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Conflict Experienced by Latter-Day Saint Working Mothers
By Sarah Maxfield

Introduction

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, with over 16 million members worldwide, promotes many conservative and family-focused policies. These policies stem from the belief that all humans are literally the children of God and that families can be joined together for eternity. Such a perspective makes the way families interact with each other in this life very important. An official proclamation issued by the church states, "By divine design, fathers are to . . . provide the necessities of life" and "Mothers are primarily responsible for the nurture of their children."[1] However, some Latter-day Saint women either cannot—or choose to not—adopt this role structure: 25% of Latter-day Saint women work full time and 23% work part time, with many of these women also having children within the home.[2] Because of the increase of mothers in the workforce, it is vital to understand how this responsibility affects these women, and what conflicts they experience as a result.

The Research

Much of the research on the impact working has on mothers focuses on the following:
- The effects of cultural schemas of work and motherhood [3]
- The causes and consequences of inter-role conflict for employed mothers [4]
- The cultural dissonance between mainstream and Latter-day Saint culture regarding employed mothers.[5]

Different questionnaires, personal interviews, interpretative phenomenological analyses, and other research methods have shown that women's multiple rolesand mothers' employment outside of the home are a positive combination unless they're perceived as a conflict. [6] [7] [8] Engaging in multiple roles has positive effects on women's subjective well-being, and employed mothers enjoy higher self-esteem, strengthened identity, and increased access to support networks. [9] [10] They tend to experience a social outlet at work, gain enhanced abilities to positively impact their children's social and intellectual skills, and have increased financial flexibility.[11] However, the findings aren't quite as positive when it comes to Latter-day Saint working mothers because of the perceived religious conflict.

A mother's choice to work has been defined as an interplay between financial, religious, and political (policy-related) motivations. [12] [13] When two or more of these factors conflict, negative effects are common. In fact, surveys have shown that, on average, "as religious devotion increases, gender role attitudes become more traditional."[14] For Latter-day Saint women, this decision can be especially complicated and filled with conflict because the religion emphasizes their responsibilities in the home rather than in a professional career. Also because of this religious expectation, Latter-day Saint women tend to marry and have children at a younger age than the national average.[15]

Although religion can bring positive effects to individuals, it can get complicated with individual circumstances. When Latter-say Saint women go against the "norm" of family life by choosing to work while having children in the house, the conflict they experience from religious and self-imposed expectations can have negative effects.

Cultural Dissonance

American Latter-day Saint women must often balance religious and personal aspirations, which can sometimes conflict. This results in cultural dissonance, which is the combination of cognitive dissonance and cultural consonance. Cognitive dissonance is the stress of holding multiple incongruent beliefs or actions (i.e. acting in a way that is against your beliefs), whereas cultural consonance is the adherence to cultural models.[16] Cultural dissonance occurs when someone tries to adhere, like cultural consonance, to two main cultures that compete or clash and, like cognitive dissonance, it is the "psychological tension that results from incongruent social realities."[17] With adherence to conflicting cultural models, higher perceived stress and worsening subjective well-being is common, but adherence to one model or the other results in lower perceived stress in people.[18] In the case of Latter-day Saint working women, adhering to either the cultural model of being a stay-at-home mom or leaving behind their religion would result in lower stress.

Work-to-Family Conflict

One study suggests that the number of hours worked per week and the husband's support was most important in defining conflict (known as work-to-family conflict, or WFC). They found that a mother who adhered to traditional gender role attitudes and who had a high workload (over 32 hours a week) experienced higher WFC, whereas those who worked less than 32 hours a week experienced little to none.[19] This approach would enable working Latter-day Saint mothers with traditional gender role attitudes to find the amount of work that helps them reap the positive benefits of working, including increased financial growth and self-growth, with the least amount of WFC as possible. In the United States, working part-time is something many long for. According to a Pew research survey, almost half of the mothers in their sample said it is best for children when mothers work part time, instead of working full time or staying home.[20]

Unfortunately, WFC was also found to increase if the husband had more traditional gender role attitudes, regardless of the workload of the mother. This means that even in the cases where the mother was working very little, conflict would still occur. The implications of this on Latter-day Saint families is huge; it means that the women who plan on working after having children should weigh their potential husband's gender role attitudes heavily in deciding whether they will be compatible.[21]

Inter-role Conflict

Working mothers often report experiencing inter-role conflict between their career and parenting goals.[22] This occurs both from not meeting internal standards due to their attempts to meet the perceived demands of another role, and from their domains creating incompatible pressures that go beyond their internal standards. [23] [24] This has been shown to have negative effects on women's well-being. With a religious intersection, women may experience more inter-role conflict because of the tension between working, taking care of a home, and religious responsibilities and expectations. Latter-day Saint women often have high standards that can lead to perfectionism and toxic religiosity, regardless of motherhood status.[25] When incorporating work, children, and religion, Latter-day Saint women could avoid potential negative impacts of religion by letting go of what doesn't matter (i.e. outward appearances) and focus on what is essential.

Research has shown that in the absence of inter-role conflict, which takes the multiple roles of women and pits them against each other, the multiple roles of working women can have positive psychological effects. Working women score lower on Postgraduate Institute (PGI) Health Questionnaires than homemakers, which suggests that working women on average have higher psychological well-being than homemakers.[26] In a similar fashion, another study showed that employed mothers can have two sources of gratification, helping them to obtain better psychological well-being.[27] Without conflict, religion actually adds many positive aspects to the mix; it helps individuals find community and higher purpose, lowers the effects of depression of anxiety, and increases overall mental and physical health.[28]

Sanctification

Regarding the differing conflicts within any religious working mother's life, one practice has been proven by several studies to be effective for reducing conflict, controlling feelings of depression, stress, anxiety, and anger, and bringing about higher satisfaction with work and positive affect.[29] This practice is called sanctification, the process of viewing a practice as holy and divine. Specifically regarding work, sanctification is viewing one's career as a calling derived from God.[30] In a study examining sanctification and attitudes toward full-time employment among Latter-day Saint professional women, a pattern was seen where the women would soothe themselves by sanctifying or aligning their work with their religious beliefs. This helped them to better cope with any conflict that sprang up.[31] By helping Latter-day Saint women to better "sanctify" their careers, even by incorporating parts of their religious experience with it, one can help to manage these conflicts.[32]

Conclusion

In summary, Latter-day Saint women's experience with conflict includes both inter-role (the clashing of personal and societal expectations in multiple roles), work-to-family conflict (conflict found within the home because of differing gender role behavior), and cultural

dissonance (when the two prevailing cultures conflict with the other, which in this case would be conservative religion and liberal feminism). One way to help women overcome these conflicts is through sanctification. Considering these potential conflicts, there is an overwhelming need for more research in order to find better conflict strategies for the increasing number of mothers in the workforce.

Notes

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