

Education empowers Canadians but raises risks of overwork and work-family stress

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The higher your level of education, the greater your earnings and your sense of "personal mastery" or being in control of your fate, University of Toronto researchers say. But wait: there's a downside.

Professor Scott Schieman, Canada Research Chair in the Social Contexts of Health, and PhD student Atsushi Narisada investigated the adverse effects associated with attaining a high degree of mastery. Using the Canadian Work, Stress, and Health Study (CANWSH), a national sample of Canadian workers, the researchers measured proficiency, or mastery, by asking study participants how much they agree or disagree with statements such as: "You have little control over the things that happen to you" and "You often feel helpless in dealing with problems of life."

The study confirms that university graduates in Canada report the highest sense of mastery, mainly due to their above-average earnings and lower exposure to financial strain. However, these well-educated people are also more likely to encounter overwork, job pressure, and work-to-family conflict. And, in turn, each of these stressors actually undermines mastery.

"Were it not for the fact that highly educated individuals report more job demands and conflict between work and family roles they would have even [higher levels](#) of mastery," says Schieman. "While education is extremely critical for mastery, higher educational attainment also appears to introduce stressors that can dampen the psychological benefits."

These patterns represent what Schieman has called "the stress of higher status" - a process in which stressors associated with higher status offset the rewards that often accompany it.

"We also learned that workers who experience excessive on-the-job pressure feel less in control of their lives, primarily due to the conflict triggered between work and personal or family life," says Schieman. "In fact, stress in the work-family interface poses the biggest threat to Canadians' sense of mastery."

The study also found that workers who engage in more work-family multitasking feel a lower sense of mastery due to the conflict generated between the two roles.

Provided by University of Toronto

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