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Social Class and the Experience of Work-Family Conflict during the Transition to Adulthood

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Abstract

The challenges of juggling work and family responsibilities are well known, but there has been little attention to the distinctive work and family experiences of young adults. In this chapter, we explore how class affects young adults' exposure to work-family conflicts and the strategies they use to manage their work and family responsibilities. Using data from a recent cohort of young adults, we find class and gender variations in work and family roles and work-family conflict. Early family formation, coupled with poor working conditions, lead those with lower educational attainments to experience more years of family-to-work interference. In contrast, young adults with more education have more work-to-family interference, and this is especially true for college-educated women.

In the U.S., the transition to adulthood usually involves increased involvement in paid work and the formation of new families through marriage or cohabitation and parenthood. Many young adults increase their responsibilities to both paid work and to family caregiving, and find themselves managing the complex ways that work and family responsibilities intersect and sometimes conflict. Investigating the experiences of contemporary young adults is especially important because of recent changes in work and family domains. On the work side, these changes include decreased perceptions of job security across a wide range of occupations, rising wage inequality (Mishel, Bernstein, & Allegretto, 2005), policy changes that push welfare recipients into low-wage work, and the increased availability of "family-friendly" policies and flexible schedules (Bond, Thompson, Galinsky, & Prottas, 2002). On the family side, these changes include increased non-marital fertility (Ventura & Backrach, 2000), smaller gender gaps in household work and child care (Bianchi, Milkie, & Sayer, 2000), and changes in young people's expectations of how they will combine work and family responsibilities (Gerson, 2002). At the same time, life course researchers report that the transition to adulthood is lengthening and is more variable, with less orderly sequencing of school, work, and family transitions and more movement into and out of key roles (Furstenberg, 2000; Shanahan, 2000). These changes in work and family lead us to examine class variations in exposure to work-family conflict, particularly in regard to family formation and employment, and to consider the various strategies that young adults employ to manage work and family conflicts.

This article investigates two questions. First, how does class background and early attainment affect young adults' exposure to work-family conflicts? Second, do the adaptive strategies (Moen & Wethington, 1992) that young adults use to manage their work and family responsibilities vary according to their early attainment? In addition to reviewing previous research, we analyze data from the Youth Development Study (YDS), a longitudinal study of 1000 adolescents who were sampled from public high schools in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1988. We use survey responses from waves 5 through 15, when young adults were 18–19 to 30–31 years old.¹ Our review and analysis clearly show that class and gender still differentiate young

adults' experiences of work-family conflict and the strategies they use to manage these responsibilities.

The interdisciplinary literature on work and family has not paid enough attention to class variation, although there have been recent efforts to broaden the literature beyond middle-class experiences. Also, relatively few studies employ a life course perspective that examines how work-family experiences are shaped by individuals' location in cohorts with different historical realities (cf., Johnson, 2001; Johnson, Oesterle, & Mortimer, 2001; Moen & Roehling, 2004). In contrast, the literatures on the transition to adulthood and stratification are attentive to historical changes and individual development. However, these literatures generally do not examine how young adults experience the *interface* of work and family.

Class and Exposure to Work-Family Conflicts

Young adults' exposure to work-family conflicts is affected by the amount of time they are "at risk," or engaged in work and family roles, as well as the sources of support available to them in their workplaces and families. We focus on the relationship between young adults' educational attainment and their work and family experiences, but it is important to realize that class background, measured by parents' education, remains a strong predictor of young adults' educational attainment and occupational status (Crosnoe & Elder, 2004; Kerkoff, 1995). By their late 20s, young adults' education tends to mirror that of their parents (Sandefur, Eggerling-Boeck, & Hyunjoon, 2005). We also see this pattern in the YDS data. By age 30–31, young adults with at least one college-educated parent were over twice as likely to have completed a four-year degree themselves.

Differences in Family Formation

Marriage and parenthood are important markers of the transition to adulthood for many young people, but these transitions are not equally likely to occur among all young adults. Instead, they are closely associated with class background, the educational attainment of young adults, and young adults' financial resources. Parents' educational attainments affect the timing of family formation and this relationship is mediated by the young adult's own educational attainment. In particular, education delays first marriage (Goldstein & Kenney, 2001; see Marini, 1984 on gender differences). The YDS cohort's family formation follows the same pattern as national samples. Young adults with college degrees are slightly *more* likely to have married by age 30–31, but their marriages occur later than their less-educated peers. College-educated young adults are also much less likely to have children by age 30–31 (45% vs. 71% of those with less education). Additionally, when college graduates do have children, they come later on average and college-educated parents are much less likely to be single parents.

Differences in Young Adult Employment & Work Conditions

The time young adults are "at risk" of experiencing work-family conflict also varies according to the length of time they are employed during this period. Although many college students are employed (some full-time), young adults who do not pursue higher education likely have more years of full-time employment than those who earn a college degree. In the YDS sample, young adults with four-year degrees spent about 5 years in full-time, stable employment (i.e. working at least 10 months per year), compared to 6 years for those without degrees. College graduates spent more time in part-time employment and less time with no employment during their 20s than their less-educated peers (see also Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005a).

¹Seventy-three percent of the original sample participated in the Wave 15 survey in 2004. In our analysis, we substituted data from Wave 14 (age 29–30) if wave 15 data (age 30–31) was missing. This produced a maximum sample size of 773 young adults.

Young adults' job experiences vary systematically and translate to class-differentiated challenges on the "work" side of work-family conflict. Employees in lower-wage jobs often have little control over their work hours, have limited access to employer-provided family-supportive policies and benefits, and work non-standard shifts. Because teenagers and those in their 20s are most likely to be in low-wage jobs (Schochet & Rangarajan, 2004), these working conditions are relevant to most young adults. The question for those interested in class and the transition to adulthood is who passes through these jobs and who spends most of their adulthood in them.

Employees in low-wage jobs have limited control over their work hours and schedules (Bond & Galinsky, 2006; Golden, 2005; Heymann, 2000; Lambert & Waxman, 2005) and are often asked to work evenings, nights, and weekends. These non-standard shifts may negatively impact their health and their relationships with spouses or partners (Tausig & Fenwick, 2001; Presser, 2003). While low-wage workers are often said to have "flexible schedules," that often means management determines how many hours employees work rather than employees' ability to work the hours that are best for them and their families (Kelly & Moen, forthcoming; Henly, Shaeffer, & Waxman, 2006). Mandatory overtime is also most common among those with less than a high school degree and those with lower family incomes (Golden & Wiens-Tuers, 2005). Many workers in service jobs like retail and food service have such unpredictable schedules that it is difficult to establish stable routines for their own families or to know how much income they will earn in any given month (Lambert & Waxman, 2005; Henly et al., 2006).

Employers are increasingly likely to provide some family-supportive policies, benefits, and work arrangements, but access remains unevenly distributed. Lower-wage workers are less likely to have employer-provided health insurance, and there are occupational differences in access to newer benefits such as on-site child care, referral services for child care, pre-tax dependent care spending accounts, flextime, telecommuting, and job-sharing (Deitch & Huffman, 2000; Glass & Estes, 1997; Schochet & Rangarajan, 2004). Flexible work arrangements are especially stratified. In 2002, low-wage workers were less than half as likely as higher-wage workers to report having access to flextime (12% vs. 26%) and telecommuting (4% vs. 11%) (Bond & Galinsky, 2006). Additionally, managers are less likely to grant low-wage workers these options because they usually view these arrangements as tools to motivate and retain highly-skilled and highly-valued workers (Kelly & Kalev, 2006).

Class position clearly affects employees' access to paid time off to care for their children, other relatives, or their own health (Bond & Galinsky, 2006; Heymann, 2000). Only 16% of parents with an associate's degree or less have access to paid family leave (Perry-Jenkins, 2005) and low wage workers are twice as likely as higher wage workers to say that they do not have enough paid time off to care for sick children, or for their own personal illness (Bond & Galinsky, 2006). The Family and Medical Leave Act guarantees only unpaid leave of absences to those who meet certain eligibility requirements based on size of workplace, tenure, and hours worked. Lower-wage workers are less likely to meet those requirements and can not afford to take unpaid time off work anyway. Additionally, common work-family challenges that are short in duration (such as a minor cold with a fever, a broken down car, or a school holiday that falls on a regular workday) are not currently covered by the federal leave law. Because of class variation in paid time off, unpaid leaves, and work rules, low-wage workers are more likely to be disciplined or fired for staying home with a sick child or being 15 minutes late because of a family emergency (Williams, 2006).

Table 1 presents differences, by wage category, in access to family-supportive policies, benefits, and arrangements for the YDS cohort.² Lower-wage workers have fewer of these supports at their disposal. These differences reach statistical significance for unpaid family

leaves, paid family leaves, pre-tax dependent care expense accounts, information and referral services for dependent care, and telecommuting options.

Higher-wage and higher-status jobs tend to have predictable, steady, and secure work hours with more flexibility and greater access to family-supportive policies and benefits, but these jobs often bring intense demands that spillover into family life. Workers in managerial and professional jobs work more hours, on average, than workers in other jobs (Jacobs & Gerson, 1998) and are more likely to feel overworked (Galinsky, Kim & Bond, 2001). Jacobs and Gerson (1998) showed that 35% of professional or managerial men worked 50 hours or more (compared to 20% of men in other occupations), and 17% of professional or managerial women did so (compared to 7% of women in other occupations). Managerial and professional workers also have more overnight business trips (Families and Work Institute, 2005) and are twice as likely to be contacted about work matters outside of normal work hours by customers, managers and coworkers as workers in other occupations (Bond et al., 2002). Frequent disruptions may make it difficult for those in highly skilled jobs to attend to their families.

Experiencing and Anticipating Work-family Conflicts

There is little previous research specifically on young adults' work-family conflicts. Most measures capture perceptions of everyday spillover from one domain into the other. An example would be a respondent reporting that they frequently find their work affecting the energy they have for family interactions. A different strategy is to ask whether responsibilities in one domain interfere with the development of, and decisions about, the other domain. This approach is particularly appropriate for studies of the transition to adulthood, when decisions about how one will invest in different adult roles are most likely. The YDS asked in five waves whether marriage, children, or caring for a sick parent had recently interfered with young adults' careers and also asked whether respondents were concerned about this type of interference occurring in the future. In one wave (age 30–31), the YDS also asked whether young adults' work responsibilities had *ever* interfered with their family lives by making it difficult to find a spouse or partner, affecting their decision to have a child or the timing of their children, or by negatively affecting their relationships with a spouse or partner, with children, with parents or siblings, and with friends.

Table 2 reveals intriguing class and gender differences in the experience of work-family conflicts for this young adult cohort.³ Young adults with less than a college degree are significantly more likely to report that family responsibilities (marriage, children, and/or caring for parents) have interfered with their work lives than are young adults with four-year degrees. These differences are especially strong for women. Earlier childbearing, coupled with gender differences in time spent with young children (especially for single parents), puts less educated women at greater risk of family-to-work interference. College-educated respondents may “catch up” on family-to-work interference in their 30s, as more of them form families. In their 20s, those with college degrees are more likely than their less-educated counterparts to be *concerned* that family will interfere with work in the future, although levels of concern are quite high for both groups.

Young adults with college degrees are also more likely to report that work has interfered with family life (particularly finding a spouse or partner or relationships with friends) by age 30–31. Surprisingly, college-educated men were the group most likely to report work interferences with family (36% did so). There were no statistically significant gender differences in reports

²These data reflect a snapshot of access at age 28–29, because these questions were only asked in one wave.

³YDS respondents were included in the analysis of family-to-work interference and concern if they responded to any of the 5 waves that contained these questions. Work-to-family interference questions were only asked in the last wave we analyzed, when respondents were ages 30–31.

that work interfered with finding a spouse or one's relationship with a spouse or partner. However, there were significant gender differences in work interferences with childbearing decisions and parenthood. Young women were twice as likely to report that work affected childbearing decisions (7% vs. 3.6% for men), and mothers were more than 1.5 times as likely as fathers to say their work had interfered with their relationships with their children (23% vs. 14% for fathers).

Strategies for Managing Work and Family

Just as class and gender affect exposure to work-family conflict, they also influence the strategies young adults use to avoid or resolve work-family conflicts. Existing research on work-family strategies often examines specific classes of workers, such as professional or managerial employees or low-income parents (Becker & Moen, 1999; Heymann, 2000) or treats class indicators as controls. In this section, we review the literature on three types of work-family strategies: 1) altering work attachment and hours, 2) using employer-based policies and benefits, and 3) turning to government assistance or informal support from extended family. We also present descriptive findings on how YDS respondents manage their work and family responsibilities.

Work Attachment and Hours

The most dramatic work-family decision one can make is eliminating involvement in one domain. We do not address fertility decisions here, but do review recent research on leaving the labor force because of family responsibilities. Women are still much more likely to leave the labor force (and to work part-time) than are men (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005a, 2007; Carr, 2002; Mishel et al., 2005). The media often frames this as women "opting out" (Belkin, 2003) but research suggests that these decisions are informed at least as much by the rigidity of workplaces and by the intensity of spouses' work demands as by women's preferences for staying home (Stone, 2007). Those with more education are more likely to leave the labor market or to cut back on their work hours (Carr, 2002), partly because these women are more likely to have high-earning spouses. While women with higher levels of human and financial capital are more likely to reduce work involvement, women with fewer resources often want to work additional hours to meet their families' needs (Reynolds, 2005). Using national data, Ammons & Edgell (2007) found that women with lower educational attainments are more likely to report working additional hours to meet their family needs than women with higher levels of education. However, other employment measures of "scaling back" (Becker & Moen, 1999) did not vary by education or household income for women, and class did not affect men's likelihood of making these choices (Ammons & Edgell, 2007).

We examine the employment strategies of young adults at age 30–31 in the full YDS sample and find no notable class differences. However, when we consider only parents, a more interesting story emerges. As noted above, college-educated women tend to become mothers later in life than those without a college degree and they are less likely to be single parents at age 30–31. Among mothers, work hours do not significantly vary by their own levels of education. Interestingly, the impact of men's education and wages on their wives' work patterns highlights the fact that work-family strategies are couple strategies. Among fathers, men's education is not closely related to their *own* work hours but married fathers who have a bachelor's degree (or more) are significantly more likely to have a spouse who is not employed or is employed part-time (64%) than married fathers with less education (42%). Similarly, married fathers with earnings in the top quartile of their cohort are more likely to have a wife who was either at home or working part-time (61%), compared to married fathers who earn less (42%).

Use of Workplace Policies

The stated objective of employers' family-supportive policies and benefits is to reduce employees' work-family conflicts. Yet there is relatively little research on who takes advantage of these policies and benefits when they are available. Studies of use generally rely on samples of professionals, managers, or employees of particular organizations (Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002; see Glass, 2004 for an exception).

Some policies are more popular than others. In a sample of highly educated, high income professionals, Thompson, Beauvais and Lyness (1999) found that the most commonly used policies were flextime (45%), telecommuting (27%), and flexible spending accounts for dependent care expenses (20%). In the YDS cohort – which includes young adults in a variety of occupations – flextime is also most commonly used (30%), followed by compressed work weeks (14%), reduced hours (10%), telecommuting (9%), and flexible spending accounts for dependent care (7%).⁴ YDS respondents also commonly used unpaid family leaves at key transition points. Although use varies by class, existing research reveals that women are more likely than men to use family leaves (Gerstel & McGonagle, 1999).

Educational attainment, occupation, and income predict the use of family-supportive workplace policies. Managerial and professional workers and those with at least a bachelors' degree are more likely to telecommute than workers in any other occupation or educational attainment level (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005b). Household income is also associated with use of flextime. Only 8% of those in households with an income below \$25,000 used flextime, compared to about 40% of those in households earning \$100,000 or more (Corporate Voices for Working Families, 2006). Gerstel and McGonagle (1999) found that low-income households were more likely to *need* to take a family leave than higher income households, but they often could not afford to take unpaid time off. When the *use* of family leaves was analyzed, there was no variation by income.

In the YDS sample of young adults, parents were more likely to use at least one work-family support (47% vs. 36% of non-parents, results not shown), which aligns with findings from previous studies (Thompson et al., 1999; Blair-Loy & Wharton, 2002). There were no differences in parents' overall usage by education or income. We did see some class differences in use of specific policies. College graduates were more likely to telecommute and less likely to work part-time while respondents whose earnings were in the bottom quartile were much less likely to use the flexible spending account for dependent care because that benefit reduces one's take-home pay.

Public and Family Assistance

Living at home with parents, receiving financial or other resources from parents and relatives, and public assistance are additional ways that young adults can manage their work-family conflicts. Unlike the previous strategies reviewed, existing studies of public and family assistance is attuned to class variation and family class background. In particular, scholars find that if parents used public assistance, young adults are more likely to as well (Klawitter, Plotnick, & Edwards, 1996).

Young adults may turn to public assistance and/or to their families of origin for financial buffers. In the full YDS sample, 5% of college graduates received income from government assistance compared to 14% of young adults with less education (see also Klawitter et al., 1996). The pattern was quite similar when we considered only respondents who were parents

⁴The YDS measure asked about current use of these policies, benefits, and arrangements when the sample was 28–29 years old.

at that time (7% vs. 16%). But, among parents and the full sample, education is not significantly associated with receiving income from parents or other relatives.

Living with parents or relatives is one common way that low-wage workers and low-income mothers on public assistance make ends meet and balance the needs of work and family (Edin & Lein, 1997; McCormack, 2005). In recent decades, more young adults between the ages of 19 and 30 live with their parents (Messineo & Wojtkiewicz, 2004) and those with less education or those who encounter unemployment or divorce are more likely to return home than those with stable employment and family experiences (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1999; Ward & Spitze, 1992). In the YDS sample, 21% of those with less than a college degree were living with their own parents at age 30–31, compared to 8% of college graduates. Also, living with parents was more common among less educated parents than parents with at least a bachelor's degree.

Young adults who earn low wages are also more likely to turn to parents, relatives and friends for childcare than those with higher incomes, partly because of an inability to afford higher-quality child care centers and partly because their less predictable hours make other care unfeasible (Henly & Lambert, 2005; Heymann, 2000; Perry-Jenkins, 2005). There is some suggestion of this in the YDS sample, where 57% of parents with less than a college degree report that their parents or other relatives provide some child care and 46% of those with a college degree report using relative care.

Conclusion

We have explored how class affects young adults' exposure to work-family conflicts as well as the strategies that young adults use to manage their work and family responsibilities. Because the work-family literature has little research focusing on young adults and the transition to adulthood literature has few studies that investigate the work-family interface, we use data from a recent cohort of young adults to consider class and gender variations in work and family experiences.

Early family formation, coupled with poor working conditions, led those with lower educational attainments to experience more years of family-to-work interference. With higher rates of single parenthood, and fewer family-supportive policies and benefits available, these young adults face more challenges as they pursue their work goals. In contrast, young adults with more education had more work-to-family interference, and this was especially true for college-educated women. College graduates were also much more concerned about how work and family will intersect in their future. This may reflect the fact that young adults with college degrees had a longer period of pre-family anticipation of conflicts, while other young adults were already living through the time when conflicts were most likely to occur. But concerns about work-family conflicts may also be more salient for those with more education because the intensive demands of their jobs conflict more obviously with middle-class parenting norms (see Lareau, 2003).

Our findings also showed that, even among this most recent cohort of young adults, work-family strategies remain gendered. This is especially true for households with greater resources. Married fathers with college degrees generally do not pursue work-family strategies that reduce their work time. Instead, and irrespective of their own educational levels, it is mothers married to highly-educated partners who are more likely to work part-time or leave the labor force. In households with more resources, gendered patterns of work and caregiving continue to thrive, with women much more likely to cut back at work when conflicts occur.

Additional research is needed to build upon recent studies and the exploratory analysis we present here. Studies of how the timing of family formation affects work decisions and the

subjective experience of work-family conflict would be particularly illuminating. The work-family literature would also benefit from joint analysis of workplace supports and family supports, including resources provided by both the immediate family (i.e. spouse) and extended family. Finally, an examination of class differences should sensitize researchers to consider the supportive work conditions that are crucial to employees with less education. These include predictable, but still flexible, work hours, a predictable income, and decent benefits including paid time off for caregiving.

With supports and constraints unevenly distributed, some young adults struggle more than others. Employers and government agencies should expand access to supportive policies and resources (such as affordable, quality daycare and health insurance). Work conditions that facilitate, rather than impede, workers' abilities to form and sustain families and meet personal needs are also vitally needed. Together, these changes would ease the transition to adulthood for all young adults and help families flourish.

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Table 1
Access to work-family policies and benefits by hourly wages

	Hourly Wages at Age 30–31	
	Bottom Quartile (N = 107)	Others (>=\$13.46) (N = 482)
<i>Availability of Work-Family Policies & Benefits</i>		
Mean number of work-family policies available (0–10)	2.0	2.8 ***
Unpaid family leave available	31%	46% ***
Paid family leave time available	8%	17% *
Pre-Tax Dependent care expense account available	21%	49% **
Information & referral for dependent care available	10%	23% ***
Telecommuting option available	11%	21% *
Flextime option available	38%	44%
Compressed work weeks available	30%	33%
Reduced hours option available	35%	31%
Job-Sharing option available	11%	12%

*
p<.05;

**
p<.01;

p<.001

Table 2
Work-family experiences and concerns by educational attainment

	Full Sample (N = 905)	Respondent's Education by Age 30–31 Less than BA (N = 680)	BA or more (N = 225)
<i>Family to Work Interference, Ages 21–31</i>			
Any reported interference	46%	50%	34% ***
Women: Any reported interference	56%	62%	41% **
Men: Any reported interference	33%	35%	25% ***
Any reported concern about future interference	92%	91%	98% ***
Women: Any reported concern about future interference	96%	95%	99% *
Men: Any reported concern about future interference	88%	85%	96% **
	(N = 735)	(N = 510)	(N=225)
<i>Work to Family Interference, Ages 30–31</i>			
Any reported interference	26%	23%	33% **
Women: Any reported interference	27%	26%	32% **
Men: Any reported interference	24%	19%	36% **
<i>Work interfered with:</i>			
Finding a spouse or partner	4.64%	3.46%	7.27% *
Relationship with spouse or partner	14%	13%	18%
Decision to have or timing of children	5.64%	5.32%	6.36%
Relationship with children	12%	13%	11%
Relationship with own parents, siblings	6.15%	5.07%	8.52% *
Relationship with friends	14%	12%	19%

*
p<.05;

**
p<.01;

p<.001