BENEFITS OF THE BALANCING ACT: MOTHERHOOD, EMPLOYMENT AND MENTAL HEALTH


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Variant findings on the benefits and strains of combining employment and family roles encourage investigation into the mechanisms and conditions under which employment improves the well-being of individuals who perform the greatest amounts of family caregiving labor-- mothers caring for children. In this dissertation, I explore the effects of employment on depressive symptoms in light of gendered parental responsibilities. Two possible mechanisms through which employment may confer mental health benefits are explored: identity accumulation, and for married women, gains in relative spousal resources. First, motivated by symbolic interaction perspectives on identity, I examine how the mental health effects of employment for mothers vary according to their attitudes about the compatibility of employment and childrearing. Secondly, I draw on household bargaining and resource perspectives to examine whether the increase in relative spousal earnings generated by employment are associated with fewer depressive symptoms among married women. Finally, I approach the social roles of parenthood and employment from a life course perspective, considering their effects on the distribution of depressive symptoms by age for men and women. These analyses enrich understandings of how and when employment improves mental well-being, and highlight the force of gendered parental responsibilities in shaping the effects of work and family roles.

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