Impact of Work, Family, and Welfare Receipt on Women’s Self-Esteem in Young Adulthood*

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This study analyzes the impact of work, family, and welfare on change in white women’s self-esteem from 1980, when the women were age 15–23, to 1987, when they were 22–30. National Longitudinal Survey of Youth data are used to test the effects of work, family, and welfare roles, conditions, and length of role occupancy on change in self-esteem during the transition to adulthood. The results show that marriage tends to improve self-esteem, whereas motherhood and welfare receipt depress it. The effect of being employed interacts with age and motherhood: the positive effect of being employed on change in self-esteem is strongest for younger mothers; the effect is slightly negative for older, childless women. Several conditions of work and family mediate the effects of role occupancy on change in self-esteem. The study concludes with implications for public and private work and family policies, and for welfare reform.

Structural changes in the labor market, economic pressures on young families, and the women’s movement have dramatically altered social expectations of appropriate labor market behavior for young white women in the United States. In the first half of this century, most white women left the labor market once they were married. Since the 1960s, however, it has become increasingly common for married women and mothers of young children to work, often full-time, outside the home. Faced with an absence of well-established norms or role models and a lack of institutional supports, working wives and mothers have improvised ways of combining work and family; some of these ways are emotionally gratifying, and others take an emotional toll. The remaining women, a nonemployed minority, either have chosen not to work and have faced social disapproval of their lack of “career ambitions,” or cannot afford to work and have faced the social stigma of relying on means-tested government income assistance to support themselves and their families.

This research examines the relative effects of women’s labor force status, family responsibilities, and welfare receipt on the development of their self-esteem in early adulthood. The sample of women in this study is drawn from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY). These respondents were white women who were in their twenties during the late 1980s; they experienced significant role transitions in their lives, continuing social change in the workplace for women, and macroeconomic changes that increased their probability of living in poverty (Johnson, Sum, and Weill 1992). They became adults at a time when female labor force participation was at an all-time high in the United States: 49.4 percent of married women with children under 1 year of age worked outside the home in 1985 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1993). The employed mothers in the sample often had to contend with a lack of high-quality, affordable day care (Hayes, Palmer, and Zaslow 1990), husbands who performed far less than half the housework (Shelton 1990), and employers who resisted adopting flexible work/family policies (Sweeney and Nussbaum 1989). Thus, for many women, having a job entailed low-quality day care for their children and the combined burdens of paid work and housework.

Logically, the effect of employment on women’s self-esteem should vary according to the contingencies faced by working women. Some women, for example, may

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1 White, black, and Hispanic women vary considerably in patterns of labor force participation and types of jobs held, as well as in family forms. Although these differences are not a focus of this research, it would be inappropriate to treat work and family as equivalent across these groups.
benefit psychologically from employment by realizing their full potential and by receiving validation and social support from their superiors and colleagues; others may suffer emotionally from employment through role overload and routine, low-paying work. Thus one of the goals of this research is to capture the complexity of the effect of employment on women’s self-esteem by taking into account the conditions of work and family that may interact with employment status in determining self-esteem.

As women’s patterns of labor force participation have changed, so have the social definitions of the roles of wife and mother. Social expectations have shifted toward acceptance and approval of women in the labor force; thus the social meanings of being a wife and mother have been devalued somewhat. It has become far less common in the 1980s and 1990s than earlier in this century for women to be identified by the person to whom they are married, or by those to whom they are mothers. Because the roles of wife and mother confer less stature now than in the past, they may have lost the capacity to enhance women’s self-esteem, particularly in the absence of employment. Indeed, when motherhood prevents a woman from working, it actually may detract from her self-esteem.

The effects of social roles on self-esteem do not operate in isolation. Rather, the effect of one role may hinge on the presence or absence of another role, on conditions attendant on a role, or on the length of role occupancy. For example, the effect on self-esteem of being a mother may vary between married and unmarried women. Furthermore, a mother’s opportunity to be employed outside the home may mediate the negative effect of motherhood on self-esteem. Also, the longer a woman is a mother, the more her self-esteem may improve if she is able to integrate the role into her previously existing role configuration.

SELF-ESTEEM DURING THE TRANSITION TO ADULTHOOD

What Is Self-Esteem?

This study adopts Morris Rosenberg’s concept of global self-esteem, defined as a person’s overall evaluation of his or her worthiness as a human being (Rosenberg 1979). Self-esteem captures the essence of how people think and feel about themselves as totalities; it is therefore “global” rather than “specific,” or limited to a single dimension of the self (Rosenberg et al. 1995). Global self-esteem correlates highly with overall psychological well-being (Puglisi 1989; Rosenberg 1979; Rosenberg, Schoolder and Schoenbach 1989; Rosenberg et al. 1995). When people think highly of themselves, they tend to be in good mental health, whereas they tend to be depressed when they think poorly of themselves.

The transition from adolescence to adulthood challenges young people to reexamine their identities and reevaluate their self-worth. Possibly one of the most significant developmental phases in the life span (Gecas and Mortimer 1987), entering adulthood entails several role transitions as well as the imperative to develop an adult identity (Erikson 1963). The expected passage from being a dependent of one’s parent(s), and legally bound to attend school, to becoming a financially independent worker, and often a spouse and parent as well, with responsibilities for other human beings, dramatically affects one’s identity and quite likely one’s self-evaluations.

A major body of research has focused on losses in self-esteem during adolescence (e.g., Gecas and Schwalbe 1986; Walker and Greene 1986; Youngs et al. 1990), but relatively little is known about self-esteem during the transition to adulthood, especially for present-day women. This study considers three major events in the transition to adulthood: 1) obtaining work, 2) getting married, and 3) becoming a parent. It also considers the event of becoming a welfare recipient, which is not normatively expected but is nonetheless common. I focus more strongly on the consequences of being in a particular state—that is, performing the role of mother—than on the assumption of the role.

The Transition to Work (or to Welfare)

Successful completion of the transition from financial and emotional dependence to independence through work and living apart from one’s parents is the hallmark of entry into adulthood. Research shows that (all else being equal) employed women tend to be less distressed than nonemployed women (Bromberger and Matthews 1994; Gore and Man-
gione 1983; Gove and Geerken 1988; Rosenfield 1980), though the difference is not always statistically significant (Cleary and Mechanic 1983; Radloff 1975). Because self-esteem is a component of psychological well-being, it may be inferred that employed women tend to have higher self-esteem than nonemployed women.

The effects of not being employed may vary between women who are homemakers by choice and women who are not working, perhaps because they cannot afford to pay child care and/or lose health benefits in the type of jobs they are able to acquire. Whether a woman is out of the labor force by choice or by necessity, however, her self-esteem may suffer without the extrafamilial sources of identity, opportunities for social interaction, and outlet for occupational skills that a job provides. In comparing herself with working women and feeling the social pressure on women to have careers, a woman who does not work for pay may devalue the worthiness of her homemaking and child-rearing activities and may view herself less favorably as a result. Women who receive government assistance may disparage themselves further for the need to depend on the government to make ends meet. In the United States, the stigma associated with welfare is so strong that it actually discourages some people from obtaining the benefits to which they are entitled (Goodban 1985). Women on welfare are said to exhibit more symptoms of distress and lower self-esteem than women who are not (Berlin and Jones 1983; Garfinkel and McClanahan 1986). This may well be because women who perceive the social disapproval of their “welfare dependency” internalize the reflected appraisal that they are not valuable members of society. In comparing themselves with women who have better training, have found a good job, and can afford to work, they may feel deeply inferior.

The negative psychological effects of being unemployed or out of the labor force may increase, the longer women remain without a job. Over time, the effects of social isolation, the lack of a publicly recognized identity that comes with a job, and the absence of virtually any form of external validation of their self-worth may take a cumulative toll on their global self-esteem. Similarly, the negative effect of receiving means-tested government assistance may increase over time as women shift their perception of being on welfare from that of a temporary crisis over which they have no control to a long-term state that marks their own personal failure (Goodban 1985). Many women who receive government benefits also hold jobs that either pay low enough wages to qualify them for income assistance or go unreported to maintain eligibility for benefits. Because their jobs do not provide adequately for material needs, they may not enjoy the satisfaction of supporting themselves and the resultant boost to their self-esteem that more lucrative jobs might provide.

The Transition to Marriage

Most married women in the 1980s were employed outside the home. In 1950, only 26 percent of married women age 20–34 were employed, but by 1987 this trend had reversed itself such that 67 percent of married women age 20–34 worked outside the home (Taueber 1991:103). Formerly the transition to marriage for most young white women entailed the displacement of their identities as employees by their new identities as wives and, later, as mothers; by the late 1980s, however, most married women continued to work outside the home after marriage. In view of these figures, the nature of women’s own employment may have become more important to their sense of self than the kind of work performed by their husbands.

Perhaps the most important contribution of marriage to women’s self-esteem, when most women are employed, is to provide emotional and social support in the form of feeling cared about, loved, and valued as a person. In addition, marriage, being normatively expected, confers social approval, whereas delaying marriage beyond one’s early thirties elicits social disapproval. Marriage also leads to greater social connectedness, embedding women in large social networks that include their husbands’ family and friends as well as their own. In short, marriage is a major source of social support, which should improve self-esteem.

Even among women in their twenties, the possibility of separation, divorce, and (more remotely) widowhood exists. The consequences of marital disruption for self-esteem may depend on the state of the relationship before it ended, on the cause of the disruption, on the time elapsed since the disruption, and on any changes in marital
status, such as remarrying, that follow the disruption. This study will test whether marital disruption has lasting effects on self-esteem after current marital status is taken into account.

The Transition to Parenthood

Becoming a mother may be the most dramatic role transition that women undergo. Many first-time mothers have little if any experience in caring for infants, and suddenly find themselves responsible for the care of a helpless and dependent human being, often in isolation. Research shows that parenthood, at least when children are still living at home, does not improve psychological well-being and may even decrease it (McClanahan and Adams 1987), especially when accompanied by economic hardship, lack of affordable, accessible child care, low participation by the husband in child care, and few external sources of social support (Ross and Mirowsky 1988; Ross, Mirowsky, and Goldsteen 1990). Conversely, if a woman is able to integrate mothering into her identity set and to remain successful in her preexisting roles, particularly that of employee, her self-esteem may remain stable or even may improve (Reilly, Entwisle, and Doering 1987). Mother’s paid employment reduces economic hardship and social isolation (Goldsteen and Ross 1989; Gore and Mangione 1983; Gove and Geerken 1988), although employed mothers actually may be more distressed than housewives if they experience role overload (Cleary and Mechanic 1983). Parenthood also may affect self-esteem indirectly by decreasing spouses’ time and energy for one another and thereby reducing marital satisfaction (White, Booth, and Edwards 1986). All in all, parenthood is expected to diminish young women’s self-esteem. The lack of external rewards for mothering, the economic burdens of children, and the likelihood that motherhood will curtail activities in other spheres and remove women from the labor force for long periods may combine to produce this effect.

Interactive Effects of Roles on Self-Esteem

The effect of one role on self-esteem may depend on the presence or absence of another role. For example, the effect of being a mother on self-esteem may not be the same for employed as for nonemployed mothers. Employed mothers may suffer a smaller decrement in their self-esteem due to motherhood than other mothers because their paid work provides relief from the intense demands of child rearing, as well as external validation of their self-worth in the form of pay and recognition for work well done. Nonemployed mothers who spend most of their time with their children may be disheartened by children’s unrelenting needs and by the lack of external recognition for a mother’s efforts. Therefore, this study will examine potential interactive effects among roles in addition to the direct effects of role occupancy in itself.

Mediators of the Effects of Roles on Self-Esteem

A given role may not have the same effect on all role incumbents. For example, the effect of employment status may vary across employed women according to their working conditions and their earnings. Paid employment may improve women’s self-esteem by increasing their economic security and rewarding them for their skills and talents, but if wages are low, if working conditions are poor, or if a job infringes on family needs, employment may depress self-esteem. Substantial evidence shows that working conditions affect self-esteem; the most consistently reported finding is that substantive complexity has a positive effect (Geckas and Seff 1989; Kohn and Schooler 1983; Menaghan 1990; Spennor and Otto 1985; Staples, Schwabke, and Geckas 1984). Routinization or repetitiveness and low occupational control reveal significant negative effects on self-esteem in some studies (Geckas and Seff 1989; Staples et al. 1984), but not in all (Miller et al. 1983). Hourly wages have positive effects on self-esteem (Menaghan 1990); number of hours worked has negative effects (Miller et al. 1983). In the present study, I model several conditions of work including hourly wages, hours worked per week, occupational prestige, occupational control, substantive complexity, and the repetitiveness of work.

The effects of marriage and parenthood on self-esteem may vary according to specific aspects of each role. For example, if marriage improves self-esteem by providing economic security, then husband’s income must have a positive effect. The negative effect of parenthood on self-esteem may be strongest when
preschool children are under a mother's care. Also, because the burdens of mothering increase with the number of children, family size may have a negative impact. The woman's age at the birth of her first child may affect self-esteem: younger mothers may be affected more negatively because they are less prepared to cope with the demands of child rearing and less likely to be settled in their work and family roles. Other aspects of family that affect women's psychological well-being include the hours of household labor performed, the perception of inequity between spouses in the share of household tasks performed (Glass and Fujimoto 1994; Lennon and Rosenfield 1994), and the substantive complexity of housework (Schooler et al. 1983). Unfortunately, in the present study only proxy variables are available to gauge the extent of household responsibilities, and there are no measures of the actual content of household work.

In addition to concrete conditions of family life, women's attitudes toward the appropriate position of women in the family may modify the effects of work and family on their self-esteem. When attitudes toward work and family are inconsistent with actual behavior, increases in depression or anxiety result (Parry 1987; Ross, Mirowsky, and Huber 1983; Waldron and Herold 1986). Furthermore, women with traditional attitudes tend to have lower self-esteem than women with nontraditional attitudes regardless of their employment status (Kleinplatz, McCarrey, and Kateb 1992). Therefore I include women's attitudes toward work and family roles as a control variable in this study.

Hypotheses

The analyses of the life circumstances that prompt changes in women's self-esteem are summarized in the following five hypotheses. The first two are general; the last three deal with "nonnormative" events.

The role occupancy hypothesis: On average, being employed or married has positive effects on self-esteem, whereas being a welfare recipient or a mother has negative effects.

The role conditions hypothesis: Current work and family conditions mediate the effects of employment, marital, and parenthood roles on self-esteem.

The labor-force separation hypothesis: The longer a woman is out of the labor force or looking for work without being employed, the greater will be her loss of self-esteem.

The marital disruption hypothesis: The prior disruption of marriage through divorce, separation, or death has negative effects on self-esteem regardless of current marital status.

The duration of dependency hypothesis: The longer a woman receives means-tested government assistance, the greater will be the damage to her self-esteem.

DATA AND METHODS

Survey Data and Sample

The data for these analyses were drawn from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), which was initiated in 1979 and was administered annually through 1994. The NLSY started with 6,283 women age 14–22 in 1979 and has followed them through their transition to adulthood, including the completion of their education, movement into their own households, early labor force experience, receipt of welfare, marriage, and parenthood. The retention rate for the NLSY in 1987 was 90.3 percent (Center for Human Resource Research 1992:13). I will analyze the determinants of change in self-esteem for NLSY women between 1980 and 1987, when the women were age 15–23 and 22–30 respectively.

The NLSY consists of a representative sample of whites and an oversampling of blacks, Hispanics, and economically disadvantaged whites. In this study, the analyses are limited to white women. All aggregate analyses are based on weighted samples that reflect the actual socioeconomic distribution of white women in the U.S. population at the time of data collection. Thus the results are generalizable to the U.S. civilian, noninstitutionalized population of white women in the same age range. The analyses include all white women—married or unmarried, mothers or childless, and employed or nonemployed—to maintain representativeness of the U.S. population.

Before proceeding, I should mention two limitations of the data. The major limitation is that the sample is limited to white women living in the United States and age 22–30 in 1987. Therefore the results obtained here may not apply to women of color, of other ages, or of different nationalities. One advantage of a sample in this age range, however, is that it
focuses on a particularly busy phase in the life course, namely the transition to adulthood, and addresses how key developmental tasks associated with becoming an adult relate to change in self-esteem. A second limitation to the data is that not all relevant concepts are measured; this is the case with all secondary analyses. Because we lack detailed measures of working conditions, both in and outside the home, the analyses of the relative effects of roles versus conditions within roles are narrowed in scope to those measures which are available.

**Measurement**

The measures of self-esteem are additive scales, administered in 1980 and 1987 and composed of 10 items each, such as “I am a person of worth” or “I feel useless at times.” Women responded with “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “agree,” or “strongly agree.” Negatively phrased items are reverse-coded. Both scales range from 4 to 40; the alpha reliability is .85 in 1980 and .87 in 1987. A one-point increase in self-esteem represents a one-unit increment in a respondent’s level of agreement with an individual item. Current work, family, and welfare roles are measured with dummy variables coded 1 if a woman was employed, married, a mother, and/or a recipient of means-tested government income assistance in 1987 and 0 otherwise.

NLSY measures of working conditions included hourly wages and average number of hours worked per week. More fully detailed questions about working conditions were not asked about the jobs held by women in 1987, so I imported measures from the Dictionary of Occupational Titles (DOT), fourth edition (U.S. Department of Labor 1977). The DOT includes data on 43 dimensions of occupations that were derived from on-site observations of workers by occupational analysts from the Department of Labor. The principal strength of these data is their objective quality; in contrast, self-reports of working conditions may be clouded by individuals’ feelings or thoughts about their work on a given day. The principal weakness of the DOT data, however, is that they are estimated at the occupational level rather than at the level of individual jobs. The result is a loss of detail regarding within-occupation variation in working conditions. Further details are lost in this study because the NLSY women’s occupations are coded only at the census occupational level. Thus I found it necessary to recode some DOT occupational categories and collapse them into census occupational categories.

The following measures of working conditions were imported from the DOT: 1) substantive complexity, 2) repetitiveness, and 3) occupational control. Substantive complexity is measured as a weighted scale, derived from a factor analysis of three scales of complexity of work with data, people, and things. This measure is similar to Kohn and Schooler’s (1983:108), although it does not include indicators of the time spent working with each, or the observers’ overall estimate of the complexity of the job. Repetitiveness is a single-item measure of the percentage of workers in a given occupation who perform repetitive work according to set procedures, sequence, or pace. Similarly, occupational control is measured by a single item indicating the percentage of workers in the occupation who have responsibility for directing, controlling, or planning activities.

NLSY measures of family conditions in 1987 include husband’s income, number of children age 0 to 4 in the home, total number of children in the home, age of the oldest child in the home, women’s age at first birth, and whether regular child care arrangements were in use. More detailed questions on time spent on household activities, including child care, were asked only in 1981, six years before the second measure of self-esteem, and therefore were not used to predict self-esteem in 1987. One additional measure that is relevant to women’s family situation is an additive five-item scale of women’s attitudes toward the role of women in the family and the workplace. Statements include “A woman’s place is in the home, not in the office or shop” and “Traditional roles for husbands and wives are best.” Responses range from strong disagreement to strong agreement; statements reflect the traditional female role as a nonemployed housewife. The scale ranges from 5 to 25; a one-unit increase represents a one-point increment in a respondent’s level of agreement with an individual item. The alpha reliability of this scale is .82.

**Missing Data**

The final sample was drawn from the 3,720 white women initially interviewed in 1979.
By 1987, the second year in which self-esteem was measured, 3,119 women remained in the sample, just under 80 percent; 3,079 of these had valid data on all 10 self-esteem items. After I excluded three cases with outlying values on wages, the final sample size was 3,076. A comparison of baseline characteristics between the final and the original sample revealed only one significant difference: the women sampled here have significantly higher scores on the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery (ASVAB) test of mathematical and verbal abilities.

There are two sources of missing data on independent variables: 1) "invalid skips," in which a respondent either refused or failed to answer the corresponding questions, and 2) "valid skips," in which the corresponding questions were not relevant to some respondents. Examples of the latter include nonmarried women who were not asked about husband's income, and nonemployed women who were not asked about wages. To avoid dropping cases that are missing on some, but not all, variables, so as to maintain the representativeness of the original sample and the power of tests of statistical inference, I use a strategy explained in detail by Cohen and Cohen (1983:298–99). I substitute a constant (either the mean for invalid skips or 0 for valid skips) when data are missing for any independent variable, and then add a dummy variable that is matched to each independent variable for which any cases were missing. This procedure controls for any effect of missing data on results without biasing the regression coefficients of the independent variables and without sacrificing sample size or representativeness. The coefficients associated with the dummy variables for invalid missing data are not presented here, but are available on request.2,3

Methods of Analysis

This research focuses principally on the concurrent effects of work, family, and welfare on women's self-esteem. To establish the causal direction of influence from work, family, and welfare to self-esteem in 1987, I control the earlier 1980 measure of self-esteem in all analyses. Thus the models predict change in self-esteem between one time and the next, rather than level of self-esteem. I estimate all equations using ordinary least squares (OLS) regression. Figure 1 portrays a conceptual model of the effects of work, family, and welfare on self-esteem. Although work, family, and welfare are highlighted, background characteristics and earlier self-esteem are also depicted. The analyses involve a series of regressions that add blocks of variables sequentially, beginning with measures of background characteristics and proceeding to measures of work, family, and welfare role occupancy, work and family conditions, work, family, and welfare history, and, finally, interaction terms.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 presents mean levels of self-esteem in 1980 and 1987 by employment, marital, and motherhood statuses, and by receipt of welfare, all measured in 1987. In both 1980 and 1987, average levels of self-esteem are lower for nonemployed than for employed women, for nonmarried than for married women, for mothers than for childless women, and for current welfare recipients than for women who have not received welfare that year. In each comparison, groups means are significantly different in the directions expected, with the exception of married and nonmarried women's self-esteem in 1987. Even more striking, all means are higher in 1987 than in 1980 regardless of role status: that is, all women's views of themselves become more positive as they leave behind the strains of adolescence.

Table 2 includes means, standard deviations, and bivariate correlations between all independent variables and self-esteem in 1987 minority of the sample (2 percent for wages, for example), they should not be considered meaningful.
for the aggregate sample of 3,076. On average, women gained about one point on the self-esteem scale, or approximately one-fourth of a standard deviation of 1980 self-esteem, over the seven-year period between 1980 and 1987. Respondents reported over one year more of postsecondary education than did their mothers, who had just completed high school. The women are spread evenly across the age range: approximately half were age 26–30 in 1987. Four percent of the sample reported having health problems that interfered with their work. Fully 73 percent of the sample were employed in 1987, 56 percent were married, 47 percent had their own children in the household, and 9 percent received some form of income assistance.

The average wage of these women was well above the federal minimum, but the large standard deviation indicates considerable variability. The mean number of hours worked per week, 37, would be considered full-time. The mean percentages of women performing repetitive work or having occupational control in a given job appear to be low; again, however, the standard deviations show substantial variability, as does the standard deviation for substantive complexity.

Among the married women, spouse’s income, on average, was approximately $22,000 per year in 1987 dollars, a figure

### Table 1. Mean Level of Self-Esteem by Employment Status, Marital Status, Motherhood, and Receipt of Welfare* (Standard Deviations in Parentheses)

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employed, n = 2,241</td>
<td>32.61* (4.00)</td>
<td>33.89* (4.00)</td>
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<td>Not Employed, n = 835</td>
<td>31.86 (4.25)</td>
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* Welfare includes Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), food stamps, unemployment compensation, and Supplemental Security Income (SSI).

* P < .05, two-tailed T-test for difference in group mean levels of self-esteem in 1980 and 1987.
somewhat below the national average of $25,238 for married men age 25–34 in 1987 (U.S. Bureau of the Census 1991:459). In view of the young age of the wives in the sample, husbands are also likely to be young, and not to have been in the labor force long enough to have reached average levels of earnings. On average, the age of mothers at the birth of their first child was approximately 21, younger than the national average of 22.5 for white women age 15–44 in 1987 (National Center for Health Statistics 1988). That is, the white women in the NLSY sample tended to become mothers earlier than the national average. The mean and standard deviation for traditional family attitudes demonstrate that the majority of the women in the sample tended to favor nontraditional roles: they tended to disagree with more than half of the statements supporting traditional roles for women.

On average, women were unemployed or actively seeking employment over the seven years for about 19 weeks, or four months. They were out of the labor force and not seeking employment for close to two years on
average. Time out of the labor force includes periods when respondents were in school and/or staying at home with children. On average, each woman held six jobs from January 1, 1978 through the 1987 interview, though this figure varied by age. The average length of receipt of any of the four forms of income assistance was .89 year, or just under one year, with a standard deviation of 1.57 years; that is, most women who received welfare did so for less than two years. Bivariate correlations between self-esteem in 1987 and all independent variables are shown in the third column of Table 2.

**Multivariate Analyses**

Table 3 presents a series of regressions of 1987 self-esteem on women’s self-esteem in 1980, background, current work, family and welfare roles, conditions of work and family, role tenure, and interaction terms. Eq.(1) in Table 3 presents the regression of self-esteem in 1987 on earlier self-esteem and background characteristics. Earlier self-esteem is by far the strongest predictor of later self-esteem (beta .385); this finding indicates that although self-esteem is fairly stable over time, considerable variance in change in self-esteem remains to be explained. Several other variables have significant, although much

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<td>.341</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Roles, 1987</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>.182</td>
<td>.538</td>
<td>.473</td>
<td>.450</td>
<td>.049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married (spouse present)</td>
<td>.244*</td>
<td>.019</td>
<td>.009</td>
<td>.001</td>
<td>-.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother (children in household)</td>
<td>-.296*</td>
<td>-.422**</td>
<td>-.278</td>
<td>-.944***</td>
<td>-.115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>On welfare</td>
<td>-.433*</td>
<td>-.419*</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working Conditions, 1987</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hourly wages</td>
<td>.017</td>
<td>.018</td>
<td>.021</td>
<td>.035</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hours worked per week</td>
<td>-.012</td>
<td>-.012</td>
<td>-.01</td>
<td>-.011</td>
<td>-.048</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weeks at current job</td>
<td>-.0004</td>
<td>-.001</td>
<td>-.001</td>
<td>-.001</td>
<td>-.017</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substantive complexity</td>
<td>.041</td>
<td>.036</td>
<td>.061</td>
<td>.013</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repetitiveness</td>
<td>-.006*</td>
<td>-.005*</td>
<td>-.006*</td>
<td>-.006</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Conditions, 1987</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Husband’s earnings</td>
<td>.00002***</td>
<td>.00002***</td>
<td>.00002***</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of children 0–4</td>
<td>.150</td>
<td>.091</td>
<td>.149</td>
<td>.024</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional attitudes</td>
<td>-.188***</td>
<td>-.186***</td>
<td>-.184***</td>
<td>-.115</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role Tenure, 1980 through 1987</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weeks out of the labor force</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weeks unemployed</td>
<td>-.0001</td>
<td>-.001</td>
<td>-.003</td>
<td>-.002</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of jobs</td>
<td>.003</td>
<td>.002</td>
<td>.006</td>
<td>.005</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever divorced</td>
<td>.215</td>
<td>.179</td>
<td>.19</td>
<td>.015</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever separated</td>
<td>-.150</td>
<td>-.116</td>
<td>-.009</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ever widowed</td>
<td>.146</td>
<td>.209</td>
<td>.203</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years on welfare</td>
<td>-.125**</td>
<td>-.108**</td>
<td>-.042</td>
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</table>
smaller, effects. A more internal locus of control and higher test scores predict increases in self-esteem, whereas being age 26–30 predicts smaller gains than being age 21–25. The coefficient for respondent’s age changed from positive to negative between the bivariate and the multivariate cases. Apparently, although older women tended to have higher self-esteem, change in self-esteem between 1980 and 1987 was greater among younger women. Respondent’s mother’s education, an indicator of socioeconomic status (SES) of family of origin, does not significantly affect change in self-esteem, though the respondent’s level of education does so, in a positive direction. Self-reported health limitations have no direct effect on change in self-esteem.

Table 3 (Continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interactions</th>
<th>Eq. (1)</th>
<th>Eq. (2)</th>
<th>Eq. (3)</th>
<th>Eq. (4)</th>
<th>Eq. (5)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aged 26–30 x employed</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>beta</td>
<td>b</td>
<td>beta</td>
<td>b</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother x employed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>18.09</td>
<td>18.55</td>
<td>21.96</td>
<td>22.44</td>
<td>22.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjusted r²</td>
<td>.212</td>
<td>.214</td>
<td>.232</td>
<td>.232</td>
<td>.236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S.E.</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>3.58</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>3.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Reference category age 22–25
* P < .1; ** P < .05; *** P < .01

Eq. (3) in Table 3 tests the role conditions hypothesis: current work and family conditions mediate the effects of employment, marital, and parenthood roles on self-esteem. The effect of respondent’s education becomes nonsignificant when work and family conditions are entered; this result suggests that education affects self-esteem indirectly through the opportunities it offers to women for particular work and family situations. Three of the indicators of work and family conditions are related significantly to change in self-esteem, giving partial support to the hypothesis. The more likely a woman is to engage in repetitive work on the job, the smaller her gain in self-esteem over time relative to other employed women. The main effect of employment on self-esteem increases from .182 to .538 between Eqs. (2) and (3). For each 1 percent increase in the proportion of workers engaging in repetitive work in a given occupation, the positive effect of employment on change in self-esteem (.538) decreases by .006. Thus, for an occupation in which 50 percent of workers engage in repetitive work, the effect of employment remains positive (.538 - (.006 x 50) or .238), but when the proportion of workers in repetitive work reaches about 90 percent, the effect of employment becomes zero; anything above 90 percent results in a small negative effect of employment. None of the remaining indicators of working conditions, including hourly wages, hours worked per week, seniority, or substantive complexity, are

Theoretically, both locus of control and mathematical and verbal abilities as measured by the ASVAB test could be affected by working conditions, and in turn could affect self-esteem. This possibility cannot be tested with the data at hand because locus of control and test scores were measured only in 1979 and 1980 respectively.

6 Age is entered as a dummy variable in the multivariate model, coded 1 for age 26–30 and 0 for age 22–25. The correlations between dummy variables for each age group and change in self-esteem are positive among the 22– to 25-year-olds (half of the sample) and negative among the 26– to 30-year-olds, suggesting that the relationship between age and change in self-esteem varies between the two age groups. The dummy coding of age simplifies interpretation of interactions between age and other variables.

7 This analysis does not distinguish between women who were married, mothers, welfare recipients, or employed in both 1980 and 1987, and women who changed status between 1980 and 1987. When I made such distinctions, the effects of being in a given state in both years versus entering or leaving a state between the two years were not significantly different. For example, women who continuously were mothers experienced smaller gains in self-esteem between 1980 and 1987, as did women who became mothers during that period.
related significantly to change in self-esteem. Among family conditions, the effect of husband’s income is positive and significant. The effect of being married on change in self-esteem is actually negative (-.019) for women whose husbands have no earnings, but it quickly becomes positive as husbands’ earnings increase. When husbands earn $1,000, the effect of being married is .001 (-.019 + (.00002 x 1,000)), and it increases to .481 when husbands earn $25,000 (-.019 + (.00002 x 25,000)). At the high end, wives of husbands earning $100,000 enjoy a 1.981 increase or nearly one-half a standard deviation, in self-esteem (-.019 + (.00002 x 100,000)). The effect of the number of preschool-aged children was nonsignificant. Several other “conditions” of motherhood, including age of oldest child in the household, total number of children in the household, and mother’s age at first birth (all highly intercorrelated) were tested in separate models, but none were significant. Women’s attitudes toward women’s roles in the family made a difference in that women who were more likely to favor traditional roles for women inside the home experienced smaller gains in self-esteem over time than did women who disagreed that traditional roles are best. Women’s attitudes may mediate the effect of their education on self-esteem; this effect becomes nonsignificant in Eq. (3) because less highly educated women tend to have more traditional attitudes ($R = -.20$).

Eq. (4) tests the effects of work, family, and welfare history on self-esteem, net of current work and family. Years on welfare is substituted for current receipt of welfare because of the high correlation between the two. Neither the labor-force separation hypothesis nor the marital disruption hypothesis is supported: neither weeks out of the labor force or unemployed nor prior marital disruption effects are related significantly to change in self-esteem. The duration of dependency hypothesis finds support, however. As expected, the negative effect of years on welfare is significant, and explains more variance than the dummy variable for current receipt. This result demonstrates that the longer the negative and stigmatized experience of receiving welfare persists, the worse are a woman’s chances of improving her self-esteem.

The final equation in Table 3 presents two significant interaction terms with employment status, which are the result of an exhaustive test of interactions among roles and conditions within roles. I tested several interactions between age and various roles to learn whether the effects of roles on self-esteem vary between younger and older women. Only the interaction between being employed and being age 26–30 in 1987 was significant, an indication that the nonemployed women age 26–30 enjoyed greater gains in self-esteem than the employed women in the same age range. The effects of motherhood and employment are related: the positive effect of being employed on gains in self-esteem is significantly stronger for mothers than for nonmothers, and the negative effect of being a mother on gains in self-esteem is significantly weaker for employed mothers than for nonemployed mothers. The effect of wages reaches statistical significance in Eq. (5), indicating that the main effect of employment is increased by .123 for each standard-deviation unit increase of $5.87 in wages.

Because employment status interacts with both age and motherhood, its effects on change in self-esteem are different for each of four categories of women defined by age and motherhood. I estimated the predicted means of self-esteem in 1987 to demonstrate the size and direction of the effect of employment for young mothers, older mothers, young nonmothers, and older nonmothers (see Table 4). I substituted mean values for all other variables, except that I gave nonemployed women a value of 0 for working conditions. The right-hand column of Table 4 displays the proportion of a standard-deviation unit change in predicted self-esteem that is associated

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8 I tested a revised measure of substantive complexity excluding complexity of work with “things” (which is related negatively to complexity of work with people or data), but its effect also was nonsignificant. I also tested occupational prestige and occupational control in separate models because of high multicollinearity between complexity, prestige, and control. None of these variables, however, were related significantly to gains in self-esteem net of routine, repetitive work.

9 I tested a weak measure of the availability of child care, referring only to the previous four weeks and not contingent on the need for child care, and found it nonsignificant (results not shown).

10 The full effect of employment, when working conditions are set at their mean value, equals its main effect (.450) + (age)(age x employed or -1.056) + (mother)(mother x employed or .839) + age(.511) + mother(-.944).
Table 4. Predicted Mean Self-Esteem in 1987 by Employment, Motherhood, and Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Motherhood/Age</th>
<th>Employed</th>
<th>Not Employed</th>
<th>Effect Change*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>33.961</td>
<td>32.230</td>
<td>+ .424</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 21-25</td>
<td>(n = 269)</td>
<td>(n = 231)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>33.416</td>
<td>32.741</td>
<td>+ .165</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 26-30</td>
<td>(n = 565)</td>
<td>(n = 372)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Children</td>
<td>34.066</td>
<td>33.174</td>
<td>+ .219</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 21-25</td>
<td>(n = 786)</td>
<td>(n = 134)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Children</td>
<td>33.521</td>
<td>33.685</td>
<td>-.040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age 26-30</td>
<td>(n = 621)</td>
<td>(n = 98)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Difference between employed and nonemployed divided by the standard deviation of self-esteem in 1987 (4.08).

with being employed for each category of women listed in the left-hand column. The largest contrast is between employed and nonemployed young mothers: employed mothers in their early twenties have almost one-half a standard deviation higher gain in self-esteem, net of all the controls, than their nonemployed counterparts. Employed mothers age 26–30 also enjoy a modest addition to their predicted self-esteem relative to nonemployed mothers in that age group. Young childless women who are employed average one-fifth of a standard deviation greater increase in self-esteem than do nonemployed young childless women. Older employed childless women, however, tend to have slightly lower gains in self-esteem than older nonemployed childless women, but the difference (.04 standard-deviation unit) is too small to be meaningful.

DISCUSSION

The primary goal of this study has been to ascertain how young women’s self-esteem responds to the transition to adulthood. I paid specific attention to women’s work and family roles and the role of welfare recipient, to the context in which roles are played out, to length of role occupancy, and to the interaction between work and family settings. The findings suggest how women juggle work and family responsibilities in early adulthood to optimize their self-esteem. They also suggest possible changes in public policy and private employment arrangements that might benefit young women’s psychological well-being.

On average, women’s self-esteem improved modestly (by one point, or approximately one-fourth of a standard deviation) between 1980 and 1987. Although self-esteem is fairly stable over early adulthood, a number of factors in these women’s lives either threatened or potentially enriched their self-esteem as they progressed through their twenties. Marriage, particularly to a high-earning husband, tended to improve self-esteem. Marriage may improve self-esteem by increasing economic security, conferring social status, and providing access to social and emotional support from the spouse and the spouse’s social network. It appears that current marital status rather than past change in marital status is the only accurate predictor of current self-esteem, at least among women in their twenties, for whom the incidence of marital disruption is still fairly low. Motherhood has a negative effect on change in self-esteem. Mothering may reduce self-esteem because of the unrelenting stresses of taking care of children and because being a mother interferes with being a wage earner or being a wife. For employed women, the negative effect of being a mother is much smaller (-.105 versus -.944), suggesting that employment buffers the negative effect of motherhood by providing women with an alternative identity, social support, external validation for work well done, greater economic security, and a break from childrearing.

The receipt of welfare increasingly depressed self-esteem over time, perhaps because the longer a woman requires government assistance, the less her prospects for eventual financial independence. The negative effect of welfare receipt highlights the relevance, to women’s self-esteem, of the meaning that society attaches to sources of income. Women’s wage income was found not to be a sufficient yardstick in itself because the source of income, and whether that source is approved by society, affected its impact on women’s self-regard.

11 The value of -.105 (-.944 + .839) is the main effect of motherhood plus the interactive effect of employment and motherhood.
The effect of employment is more complex than that of motherhood, marriage, or welfare receipt because it interacts with women’s age and motherhood status. Being employed has the strongest positive effect on change in self-esteem for young mothers, perhaps because they have had less time to establish their careers and are most in need of social support and income. Employment also improves the self-esteem of mothers in their late twenties, although less so. Young employed and childless women tend to experience greater gains in self-esteem than their nonemployed counterparts, perhaps in part because their employment represents a successful transition to adulthood and financial independence. The younger employed women, both mothers and childless, also may experience greater gains in self-esteem because they have passed more recently through the transition to adulthood, a period during which consolidation and growth in self-esteem are expected to follow the tumultuous years of adolescence.

Among employed women, higher wages and more varied tasks improved women’s sense of self relative to low pay and repetitious work. The positive effect of higher wages likely reflects the social status that earnings confer in U.S. society, and the power that women gain in the household through higher earnings. Through the processes of self-attributions and social comparisons, women and American society at large interpret earnings as a measure of a person’s intrinsic value relative to other people. Repetitive, unchallenging work may reduce women’s self-esteem by precluding a strong sense of accomplishment for work well done.

Among control variables that were not the analytic focus of this study, two stand out as important predictors of women’s self-esteem: 1) test scores of mathematical and verbal ability, and 2) attitudes toward women’s role in work and the family. First, higher scores on the ASVAB test are consistently associated with gains in self-esteem net of education, work, family, and welfare. This finding suggests that women with greater intellectual skills may promote more external validation of their self-worth, and may use their skills as coping resources during the challenging transitions to new roles. As stated earlier, the sample used in these analyses had significantly higher ASVAB test scores than the general population; it may be that this finding would not hold if the sample had a more normal distribution of test scores. Second, women who hold less traditional attitudes toward women’s role in the family tend to have higher self-esteem, whether or not they follow traditional family roles themselves. Traditional attitudes that favor women as full-time wives and mothers are out of line with current mainstream expectations for women, and with the reality that most married mothers, even those with very young children, are in the labor force. Women who eschew such attitudes may feel better about themselves simply because they conform to social expectations for women in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

Implications for Public Policy

This study testifies that employment can improve young women’s, and especially young mothers’, self-esteem. Employment is particularly important to self-esteem when it allows women to support themselves free of public assistance. Thus the most important policy implication of this study is the need for both public and private attention to employment opportunities for young women, particularly young mothers. Too often the costs of being employed, particularly day care expenses and the loss of Medicaid, exceed women’s potential earnings, thereby barring them from the labor market.

Presently in the United States most mothers must find day care services on their own, and the quality of care varies greatly. If mothers are to be employed and to be productive while at work, high-quality, affordable day care must be available during their working hours. The picture presented here—that of depressed self-esteem among women on welfare—contradicts prevalent stereotypes of women who readily receive a welfare check, or even produce more children, in order to avoid work. The women in this sample clearly sensed society’s disapproval, and suffered emotionally as a result.

In addition to day care provisions, private employers should move to ease work/family conflict for employees with children. Employers receive potential long-term benefits from accommodating employees’ short-term family needs because such policies encourage longevity in the job and reward women for investing more in their jobs. Parents must be able to cut back their work hours, or stop working for a time, without being penalized.
upon their return to the job in terms of future chances for promotion or career development. Future research, in turn, should respond to workplace policy initiatives by incorporating the effects of innovative work/family policies on women's psychological well-being.

REFERENCES
Ross, Catherine E., John Mirowsky, and Joan Huber.

Marta Elliott is a recent graduate of the doctoral program in Sociology at Johns Hopkins University and is presently a Research Fellow at the National Center for Education Statistics. Her current research includes an analysis of the effects of work, family, and welfare receipt on women’s locus of control and physical symptoms of distress, and a study of the determinants of race, gender, and class inequalities in opportunities to learn in United States public high schools.