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Job Travel and Work Experiences of Women Employed in the Cooperative Extension Service

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Job Travel and Work Experiences of Women Employed in the Cooperative Extension Service

Abstract

A sample of 53 Extension professionals from three western states responded to questionnaires about the challenges and rewards of work travel related to work identity, commitment and satisfaction, and job burnout. Most women identified positive and negative experiences in their jobs, but generally enjoyed the travel aspect of their work. Although burnout is evident, women also experienced a positive effect from balancing many responsibilities at once. Positive aspects of work most distinguished stressed from happy work travelers. Extension women are strongly committed to work in spite of job hardships and tiring demands. Implications for workplace policies and administrators are addressed.

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Introduction

The number of women participating in the paid labor force has increased steadily in recent decades (Bond, Galinsky, & Swanberg, 1998). Women's increasing educational levels and more varied work experiences have resulted in the employment of women in professional careers that involve multiple demands (Barnett & Hyde, 2001). The work family literature indicates that job demands extend into home life and that home or family situations can influence job performance. Travel required by work can be conceptualized as a dimension of job demands, and balancing work and personal life along with work travel has become an important area of study.

Extension professionals travel as a component of their jobs, reaching diverse audiences within their counties and throughout their states. Rural areas in the western states, in particular, pose special problems for individuals whose jobs require them to travel, because such locations typically are spatially isolated, include fewer resources than more populated areas, and may have spotty access to technology. Extension professionals often drive rather than fly to work locations, which can be physically exhausting. Extension positions are characterized by night and weekend schedules, tight deadlines, multiple reports, and a generally busy work culture short on time and funds.

As Enslé (2005) recently warned, "avoiding burnout by balancing job and family is a necessity for Extension employees." Job burnout is both a personal and an institutional concern; at the institution level, burnout affects employee retention. On the other hand, employees are often highly committed to their Extension jobs, due to their perceptions of the benefits of Extension work (i.e., flexibility, rewarding projects, and community outreach). Women who are employed as professionals in Extension positions may experience job burnout, coupled with work commitment, potentially affecting their satisfaction and retention.

Theoretical Framework and Analytic Plan

We used the theoretical connections found between personal identity and role behaviors (Burke & Reitzes, 1991; Reitzes & Mutran, 1994) to understand commitment to work for our sample of professional Extension women. Symbolic interaction theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000) guided our construction of survey items that would tap the meanings women place on their multiple roles, such as worker, intimate partner, and mother.

Commitment to various roles often enhances personal identities and promotes healthy self-esteem and life balance (Reitzes & Mutran, 1994). Furthermore, Marks and MacDermid (1996) suggest that as individuals increase their involvement in various roles, they may experience *role enhancement*-- a positive synergistic effect from balancing many responsibilities at once. In contrast, multiple roles are sometimes viewed as draining to individuals, and role burnout occurs when an individual is stretched too thin in her commitments to others (Barnett & Hyde, 2001; Marks, 1977).

We consider both possibilities for this sample of professional women, that they may experience either or both role burnout and role enhancement. Our analytic approach was structured to consider the associations between the job factors (i.e., burnout, identity, commitment, and satisfaction). Then we added family factors (children and intimate relationships) to our analysis. Last, we incorporate qualitative comments to further understand the challenges and rewards of working and traveling for Extension female professionals.

Method

The sample was 53 women employed by the Cooperative Extension Service in three western states: Montana, Oregon, and Idaho. Many lived in rural areas. Women averaged 11 years on the job, ranging from 3 months to 33 years of employment as an Extension employee. Women worked long hours (averaging 43 hours per week), with 29% working 40 hours per week, 38% working 45 to 50 hours per week, and 12% reporting they worked in excess of 50 hours per week.

Women were required to travel overnight (away from home) as a part of their jobs as Extension workers. The majority of the sample, 60% ($n = 32$) were away from home one to nine nights a month, 30% ($n = 16$) traveled 10 to 19 nights, and five women reported traveling 20 or more nights away from home each month for their work. Women's work-related trips averaged 3.5 days each and ranged from 2 to 5 days. Two-thirds of the women reported that they traveled with co-workers on their trips. When traveling with co-workers, 60% reported engaging in activities outside of the work-related duties of their trips.

Data Collection & Measures

Women voluntarily completed an eight-page questionnaire booklet after an introduction from one of the researchers or an Extension specialist colleague at an annual state conference. The questionnaire took approximately 30 minutes to complete. Questions addressed their education, work hours, job title, and family structure. Nine standardized scales were included.

Work satisfaction consisted of four questions ($\alpha = .88$). A woman satisfied with her job likes the sort of work she is doing, feels work gives her a chance to do her best, feels a sense of accomplishment from work, and rates her job as important.

Work commitment was a five-item scale ($\alpha = .72$) based on Kanter's (1968) classical instrumental, affectional, and moral commitment dimensions. Affectional commitment refers to the emotional aspects of the work situation and how interpersonal relationships at work can generate or destroy feelings of group solidarity. Moral commitment is an employee's dedication to organizational ideas and provides motives for meeting organizational goals. Interestingly, for these women, financial incentives to work (instrumental commitment) were not reliable items to assess worker commitment and were not further used in this study. As defined in this study, a woman committed to her job feels positive emotions at work; feels recognized by managers, coworkers, and clients; as well as feels committed to her work because of the special relationships she has with co-workers.

Work identity was a two-item measure ($\alpha = .72$). A woman with a strong work identity views her job as an important part of herself and believes that other people think her work is important to her.

Job burnout was a four-item scale ($\alpha = .84$) adapted from the National Study of the Changing Workforce (Bond et al., 1998). A woman experiencing job burnout feels emotionally drained from work, feels used up at the end of the workday, admits feeling burned out or stressed by work, and

often feels tired getting up in the morning having to face another day on the job.

The **work-personal life balance** ($\alpha = .95$) scale was comprised of three items to gauge the extent to which women perceived their job interfered with personal life (Tiedje & Wortman, 1990).

A six-item **relationship scale** ($\alpha = .95$) for those in romantic relationships was completed (Hendrick, 1988) that measured satisfaction and communication. Not all the participants living with a partner were married; likewise, some respondents in serious intimate relationships completed the items about their partner even if they were not coresiding.

At the end of the survey, women were provided space to record perceived benefits and challenges of travel, as well as general comments. All but one respondent wrote comments. Women returned their survey booklets to our office through the mail, along with their signed informed consent forms.

Data Analysis

We examined correlational trends among the variables measured in this study and identified significant patterns to reveal what predicted work satisfaction, work commitment, job burnout, and feelings about work travel. All reported findings were significant at a $p < .05$ level. A two-step clustering and validation procedure was used to categorize the women's experiences based on work characteristics. Cluster procedures are an exploratory technique used to uncover the natural groupings of observations (Tabachnick & Fidell, 1996). In this case, we explored women's employment experiences in Extension roles. By grouping women in clusters, we can see hidden patterns and important group differences on outcome variables.

Results

Correlational Trends

Work satisfaction, commitment, and burnout. We examined temporal work dimensions, including years on the job, number of hours worked per week, and number of nights away from home for work-related travel. Surprisingly, none of these variables were significantly related to women's feelings of work satisfaction, commitment, or burnout. Notable bivariate correlational trends that were significant include the following.

- More hours worked per week were positively associated with more nights spent away from family for work travel.
- Feelings of work satisfaction were positively associated with work commitment.
- Feelings of job burnout were negatively associated with work commitment.

Feelings About Work and Travel

Work-related travel had a variety of meanings to Extension professional women. Women's perceptions of travel were important components for understanding how they felt about their jobs in Extension.

Higher satisfaction with work travel was associated with feeling more control over job tasks in general ($r = .417$). Interestingly, control of work tasks was not related to level of education or number of years on the job. It may be possible that positive work travel experiences enhance a sense of control over women's jobs in Extension. Similarly, women who enjoyed their jobs in general tended to enjoy the travel aspect of work ($r = .309$). Those who felt dissatisfied with work travel tended to feel higher job burnout as well ($r = -.343$).

Work-personal balance: Romantic partners and children's ratings. There were no significant differences between family structure and travel frequency for this sample. Women's feelings about work travel were moderately associated with their ratings of their partners' feelings ($r = .425$). If women were satisfied with their work travel, they generally believed partners were supportive of their work travel. Partners' and the oldest child's feelings about the women's travel were also related ($r = .560$).

Coworker relations and work experiences. The more nights that women traveled away from home for work, the more important coworkers were to them (e.g., "I would really miss my coworkers if I did not see them because of work") ($r = .337$). This sample of professional women also designated more coworkers as important to them when they worked longer hours per week ($r = .303$) and had more years on the job ($r = .337$). Women with doctoral and master's degrees reported longer trips ($r = .296$) and were less likely to travel with coworkers ($r = -.275$) than women with bachelor degrees. In this sample of women, it appears that the higher education of Extension workers resulted in more independent work for longer periods of time away from the office.

Predicting Women's Feelings about Work Travel

Professional women in this sample reported high commitment to their jobs, felt strongly attached to their work, and reported high levels of work satisfaction *at the same time as* they reported feeling work burnout and work-family challenges. Using linear regression, we explored different combinations of subjective work experiences. We found work satisfaction and job burnout were the best predictors of personal feelings about work travel [$F(2, 50) = 5.69, p < .01$]. Almost 20% of the variance in feelings about travel was explained by work satisfaction and job burnout ($R^2 = .19$).

Cluster Analysis Results

We used three variables that were significantly associated with feelings about work travel--work satisfaction, work commitment, and work identity--to examine naturally occurring groups in the data. Most women experienced a moderate level of job burnout. Interestingly, job burnout was not a key variable: it was neither useful as a clustering variable nor in distinguishing the two clusters subsequently identified. All women experienced some work challenges related to travel; therefore, there was more variability in women's reports of the positive aspects of their work. These positive aspects were the variables that best differentiated among workers.

The sample partitioned into two clusters identified through validation to be either Stressed or Happy work travelers. Stressed travelers (Cluster 1) were identified as those workers reporting lower work commitment, lower work identity, and lower work satisfaction compared to the Happy (Cluster 2) work travelers. See Figures 1, 2, and 3 for the 95% confidence intervals of the means on the three work attitudes by cluster.

Figure 1.
Work Commitment for Stresses and Happy Travelers

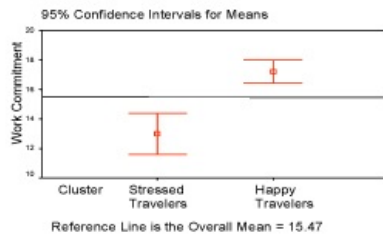


Figure 2.
Importance of Work Identity for Stresses and Happy Travelers

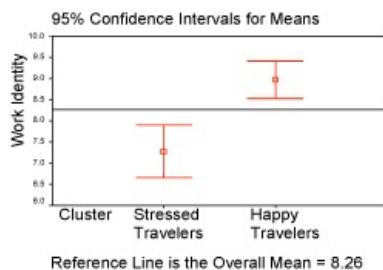
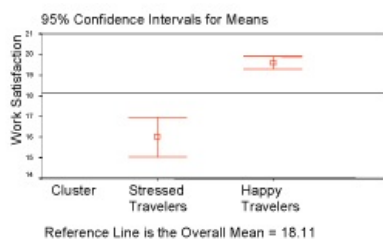


Figure 3.
Work Satisfaction for Stresses and Happy Travelers



Clusters *did not vary* by family structure, travel frequency, nature of trips (length of trips or coworker presence), or levels of education. Clusters *were significantly different* in several ways, which validates variation between work travelers. All statements are based on results from independent t tests with significance at the $p < .05$ level.

Happy Travelers ($n = 31$) felt positive about work travel, saw work-family benefits, felt satisfaction in everything they did--work time, partner time, and leisure (as tapped by the work-

personal life balance scale).

Stressed Travelers (n = 22) felt tired when they woke up and had to face another day at work, had trouble keeping their minds on work tasks, and felt like they did not care about some parts of their life, but that other parts were "okay".

Written Comments

Analysis of the survey comments revealed that the vast majority of women identified benefits to travel. Forty-three women wrote about networking and training opportunities from work travel. For example, one respondent noted that in addition to meeting workers with similar jobs, travel helps "revitalize my job attitude." Twenty women (38%) mentioned seeing new places while traveling for work, which provided, in the words of one woman, "greater awareness of diverse people and places."

These positive experiences were tempered, however, with the perception that traveling diminished time spent with family members. Twenty-nine women (55%) listed at least one family concern about traveling for work. One mother admitted that she is "crabby with family" when she returns from work travel, even when she wants to "show appreciation." Thirteen women (25%) specifically mentioned that work at home and the office piles up while they are on the road. A mother noted, "work builds up at home, I miss the kids and husband and their activities."

Another portion of women indicated that health (n = 11) and sleep (n = 8) concerns were a challenge. For example, a respondent from rural Montana noted it was a challenge to stay awake while driving long distances and late hours during her work trips.

Discussion and Conclusion

With a sample of professional women who encounter similar job demands, we see that the aspects of their jobs that they like (such as travel) can also contribute to their feelings of being burned out. Interestingly, these negative feelings by and large do not invade their feelings of satisfaction and commitment to their work. When we examined the items that comprised the work satisfaction and commitment scales, women are apparently endorsing that their work is important to them and is demanding, but that they are making important contributions. Nevertheless, they bear the brunt of job demands through feeling used up and tired.

We should note that we only surveyed women who work for Extension in this study and that the inclusion of men in the study may have altered the conclusions related to perceptions of work travel and job stressors in general. If Extension administrators are concerned with recruiting and retaining women in Extension positions, however, we believe this study sheds light on important characteristics and perceptions of professional women working in the field.

Our results provide support for the enhancement hypothesis developed by Marks and Barnett and their colleagues (Barnett & Hyde, 2001; Marks, 1977; Marks & MacDermid, 1996). Professional women acknowledged simultaneous positive and negative experiences in their jobs. We believe that rather than assuming family structure interferes or blocks women's ability to contribute positively to their jobs, our research illuminates how the demands of the job itself can challenge a positive work experience. In addition, our results are a testament to professional women's strong work involvement in the face of job hardships and tiring demands.

Implications for Cooperative Extension Workers

Workplace policies should reflect, and administrators and coworkers should recognize, the variation in women's experiences when they are required to travel for their jobs. Some employers create a work culture that blames women's family structures and parenting responsibilities as contributors to their stress at work; however, in this research, we found family factors were not significant challenges to work performance.

Instead, there are benefits and challenges to meeting demands associated with work travel. The supportiveness that workplace cultures provide their employees is one of the best predictors of worker's job productivity, including job satisfaction, commitment, and retention (Bond et al., 1998). Cooperative Extension workplaces need policies that support employees who travel, understanding that these policies can ultimately strengthen commitment and quality of work performance. Ways in which employers can do so include:

- Promoting work-life balance policies, such as sabbatical or unpaid leaves, and job flexibility such as working from home;
- Offering compensatory time to employees (if you work on Saturday, you can take Friday or Monday off) without direct supervisors feeling that this demonstrates a lack of commitment to your job;
- Providing administrative support for streamlining reporting and committee meeting requirements, when possible; and

- Promoting wellness activities at the workplace, such as workshops on working smarter, relieving stress, and physical activity

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