

Thinking about family matters linked to stress for working moms, not dads

August 11 2013

Although working mothers and fathers are almost as likely to think about family matters throughout the day, only for mothers is this type of mental labor associated with increased stress and negative emotions, according to new research to be presented at the 108th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association.

"I assume that because mothers bear the major responsibility for childcare and [family](#) life, when they think about [family matters](#), they tend to think about the less pleasant aspects of it—such as needing to pick up a child from daycare or having to schedule a doctor's appointment for a sick kid—and are more likely to be worried," said study author Shira Offer, an assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Bar-Ilan University in Israel.

Much has been written about the unequal division of household labor and childcare, but the overwhelming majority of studies in this field examine specific behaviors, Offer said. "These studies focus on the physical aspect of tasks and demands, which can be measured and quantified relatively easily," she said. "However, much of the work we do, both paid and unpaid, takes place in our mind. We are often preoccupied with the things we have to do, we often worry about them, and feel stressed not to forget to do them or to do them on time. These thoughts and concerns—mental labor—can impair our performance, make it difficult to focus on tasks, and even hurt our sleep. This mental labor is the focus of my study."

The study relies on data from the 500 Family Study, a multi-method investigation of how middle-class families balance family and work experiences. The 500 Family Study collected comprehensive information from 1999 to 2000 on families living in eight urban and [suburban communities](#) across the United States. Most parents in the 500 Family Study are highly educated, employed in professional occupations, and work, on average, longer hours and report higher earnings than do middle-class families in other, nationally representative samples. Although the 500 Family Study is not a representative sample of families in the U.S., it reflects one of the most time pressured segments of the population. Offer's study uses a subsample from the 500 Family Study, consisting of 402 mothers and 291 fathers in dual-earner families who completed a survey and a time diary that collects information about the content and context of individuals' daily experiences, as well as the emotions associated with them, in the course of a week.

Overall, Offer found that working mothers engaged in mental labor in about one fourth, and working fathers in one fifth, of their waking time. This amounts to approximately 29 and 24 hours per week of mental labor for mothers and fathers, respectively. However, mothers and fathers both spent about 30 percent of the time they were engaged in mental labor thinking about family matters. "I expected the gender gap in mental labor, especially those aspects of it that are related to family, to be much larger," Offer said. "What my research actually shows is that gender differences in mental labor are more a matter of quality than quantity."

As for why, engaging in family-specific mental labor negatively affected the well-being of mothers, but not fathers, Offer said she thinks societal expectations push mothers to assume the role of household managers and lead them to disproportionately address the less pleasant aspects of family care. "I believe that what makes this type of mental labor an overall negative and stressful experience for mothers only is that they are

the ones judged and held accountable for family-related matters," she said.

Offer also found that while fathers spent a greater percentage of the time they engaged in mental labor thinking about work-related matters than mothers, thoughts and concerns about work were less likely to spillover into non-work domains among fathers. Twenty-five percent of the time fathers engaged in job-specific mental labor, they did so in non-work contexts, compared to 34 percent among mothers.

"We know that mothers are the ones who usually adjust their work schedule to meet family demands, such as staying home with a sick child," Offer said. "Therefore, mothers may feel that they do not devote enough time to their job and have to 'catch up,' and, as a result, they are easily preoccupied with job-related matters outside the workplace. This illustrates the double burden—the pressure to be 'good' mothers and 'good' workers—that working moms experience."

Offer said she was surprised by the relatively low level of work-related spillover for fathers. "I thought that in an organizational culture that requires workers to be accessible and available 24/7 no matter where they are, highly educated fathers holding professional and managerial positions would often be preoccupied with job matters when doing things such as housework or during their free time," she said. "It appears, however, that fathers are quite adept at leaving their work concerns behind and are better able to draw boundaries between work and home. I believe that fathers can afford to do that because someone else, namely their spouse, assumes the major responsibility for the household and [childcare](#)."

In terms of policy implications, Offer said her study suggests that fathers need to take a greater role in family care to make mental labor less stressful for [working mothers](#) and ease the double burden that they

experience. "It is true that fathers today are more involved in childrearing and do more housework than in previous generations, but the major responsibility for the domestic realm continues to disproportionately fall on [mothers'](#) shoulders," she said. "This has to change."

Fathers have to be encouraged, rather than penalized, for being more active in the domestic sphere, Offer said. "This encouragement should take place at the federal, state, and organizational levels by making it possible for fathers, for example, to leave work early, start work late, take time off from work, and take pauses during the work day to deal with family-related matters," she said. "I think that if [fathers](#) were able to do this without the fear of being viewed as less committed workers, they would assume greater responsibility at home, which would lead to greater gender equality."

More information: The paper, "The Costs of Thinking about Work and Family: Mental Labor, Work-Family Spillover, and Gender Inequality among Parents in Dual-Earner Families," will be presented on Sunday, Aug. 11, at 12:30 p.m. EDT in New York City at the American Sociological Association's 108th Annual Meeting.

Provided by American Sociological Association

Citation: Thinking about family matters linked to stress for working moms, not dads (2013, August 11) retrieved 6 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2013-08-family-linked-stress-moms-dads.html>

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