

September 2006

Jumping on the Trampoline: A Balancing Act between Work and Family Child Care

Grace Hui-Chen Huang

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/taboo>

Recommended Citation

Huang, G. H. (2017). Jumping on the Trampoline: A Balancing Act between Work and Family Child Care. *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, 10 (2). <https://doi.org/10.31390/taboo.10.2.11>

Jumping on the Trampoline: A Balancing Act between Work and Family Child Care

Grace Hui-Chen Huang

Introduction

Increasing numbers of women with young children have entered the work force during the last several decades. Especially within the last two decades, there has been a significant increase in the percentage of women with young children entering the work force. In the United States, more than sixty percent of married women with children under the age of six work (Gornick & Meyers, 2001; Phillips & Adams, 2001; Janning, 2006). About 14.5 million children under the age of five years regularly attend child care in the U.S. (Smith, 2000).

One consequence of this change in employment patterns is that many married women and men have taken on substantial work and family obligations. Such obligations used to be much simpler. Fathers went out to work while mothers stayed home and took care of the family. Both parents are now going out to work. Striking a balance between work and family has become a daily feat for many families with children. The growing number of mothers entering the workforce has changed the fabric of the family; women no longer stay home to care for their children. This has caused an increase in the need for parents to find someone else to care for their children as well as to find a balance between employment and family responsibilities.

Smith (2000) found that about 14.5 million children under the age of five years (75%) regularly attend child care in the United States. There are various types of child care; family child care is one of the most widely used forms of child care in the United States. Family child care is defined as care to non-related children by a caregiver in her or his own home (Kontos, 1992). Sending a child to an acceptable quality family child care is a primary concern for parents.

Much has been written about the balancing act between work and family (Bartley, Blanton, & Gilliard, 2005; Coltrane, 2000; Coplan, Bowker, & Cooper, 2003; Janning, 2006; Powers, 2004; Rothbard, Phillips, & Dumas, 2005). However,

much less attention has been given to parents' experiences juggling work, family, and child care, even though most working parents need to use child care. The aim of this research is to contribute to the understanding of parents' balancing act between work, family, and child care through their experiences.

Methodology and Methods

Phenomenology was the methodology adopted in this study. Phenomenology seeks an understanding of the ways people subjectively experience their world and what it means for the experience (Van Manen, 1990). It is the study of everyday experiences and the meanings we construct from them. As to the method, interviews were used to explore participants' experiences. The intention was to understand parents' perceptions and perspectives from an insider's perspective. In this sense, parents are the ones who lead the research process. They play active roles in helping the researcher understand their experiences, rather than passively responding to questions.

Thirteen Caucasian parents, eight mothers and five fathers living in a large midwestern city in the U.S. were interviewed. The ages of their children ranged from 4-week-old to 6-year-old. All parents interviewed worked part-time or full-time in an array of positions ranging from blue collar to professional. The educational level of the participants ranged from high school to graduate degrees. Twelve parents used family child care for more than three years.

Parents were interviewed individually. Ten participants were interviewed twice while three participants were interviewed once. Twenty-three interviews were completed. The interview structure was open-ended, allowing participants to talk in depth about their experiences. The interview process was guided by the central research question: "As a working parent, what is it like sending your child to family day care?" The researcher asked a series of probing or clarifying questions based on the participants' responses. The researcher also asked for examples to generate thicker narrative description and inquired whether the participants had additional information to share about the particular experience or situation.

The data analysis began simultaneously with the data collection, which enabled the researcher to focus and shape the study as it proceeded (Glesne, 2006). The researcher created an organizational framework by sorting and coding collected data and identifying the primary patterns and possible relationships in the data. After carefully examining related texts grouped around the patterns, the researcher noticed a common thread across the patterns, namely, a juggling act. Accordingly, the initial codes were reorganized under this more generic code of a juggling act. Through this process, the themes emerged (Patton, 2002). As the themes unfolded from the participants' narratives, the researcher simplified the narratives into a thematic description that characterized the experiences of the participants (Van Manen, 1990).

Findings

In this study, parents provided insights about their juggling experiences between work and family obligations on a daily basis. Themes that emerged from the analysis were *the race against the clock, when children are sick, should I work, and balancing dual roles.*

The Race Against the Clock

The juggling act begins as soon as parents wake up in the morning. After getting themselves and their children ready for the day, they then had to rush to day care, drop off their children and then rush to work.

We all had to get up early, get Tom up, and get ready for work. We had to get breakfast, get Tom dressed, and get him breakfast. Tom was potty training. We had to get him to sit on the potty chair in the morning. And we tried to be organized and get things ready the night before... It was kind of a zoo. We were stumbling over each other. Nothing was coordinated. It was hectic in the morning. It was a circus. We felt like we were a bunch of clowns in the middle of three-ring circus.

Not only were mornings difficult for parents, but the end of the work day proved to also be a struggle. Parents raced against time to complete their work before leaving to pick their children up from day care. They often rushed to finish their work, and then rushed to pick their children up from child care. It was a constant battle trying to beat the clock.

Sometimes I would have to stay with the customers...The customers would go get some supper, and I would run up and get Lauren at the day care home, get her set, and then we had to run back to the shop. It was tough. (Mr. Dunn)

When parents did finally complete their work and were able to go home with their children, there still was no relief. It was like having a second job at night. A father said,

It was more of a struggle when I got home at night... I would rush to pick up my kids at day care. Then, I would come home and have supper. And then I knew there were bills that I needed to pay... I needed to snow blow the driveway, get the garbage out, because the garbage truck comes the next day. I would work until 11 o'clock at night. And then you got up at 6:00 o'clock again and started all over. So after work, I finished my day job. And then I picked Lauren up, it was almost like it was still another job to finish up, you know. You went home, and that was your second job.

When Children Are Sick

Parents often did not have a back-up child care plan for times when their chil-

dren were sick. It was difficult trying to find someone to care for their sick children at the last minute. They had to take time off from work to care for their sick child themselves sometimes. Two mothers described their experiences.

When my daughter is sick, it is a struggle. I don't have back-up care for her. Here I am, calling everyone I know in town to see if they can take care of her. Sometimes, I ended up leaving work early because I couldn't find anyone available. It was very stressful. I didn't want to give my boss the impression that I was often absent because my daughter was frequently sick. Some people would think that you are not a hard worker because you are absent a lot.

Every week, you are hoping that they won't get sick this week, because illness is so frequent in the winter months. I am almost like by Thursday if I can make it through and nobody has gotten sick, I am so happy, you know.

Should I Work?

Mothers expressed their frustration and doubts about their trying to do everything, devoting more time and attention to work and to family. Essentially, parents were spreading themselves thin by trying to keep up with both. Consequently, they were not particularly satisfied with either their work results or family efforts.

I was trying to balance work and family sorts of things. But it wasn't working. It just gets to be too much for me. Then I feel like I am not doing just either one. I am only half there at work, and only half there at home. At work, I would be limited. I couldn't go to work early, but I have a lot to get done. And I could only work so late, because I had to pick up Lauren. I am so tired of it, Grace. I am tired of balancing work and family things, because it's just too, too much.

These mothers experienced role overload as they filling multiple roles in their life. Additionally, parents did not feel the sense of completeness at work and home. Mothers' about their decision to work and place their children in family child care were enhanced when economic factors were taken into consideration.

I worked 5 or 6 hours a day. And what I actually brought home zeroed out. I paid for child care. Cause you paid for the whole day, you know.

For some parents, especially mothers who worked only part-time, or perhaps earned lower salaries, the cost of day care often equaled or surpassed what they were earning at work. Economically, it was hard to make justification to continue working and paying for child care.

After all the efforts trying to balance everything, mothers questioned whether they would possibly have the chance to feel successful.

We are limited both at work and at home. Not only that, society is harsh on women. If we do well at work and not too well at home, we are criticized as being bad mothers and bad wives, sacrificing our family for personal career. If the same thing happened with men, they were admired for their success in careers.

If we do well at home, people would say that is what we are supposed to do. No matter how hard we try, we don't seem to be credited as well as men are. We are going nowhere.

Achieving success in one area might mean letting go of the other. These working mothers experienced that their roles as mothers and female workers were not valued in this society.

Balancing Dual Roles: Work and Family

This theme describes how mothers and fathers managed their dual roles. The sub-themes that emerged were *thinking of the children while at work* and *involvement in child care for mothers and fathers*.

Thinking of the children while at work. Mothers often found themselves thinking of their children while at work. For fathers, the experience of leaving their children in child care was different.

Once mothers dropped off their children at day care and went to work, they would wonder and think about the kind and quality of care their children were receiving at child care. While picking their children up, mothers found themselves thinking about what needed to be done at work. They were constantly thinking about one while doing the other.

I thought about them while I worked, you know. What are they doing? How are they doing? Are they watching a movie? Are they talking to July (provider)? If it was the day my husband went to pick the kids up, I would wonder: Will Willy (husband) get there on time? Will he remember to bring back their belongings from child care?

As for fathers, they expressed a higher comfort level about the separation between work and child care, leaving their children at day care and focusing their attention on their work.

To me, it's more like: Tom is taken care of in child care. I don't have to worry about it. If something serious happens, Susan (provider) knows how to get ahold of us right away. I was paying a service to have Tom being taken care of. Let's go in, drop him off, pick him up. Then you move on, focusing on your job next. It's more of a man's mentality, I think (laugh).

Involvement in child care for mothers and fathers: roles are clear, responsibilities are different. Mothers tended to play a major role. Fathers, in contrast, often played more of a supporting role.

I was the primary doer. My husband was the back seat. He was just letting me do it. I think he was just waiting for me to do most of the work because he just knew I would. He was like a supporter of me. Supporter, yeah, (laugh) saying, "Go, Daniela, go!" He is standing on the sideline as a cheerleader, very positive, but not proactive. Yeah, maybe that's the word.

These parents have alluded to the differences in the roles each played in child care. Mothers were the primary decision-makers and usually the ones to take action while fathers provided suggestions and helped make decisions.

These parents identified some factors that contributed to the different levels of involvement in child care between mothers and fathers. Fathers devoted much of their time to work and tended to be the primary breadwinners of the family. Some mothers, in contrast, worked fewer hours than fathers did. As a result, they were perceived as having more time to manage child care. Among the participants, only one mother worked more hours than her husband did. During the interview, the association between involvement and working hours was not brought up by either of them.

Parents also perceived that money had an influence on the justification of role differentiation in the household—the more one earns the less responsibility one has in child care.

I am really not making much money. I am not really contributing to the household bills. And he considers himself working to pay the bills, so that leaves kind of the child care situation up to me.

Additionally, capability was another factor. To parents' perceptions, mothers tended to be more experienced, knowledgeable, sensitive, and responsive. Some parents also suggested that societal expectations provide another factor. They indicated that role differentiations are learned behaviors.

When I was in high school, the girls would be the ones to go to cooking class, and child development class. The boys would go to shop. So we shouldn't be surprised really that men from my generation anyway didn't exactly know how to deal with all these things...This was part of how we were all raised in this culture.

Jumping on the Trampoline: A Balancing Act

The parents in this study indicated that they had to constantly balance work, family, and child care. The experience is much like jumping on a trampoline. It was difficult for these parents to maintain steady footing, and they often found themselves struggling to achieve balance. With each successive jump, adjustments had to be made in order to maintain one's balance. In terms of work and family, a successful landing in one area may mean falling in the other. On a trampoline, it is always possible to jump different ways. One may jump higher, faster than the other, or even be in a different jumping position. The different roles mothers and fathers play in managing child care is an especially relevant example to illustrate how parents may jump in different positions on a trampoline.

Discussion

Contradictory Public Perceptions of Mothers and Child Care

In this study, mothers experienced inner conflict, doubt, and societal pressure. They found themselves doubting their decision to place their children in day care while they worked. Their experiences reflected the contradictory feelings Americans have regarding day care, motherhood, and women in the workforce.

The general definition of a good mother as a full-time caregiver at home remains powerful. The concepts that child care is not as good as mother care for children, and that mothers who rely on day care are neglectful continue (Cowan & Cowan, 1998). These ideas and expectations invoke the guilt and anxiety of most working mothers who send their children to child care. With the falling of the economy, many women have to work to support their families. For those women who rely on public assistance to feed their children who are being told to go out and get a job and better themselves, child care is a necessity. Therefore, in the larger society, the contradiction between public expectations about mothers' roles in child care and economic realities for women to work is all across the social economic spectrum.

Role Overload

Working is not by itself a major factor to the quality of parenting and home life for working parents. What seems to be critical is the balance between work and family (Leinonen, Solantaus, & Punamaki, 2002). Findings in this research show that balancing multiple roles was overwhelming to parents. These parents experienced role overload. They also experienced the conflict between work and family. Research indicated that role overload and conflict place people at greater risk for both physical and mental health problems, such as depression, negative mood, substance dependence disorders, and job/life dissatisfaction (Allen, Herst, Bruck, and Sutton, 2000). Additionally, parents' feelings of stress, in turn, may be brought home to affect parent-child relationships and children's behavior and development (Galambos, Sears, Almeida, & Kolaric, 1995; Leinonen, Solantaus, & Punamaki, 2003). Therefore, the issue of parents' role overload is an area that needs further understanding and development of appropriate strategies to help parents manage their balancing act.

Coping Strategies

Social support for working parents may ease their experiences of role overload (Leinonen, Solantaus, & Punamaki, 2003). Three layers of support adapted from Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory for working families would provide a comprehensive system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Microsystem: support from the workplace. Microsystem refers to the immediate setting with others which has a direct impact on the person, such as the workplace for working parents. Businesses today are much more sensitive to female work-

ers' needs and still less sensitive to men's needs of balancing work and family. To encourage fathers' roles in child care and home, it is critical for employers to provide support, such as offering more flexible and accommodating family policies. Employers who recognize workers' needs tend to facilitate workers' feelings of satisfaction, security, and their support for their company. There is a correlation between employer's recognition and the likelihood that employees will stay with their employer and promote its products and services which outrank compensation and benefits (Powers, 2004). It is a win-win situation.

Exosystem: support from family child care provider. Exosystem refers to the setting in which parents do not actually participate, but the setting affects them in one of their Microsystems, such as family child care for working parents. Parents expressed a need for flexibility from providers, such as accommodating parents' specific needs in the child care schedule. For example, when parents were late to pick up their children due to unexpected situations at work, would the provider understand and accommodate the special circumstances?

Macrosystem: Support from public policy. Macrosystem refers to the society and subculture to which parents belong, such as social policy and belief system. Much of the policy debate about child care today has been framed by a fundamental belief in "parent's choice," meaning that parents should have the ability to choose the type of care. In reality, many parents' child care "choices" reflect a mix of priorities and constraints. Economic factors can be one of the constraints. Women in secretarial positions or other predominantly female positions do not make much money. Financially, it is hard justifying working and paying for child care. Most policies that affect parents' child care options are designed to facilitate employment and do little to help parents simultaneously ensure the quality and cost of child care. Parental economic independence, rather than child care, is the goal of most child care policies (Phillips & Adams, 2001).

One way to support working families is with child care subsidies which would reduce child care costs and relieve families' economic burden. Based on several studies, children from lower socio-economic backgrounds who receive child care subsidies were more likely to be in higher quality care (Brooks, 2002; Gornick & Meyers, 2001). Congress and state legislatures have been slow to expand subsidies to keep up with demand. The lack of federal and state dollars to pay for child care subsidies affects the quality of child care arrangements (Stone & Daugherty, 2000).

***Discrepancy in Parents' Contributions in Child Care:
Roles Are Clear, Responsibilities Are Different***

As many mothers enter the workforce, subsequently reducing their time at home, the amount of housework performed by mothers has declined only slightly. They are still primarily responsible for the home. Men's contributions to family work have risen but not in any major way (Bonney, Kelley, & Levant, 1999; Lei-

nonen, Solantaus, Punamaki, 2002). Men spent less than 50 percent of the time their wives spent on child care, an increase of only 15 percentage since 1965 (Gornick & Meyers, 2001). Why does the huge gap exist? There are many factors as argued in the literature and by the parents in this study.

Involvement as a socializing process. Maccoby (1998) states that men and women's roles are socially constructed and the differentiation is a product of socialization. Roles emerge through learning processes whereby each generation of adults passes them along to the upcoming generation. It is a social shaping process. With regard to child care, men and women are brought up learning that child care belongs to women's work.

Economic pressure. In this society, men's average salary is higher than women's in the labor force. In dual-parent families with children below school age, mothers' income accounts for, at most, a third of families' total labor-market income (Gornick & Meyers, 2001). Most men take the primary responsibility to be the breadwinner of the household. They provide more economic supports which may press toward less involvement of fathers and greater involvement of mothers in child care activities. The less involvement in child care increases more time for fathers at work.

Conclusion

Although this research has revealed insights about parents' balancing act between work, family, and child care, there are limitations to be noted. The participants in this study were a relatively small number; therefore, generalization was not the goal of this study with regard to the larger population of working parents' experiences. However, the themes that emerged from this research are still applicable to work, family, and child care experiences for many families. Additionally, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that parents' experiences are embedded in the larger society that perpetuates ethnicity. With this in mind, all participants in this study were Caucasians. Thus, the findings may not be generalized to more diverse families. The task before us, therefore, is to specify in more detail how parents' experiences in diverse families are implicated in various cultures.

Despite these limitations, this article provides an angle for better understanding of parents' work, family, and child care demands. The findings suggest that parents shoulder tremendous hardships juggling work and family responsibilities, including the challenges of time, dealing with illness, inner struggles, and dual roles. Achieving balance is such a difficult task. More and more families find themselves squeezed for time between the demands of the workplace and the home. Further research of parents' coping strategies related to role overload through study of a larger population sample would benefit both parents and helping professionals. Additionally, further qualitative study is also needed to understand the detailed qualities of such strategies.

Our findings add to the body of research on work, family, and child care. More studies of those areas will help us gain a better perspective of the phenomenon surrounding parents' experiences and a more holistic frame within which to work for the benefit of children, families, and society as a whole. It will certainly require a thoughtful collective effort from child care providers, employers, and policy makers to provide strong support for working families and a shift from rhetoric to action in the valuing of children and families in the United States.

Acknowledgement

The author gratefully acknowledges the expertise and invaluable feedback of Dinah Volk on an earlier version of this article.

References

- Allen, T. D., Herst, D. E. L., Bruck, C. S., & Sutton, M. (2000). Consequences associated with work-to-family conflict: A review and agenda for future research. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology, 5*, 278-308.
- Ashforth, B.E., Kreiner, G.E., & Fugate, M. (2000). All in a day's work. *Academy of Management Review, 25*, 472-491.
- Bartley, S.J., Blanton, P.W., & Gilliard, J.L. (2005). Husbands and wives in dual-earner marriages: Decision-making, gender role attitudes, division of household labor, and equity. *Marriage and Family Review, 37*, 69-94.
- Bonney, J.F., Kelley, M.L., & Ronald, F.L. (1999). A model of fathers' behavioral involvement in child care in dual-earner families. *Journal of Family Psychology, 13*, 401-415.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.
- Brooks, F. (2002). Impacts of child care subsidies on family and child well-being. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 17*, 498-511.
- Coltrane, S. (2000). Research on household labor: Modeling and measuring the social embeddedness of routine family work. *Journal of Marriage and the Family, 62*, 1208-1233.
- Coplan, R., Bowker, A., & Cooper, S. (2003). Parenting daily hassles, child temperament, and social adjustment in preschool. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly, 18*, 376-395.
- Cowan, C. P., & Cowan, P. A. (1998). Who does what when partners become parents; Implications for men, women, and marriage. *Marriage & Family Review, 12*, 105-113
- Galambos, N.L., Sears, H.A., Almeida, D.M., & Kolaric, G.C. (1995). Parents' work overload and problem behavior in young adolescents. *Journal of Research on Adolescence, 5*, 201-223.
- Gornick, J.C., & Meyers, M.K. (2001). Support for working families: What the United States can learn from Europe. *The American Prospect, 3-9*.
- Kontos, S. (1992). *Family day care: Out of the shadows and into the limelight*. Washington, DC: National Association for the Education of Young Children.
- Leinonen, J., Solantaus, T., & Punamaki, R. (2003). Social support and the quality of parenting under economic pressure and workload in Finland: The role of family structure and parental gender. *Journal of Family Psychology, 17*, 409-418.
- Maccoby, E. E. (1998). *The two sexes: Growing up apart, coming together*. Cambridge,

- MA: Harvard University Press.
- Moustakas, C. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative evaluation and research methods* (3rd ed.). London, UK: SAGE Publications.
- Phillips, D., & Adams, G. (2001). Child care and our youngest children. *The Future of Children, 11*, 35-51.
- Powers, V. (July, 2004). Keeping work and family life in balance. *American Society for Training & Development*, 32-35.
- Smith, K. (2000). *Who's minding the kids? Child care arrangements: fall 1995*. Current Population Reports, P70-70. Washington, DC: U.S. Census Bureau.
- Stoney L., & Daugherty, J. (2000). *Access to child care assistance: A survey of sixteen southern states and the district of Columbia*. Columbia, SC: Southern Institute on Children and Families.
- Van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Grace Hui-Chen Huang is an assistant professor in the Department of Teacher Education at Cleveland State University, Cleveland, Ohio.