is at least until I can get back to college.

I: Can you tell me a little something about your challenges of trying to balance work and family life?

S: Well, it seems to change from day to day. (pause). See my daughter also has ADHD and so a lot depends on where she is on any given day. If she is in a good mood, then all is well...if she is having a tough day...it can be hell to get things done. (laugh) And if that is not challenging enough...she is really smart. So if she is wired...then it is constantly a struggle. (sigh) But, somehow we manage through it (laugh). I guess it is a lot easier for me than most women because I work at home and can do my work at midnight if I need to. (pause) So, I guess I can't complain. It isn't like I have to be at an office at a particular time everyday, which helps.

What is an interesting finding from this interview is that the participant appears to be quite content in her role as mother and worker. The study participant offers that this is somewhat a new concept for her because she had such non-traditional, strong female role models in her life growing up where her father was responsible for the majority of the household duties, as suggested by:

S: Well, I come from a family of strong women who have always worked... (pause)...not just in everyday jobs, but as professionals. So, I guess...like me she has been exposed to strong women. I always tell her [daughter] she can do anything she wants.

I: Can you tell me a little bit more about the working women in your family?

S: Well like I said, my mother was an insurance professional and always seemed to enjoy her work. I remember her being like the men in the workplace and (laugh) I guess at home to. You see, my dad did all the cooking and grocery shopping and my mom paid all the bills...you know kinda a non-traditional family. And my grandmother in (pause), I guess it was the 70s decided she wanted a business for herself. So, (laugh) instead of doing more traditional work...she started a garbage company... (laugh) and my grandfather and uncles started working for her (laugh). So, I guess I didn't know any better to think that girls couldn't achieve anything they wanted. (pause), So, I guess I have kind of passed that onto my daughter.

Though, the study participant seems to be comfortable in her role as mother and worker, she was able to articulate equality for women and the concept that women are capable of doing equal work as men:

I: Do you feel that woman should be able to have the same jobs as men and that men should carry some of the burden of the responsibilities at home?

S: (laugh) Of course, I do. I think my parents were equal partners and so, I don't really know any better. In fact, my mom made more money than my dad and (laugh) couldn't cook a meal if life depended on it. I really think that they were fifty/fifty partners. I mean, heck, just because men and

women are different doesn't mean that we can be as smart and do the same kind of work. Uh, except maybe the hard physical type of work.

I: Do you think companies are moving in the direction of giving equal pay and benefits to women and men?

S: Well, I really don't know about the pay part. But, I do know that my husband in his job is allowed to take time off to take my daughter to school or to the doctor if I can't do it. As for my job, I don't know we are all women, so I have nothing to compare it to. I do think that we are making some headway. (pause) I mean now a days it takes two paychecks to keep a family going. So, I don't think it is realistic to think that we can go back to the days of Ozzie and Harriet. I mean if you want to provide a decent quality of life for your children...it takes two jobs.

Based on the data analysis and the supporting vignettes presented, though much of the research has shown that women have greater struggles balancing work and family there are those who are satisfied with their roles. Moreover, the results of this effort beg for further study if this comfort level is due to the strong female roles that women give their daughters or if it is a product of being able to have both your public and private spheres within the home.

Discussion and Conclusion

Since this effort had only one participant, it cannot be assumed that there is significance in the findings. However, the results do pose additional research questions regarding the influence of strong female role models and the impact on work-life balance and further inquiry regarding the blurring of the public and private spheres. Furthermore, there would be much to gain by understanding the male perspective on work-life balance and the assignment of household and child rearing responsibilities. The perceptions learned in this study are that there are women or at least one woman who is satisfied in her role of wife, mother, and worker and is upbeat and positive regarding her life's direction.

References

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