Homemaking-Role Quality and the Psychological Well-Being and Distress of Employed Women

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This paper examines the quality of employed women's experience in the homemaking-role and its relationship to their psychological well-being and distress. The subjects (N = 403) were drawn from a random stratified sample of women, ages 25 to 55, who were employed as social workers or licensed practical nurses. Positive homemaking-role experience was associated with increased psychological well-being and lowered psychological distress. These associations were affected by the quality of the subjects' experiences in the paid work-role. Thus the favorable association of positive homemaking-role quality with psychological well-being and distress was enhanced by positive paid work-role quality, suggesting that the relationship of homemaking-role quality to the psychological outcomes is influenced by the effects of paid work-role quality on psychological well-being and distress.

The homemaking role and its psychological consequences for women is an issue that has received scant attention from researchers in recent years. The

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dominant focus of social science research on women's lives has instead been on the social and psychological consequences of the large-scale movement of women into the paid labor force. A large body of research concerned with the implications of this transition has examined the mental health of employed women, often comparing it to that of full-time homemakers (Gove & Geerken, 1977; Gove & Tudor, 1973; Weaver & Holmes, 1975). The findings of research on the mental health of employed versus homemaker women provide the basis for much of what is known about the homemaking role and its psychological consequences.

However, such studies focus on the effects of variation in employment status rather than on the impact of homemaking experiences on mental health. Thus they provide a fairly limited understanding of the nature and effects of homemaking activities on women's lives. In this paper we examine the psychological consequences of the quality of women's experience in the homemaking role. Because of the potentially important effect of variations in employment status on the relationship of the homemaking role to psychological well-being and distress, our analyses are confined to women who are employed outside the home. The homemaking role is defined here as the activity and experience of being responsible for taking care of the home. This definition of homemaking encompasses housework and more generally, all the tasks necessary to maintain a home (e.g., cooking, running errands, keeping track of money and bills, cleaning, yard work, decorating). However, it does not include childcare or the emotional aspects of family relationships within the home. Two specific issues are addressed in this paper: (1) What is the relationship of homemaking-role quality to employed women's psychological well-being and distress? (2) How do the quality of experiences in the homemaking and in the paid work-roles combine in their contribution to employed women's psychological health?

The salience of homemaking for women's psychological well-being is suggested by the continued prominence of this role in employed women's lives. Women still expend considerable energy in homemaking activities. Some studies do suggest there has been a decline in the amount of time spent by employed women on housework since the 1960's (Pleck, 1985). However, in comparison to their spouse/partner, women continue to bear primary responsibility for homemaking, regardless of the women's employment status or the presence of children in the home (Barnett & Baruch, 1987; Berk, 1985; Gutek, Nakamura & Nieva, 1981; Robinson, 1977; Walker & Woods, 1976).

Much of what is known about the quality of women's experiences in the homemaking role is drawn from research on fulltime homemakers conducted in the 1970s. These studies stress the negative qualities of housework, including its fragmented, repetitive and demanding but often vaguely defined and discretionary nature, as well as the high isolation and low social rewards