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# Parental Role Strains, Salience of Parental Identity and Gender Differences in Psychological Distress\*

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*Although past research indicates that women's higher levels of psychological distress can be accounted for by their greater exposure and vulnerability to role-related stress, the social psychological factors contributing to female vulnerability have not been fully identified. This paper applies identity theory to the phenomenon of gender differences in distress among parents. From an identity perspective, I propose that salience of the parental identity in women's self-conceptions contributes to their vulnerability to parental role strains. Using 1988 survey data from a stratified random sample of married and divorced Indianapolis residents (N=448), I find that gender differences in distress are explained by differences in exposure to parental role strains. Further analyses reveal, however, that salience of the parental identity contributes to both men's and women's vulnerability to parental role strains. These findings underscore the utility of identity theory for explaining psychological distress among women and men.*

Gender differences in distress are examined here among parents, taking into account the salience of parental identity in men's and women's self-conceptions. Two hypotheses are evaluated. First, parental identity is more salient to women than to men. Second, parental identity salience contributes to female vulnerability to parental role strains. This research underscores the utility of identity theory for explaining distress among women and men.

Epidemiological research has found consistently that women have higher rates of psychological distress than men (Al-Issa

1982; Dohrenwend et al. 1980; Meyers et al. 1984; Robins et al. 1984; Weissman and Klerman 1977). Stress researchers often attribute the differential distribution and etiology of mental illness to women's greater exposure to role-related stress (Gove 1972; Gove and Tudor 1973). This hypothesis led to research on gender differences in exposure to ongoing role strains. Studies have documented the pronounced sex difference in distress among the married (Fox 1980; Radloff 1975) and the greater emotional costs of parenthood for mothers, especially those with dependent children when parental role demands are greatest (Aneshensel, Frerichs and Clark 1981; Barnett and Baruch 1987; Gore and Mangione 1983).<sup>1</sup> Though mixed, results generally indicate that employment does not benefit women as much as men due to the strain of meeting family and work role obligations (Cleary and Mechanic 1983; Kessler and McRae 1982; Thoits 1986). These findings suggest that women's greater exposure to family role strains is partially responsible for their higher rates of distress.

Stress researchers also have emphasized the greater vulnerability of women to ongoing family role strains than men. Pearlin and

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Lieberman (1979) found that marital strains have a greater impact on women than on men. Kessler and McLeod (1984) showed that women are more affected by network events (i.e., undesirable events that occur to others). Like the ongoing strains associated with their family roles, these events are linked to women's caregiver role. Although some have argued that women's vulnerability stems from their inadequate stress-buffering resources (Belle 1982; Pearlin and Schooler 1978), others have documented the fact that sex differences in distress are not explained fully by social support and coping resources (Kessler and Essex 1982; Thoits 1984).

The inability to account successfully for gender differences in distress has led some authors to acknowledge potential differences in the *salience* of role domains to males and females (Aneshensel and Pearlin 1987; Bielby and Bielby 1989; Thoits 1991). To the extent that strains in salient role domains are more threatening to well-being, women's greater response to family role strains may reflect the importance they attach to these roles relative to men.

That the parental role is more salient to women than to men can be gleaned from qualitative work on parenthood. Women invest more emotionally in the parental role and their sense of self is tied more closely to parenthood than is men's (Daniels and Weingarten 1983; LaRossa and LaRossa 1981). Parenthood is perceived as a central role by mothers, regardless of employment and marital status (Wallerstein and Kelly 1980; Weiss 1979). While parenthood is not unimportant to males, these studies suggest that the relative salience of the parental role in men's and women's self-conceptions is implicated in sex differences in vulnerability to ongoing parental role strains. However, to date no attempts have been made to establish this connection systematically.

If sex differences in vulnerability to parental role strains are a function of the differential salience of the role to women and men, research should assess whether the salience of family roles *exacerbates* the impact of ongoing role strains on women compared to men. Identity theory provides a framework for examining the social psychological processes through which chronic strains in role domains affect the psychological states of persons.

Social psychologists have noted that role

identities are important for self-conception. Role identities are conceptions of oneself in terms of one's location in the social structure (Stryker and Serpe 1982; Thoits 1983, 1986). Since social roles consist of expectations attached to social structural positions, role identities provide individuals with behavioral guidelines. Thoits (1991) recently argued that because role expectations are normative expectations, experiences in identity domains are a basis for self-evaluation and should be important for psychological well-being. According to Thoits, problems experienced in a role domain could undermine the identity related to that role domain and consequently, threaten the individual's well-being.

Identity theory also posits that the many social identities held by people are not equally important to self-conception. Role identities vary in their psychological salience (McCall and Simmons 1966; Rosenberg 1979; Stryker and Serpe 1982). Social identities are organized hierarchically such that emotional investments in and commitments to some identities are greater than others. Socioculturally appropriate roles also may be more salient in a person's identity hierarchy than less normative roles (Thoits 1991).

It follows, then, that problems in a role domain should be more distressing to individuals who are highly committed to the role identity than to those who are less invested in the identity, since ongoing problems threaten a valued aspect of self. In other words, the impact of parental role strains should vary depending on the salience of the parental identity in the individual's self-conception. To the extent that the parental identity is more salient in women's self-conception than in men's, they should not only be more exposed to parental role strains, but also more vulnerable to their effects.

Research on male and female roles provides insight into the salience of the parental identity in women's self-conception. Sociocultural conceptions of adulthood emphasize the primacy of motherhood for women's social self. From childhood on, females are socialized to view the parental role as primary, while males are socialized to view the occupational role as primary. Structural factors contribute to women's commitment to the parental identity. By holding women responsible for children, the organization of family life reinforces earlier socialization. Mothers' experiences outside the family also

encourage their identification with the parental role. Less rewarding "female" occupations may lead women to seek their primary source of self-definition in parenthood. Women's emotional involvement in the parental role, and their psychological investment in the parental identity, may lead them to experience parental role strains as more distressing. In light of the cultural assumption that motherhood promotes women's well-being, it may seem ironic that the parental role contributes to women's distress. However, the thesis of this paper is that it is *precisely* because females are more committed to the parental identity that strains in the role have a greater impact on women than on men.

Two hypotheses are evaluated in this paper. First, parental identity is more salient in women's self-conceptions than in men's, regardless of marital status. Second, the salience of the parental identity in women's self-conceptions contributes to female vulnerability to parental role strains. Demonstrating the occurrence of the second hypothesis addresses the processes through which strains associated with a major social role become troublesome for women. An identity approach also provides opportunities to account for within-group variation in distressful outcomes of ongoing strains, not only in the parental role domain but across a variety of role domains among women and men.

## DATA AND MEASURES

### *Sample*

The data for this paper come from the first-wave of a two-wave prospective panel study of the stress experiences of Indianapolis adults, conducted by Thoits. Structured interviews were conducted in 1988 with a stratified random sample of 354 married and 346 divorced men and women. Persons were drawn using two sampling procedures. All married respondents and 48 percent of the divorced respondents were obtained through random digit dialing (RDD). Eligibility was determined through a telephone survey. From the married couple households, husbands and wives were selected alternately. A supplemental sample of divorced persons was drawn from Indianapolis courthouse records. Systematic random sampling was used to select

names of 800 couples, or 1,600 individuals, who obtained a divorce in 1986 or 1987. A current Indianapolis address was available for 311 of these persons, resulting in a location rate of 37 percent.

The response rates for the RDD and courthouse samples were 63 percent and 75 percent, respectively; the overall study response rate was 66 percent. The low response rate may be due to respondents' opportunity to refuse participation since they were contacted about the study in advance.<sup>2</sup> While the response rate limits the generalizability of the findings, the sample is useful for examining theoretical relationships and drawing tentative substantive conclusions. A comparison of the characteristics of the study sample to the RDD probability sample of eligible married and divorced Indianapolis residents indicates that there was no response bias with respect to age, number of children, and income. However, the sample does include a disproportionate number of employed women.

This analysis is based on a subset of 448 men and women who had at least one child under 18. This restriction is made in order to hold constant life-cycle variation in exposure to parental role strains and the salience of the parental identity. Also, the "active" phase of parenting typically occurs when children are dependent. Respondent characteristics by marital status and gender are shown in Table 1. Married and divorced respondents differ in a number of ways. The married are more likely to be White, college graduates, and have higher household incomes. Within each marital status, males and females do not differ appreciably. Married men and women differ most in employment: fewer wives are in the labor force than husbands. Divorced men and women differ most in household income and the presence of children in the household: more women have lower incomes and children in the household. The two divorced samples are highly similar with two exceptions (data not shown): courthouse respondents have a larger number of children under 18 than RDD divorced respondents and have been divorced for a shorter period of time.

### *Measures*

*Psychological Distress.* Distress, the outcome variable, was measured by 28 items from the depression, anxiety, somatization,

TABLE 1. Selected Characteristics of the Analysis Population by Marital Status and Gender

Characteristics	Married			Divorced		
	Total (N = 254)	Male (N = 111)	Female (N = 143)	Total (N = 194)	Male (N = 78)	Female (N = 116)
Age, Mean Years	36.2	37.3	35.5	36.6	38.0	35.9
Race						
White	90.6%	91.0%	90.2%	83.5%	80.8%	85.3%
Black	7.1%	7.2%	7.0%	16.5%	19.2%	14.7%
Other	2.4%	1.8%	2.8%	0 %	0 %	0 %
Education						
Less than high school	5.9%	5.4%	6.3%	6.2%	6.4%	6.0%
High school graduate	31.5%	30.6%	32.2%	26.3%	29.5%	24.1%
Some college	34.3%	31.5%	36.4%	49.0%	43.6%	52.6%
College graduate	18.5%	20.7%	16.8%	11.9%	15.4%	9.5%
Graduate degree	9.8%	11.7%	8.4%	6.7%	5.1%	7.8%
Household income						
Under \$4,000	.4%	0 %	.7%	3.6%	1.3%	5.2%
\$ 4,000- 7,999	1.6%	.9%	2.2%	3.1%	1.3%	4.3%
\$ 8,000-11,999	1.6%	.9%	2.2%	9.8%	6.5%	12.1%
\$12,000-19,999	4.5%	6.5%	2.9%	29.0%	15.6%	37.9%
\$20,000-39,999	40.5%	42.6%	38.8%	44.0%	57.1%	35.3%
\$40,000-59,999	32.8%	30.6%	34.5%	8.3%	14.3%	4.3%
\$60,000 or more	18.6%	18.5%	18.7%	2.1%	3.9%	.9%
Children under 18, Mean Number	2.1	2.1	2.0	1.7	1.7	1.7
Children under 18 residing in the household	96.5%	96.4%	96.5%	68.6%	32.1%	93.1%
Employment						
Employed	84.3%	95.5%	75.5%	87.6%	89.7%	86.2%
Employed 35 + /hrs wk	71.5%	94.6%	53.5%	84.5%	88.5%	81.7%

and hostility subscales of the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI), which is the abridged SCL-90 (Derogatis and Spencer 1982). Respondents reported how distressed they were by each item during the past month (0 = not at all, to 4 = extremely distressing). Responses were summed, resulting in a range from 0 (no distress) to 84 (extremely high distress). This measure has high construct validity (Derogatis and Cleary 1977) and high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .93$ ). Although these scores are not measures of psychiatric disorder *per se*, they can be interpreted as indicators of distress. Persons with high scores are likely to be those whose psychological state impairs their functioning somewhat. While results for the summary measure are presented, subscale analyses yield consistent results.

**Parental Role Strains.** Two measures of strain are the independent variables, (1) strain in the parental role domain, and (2) strain from combining the roles of parent and worker. Parental strain is the sum of responses to two questions which asked parents whether their children have chronic health problems and behavior problems (1 = yes).

Strain from combining parenthood with employment is the weighted sum of responses to four questions which asked employed parents if they feel (1) a conflict between their work and parental responsibilities; (2) that they miss out on some of the pleasures of being a parent; (3) that their children do not get the attention from them that they need (1 = never; 2 = once in a while; 3 = fairly often; 4 = very often); and (4) worried about the effects of their job on their role as parent (1 = yes). This measure has an internal consistency of .77, with scores ranging from 3 to 13.

**Parental Identity Salience.** Salience of the parental identity was assessed by asking parents to rate how *committed* they are to being a parent (on a scale ranging from 1 = not at all committed, to 7 = very committed). This measure is highly correlated with other indicators of identity salience (e.g., a seven-point scale indicating the *importance* of being a parent). Analyses using these alternative measures of parental identity salience yield comparable results.

**Sociodemographic Characteristics.** To control for variation specific to parental status and to hold other factors constant, seven

demographic characteristics are included in each regression analysis: respondents' age (in years), race (1 = non-White), education (8 categories), household income (21 categories ranging from no income to over \$76,000), number of children under 18, employment status (1 = employed), and whether at least one of the respondent's minor children resides in the household (1 = yes). Finally, gender and marital status are coded as dichotomous variables (1 = female; 1 = divorced).

## RESULTS

Table 2 presents mean levels of distress experienced by men and women for the total sample and separately for the married and divorced. These data replicate findings of previous research that mothers exhibit significantly higher levels of distress than fathers overall, as well as within each marital status. The data also confirm that divorced mothers and fathers are more distressed than their married counterparts. An analysis of variance (not reported here) indicates no significant interaction between gender and marital status on distress. In contrast to some studies, these data indicate that sex differences in mental health are less pronounced among the married. This discrepancy may be due to sample differences. While other studies relied on comparisons of married and unmarried persons (including never married, widowed, separated and divorced parents *and* non-parents), this study compares married and divorced parents of dependent children.

Table 3 presents mean levels of parental strain, work-parent strain, and parental commitment by gender for the total sample and for each marital status. Two patterns are evident. First, men and women vary in exposure to parental role strain. In general, women report significantly greater strain in the parental role domain. Employed women also report greater strain from combining parental and work roles than employed men. With the exception of work-parent strain among the married, these

differences hold for married and divorced parents. Second, men and women differ in their commitment to the parental identity. As expected, commitment is significantly higher for females in the total sample and in each marital status sample (although only at the .10 level for the married). These results support the first hypothesis. Irrespective of marital status, the parental identity is more salient in women's self-conceptions than in men's.

### *Exposure to Parental Role Strains*

Does greater exposure to parental role strains account for women's higher levels of distress? This question was examined with a series of regression analyses for the total parent sample and separately for married and divorced parents. Distress was regressed on gender, employment, and parental strains, controlling for marital status, age, race, education, household income, number of children under 18, and the presence of children under 18 in the household. In addition, distress was regressed on work-parent strains for the total sample of employed parents, and separately for employed married and divorced parents. Several patterns can be viewed in Table 4.

First, as expected, strains experienced within the parental role increase distress. Parental strain coefficients are positive and significant for the total sample and for each marital status sample. Second, strain from combining parenthood with employment increases distress. These coefficients are positive and significant for the total employed sample and for the employed married and divorced samples. Note that while employment reduces the distress of married and divorced parents, full-time employment reduces the distress of divorced parents. Third, male-female differences in distress are reduced substantially when the level of strain experienced in the parental role is held constant. Gender coefficients for distress become smaller and non-significant after stress exposure is controlled in the total,

**TABLE 2. Mean Distress by Gender and Gender Within Marital Status**

Sample	Male			Female			Difference
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	
Total	17.98	15.32	185	22.73	16.28	255	p≤.001
Married	17.39	15.08	109	20.76	15.41	140	p≤.05
Divorced	18.82	15.73	76	25.12	17.05	115	p≤.01

**TABLE 3. Mean Levels of Parental Strains, Work-Parent Strains, and Parental Commitment by Gender and Gender Within Marital Status**

	Male			Female			Difference
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N	
Total							
Parental strains	.43	.62	187	.73	.72	259	p≤.001
Work-parent strains	7.31	2.30	167	7.78	2.57	200	p≤.05
Parental commitment	6.23	1.72	189	6.54	1.38	259	p≤.01
Married							
Parental strains	.39	.61	111	.66	.69	143	p≤.001
Work-parent strains	7.25	2.16	101	7.35	2.64	104	p=NS
Parental commitments	6.23	1.72	111	6.51	1.45	143	p≤.10
Divorced							
Parental strains	.49	.64	76	.81	.75	116	p≤.001
Work-parent strains	7.39	2.51	66	8.24	2.44	96	p≤.01
Parental commitment	6.22	1.73	78	6.59	1.28	116	p≤.05

married, and divorced samples. A similar pattern emerges among employed parents. Once both strain variables are held constant, sex differences in distress among employed parents are reduced to insignificance.

It thus appears that gender differences in distress are explained by differences in men's and women's exposure to parental role strains. Women's higher level of distress is accounted for by the strains they experience from parenting. Employed women's higher level of distress is a function of strains in the parental role and from combining the roles of parent and worker.

An assumption underlying this and subsequent analyses is that ongoing role strains predict distress. However, it is plausible that highly distressed persons report greater exposure to role-related strains. Because these data are cross-sectional, it is not possible to rule out the alternative hypothesis that pre-existing distress results in higher levels of strains. In analyses (not reported here), the strain variables were regressed on a dichotomous variable for previous psychological treatment, a proxy for prior emotional functioning.<sup>3</sup> Results suggest that pre-existing distress does not result in significantly higher levels of role strains. A direct test of the alternative hypothesis can be made only when the second wave of data is available.

#### *Parental Identity Salience and Vulnerability to Parental Role Strains*

The central hypothesis of this paper is that

the impact of parental role strains is greater on persons who are highly invested in the parental identity than on those less invested in the identity, since chronic strains in a salient role domain threaten a highly valued aspect of self. Even though gender differences in distress are explained by differences in exposure to parental role strains, further analyses are needed. Next, it is necessary to determine whether parents who are highly committed to the parental identity are more vulnerable to parental role strains than less committed individuals.

The following analyses examine the impact of parental role strains on men's and women's distress under the condition of low and high parental commitment. The total sample, as well as male and female subsamples, were subdivided into low and high identity subgroups. Individuals were placed in the low identity subgroup if their score on parental commitment was below or at the mean ( $\bar{X} = 6$ ) and in the high identity subgroup if their score was above the mean (a score of 7). At each level of commitment, distress was regressed on gender, marital status, other background variables, and parental strains. In addition, distress was regressed on work-parent strains among employed parents. In essence, these analyses repeat the equations presented in Table 4. However, by subdividing the sample into low and high commitment subgroups, and examining differences in the impact of strains on distress across these subgroups (in the total sample and for each gender), it is possible to determine whether individuals who highly value the parental

TABLE 4. The Effects of Exposure to Parental Role Strains on Distress

	Distress											
	Total			Married			Divorced			Employed Divorced		
	(1)	(2) <sup>a</sup>	(3) <sup>a</sup>	(1)	(2) <sup>b</sup>	(3) <sup>b</sup>	(1)	(2) <sup>c</sup>	(3) <sup>c</sup>	(1)	(2) <sup>c</sup>	(3) <sup>c</sup>
Female	4.47** (1.56)	3.89* (1.69)	1.88 (1.67)	2.95 (1.98)	2.41 (2.10)	1.00 (2.10)	6.15** (2.49)	7.52* (3.36)	4.20 (3.29)	4.87† (2.58)	6.86† (3.75)	2.44 (3.39)
Employed		-4.39* (2.24)	-3.76† (2.17)		-2.73 (2.86)	-2.22 (2.81)		-7.20† (3.93)	-6.17† (3.75)		-8.96 (6.62)	-9.66 (5.92)
Parental strains		5.99*** (1.11)	5.16*** (1.15)		5.99*** (1.11)	4.97*** (1.53)		7.24*** (1.65)	7.24*** (1.65)		5.54*** (1.74)	5.21** (1.74)
R <sup>2</sup> (adjusted)	.02	.07	.13	.01	.02	.06	.02	.10	.18	.03	.06	.27
N	430	242	197	158	158	158	158	158	158	158	158	158
Female	4.87** (1.64)	5.57** (1.86)	2.46 (1.77)	4.45* (2.13)	5.58* (2.33)	3.07 (2.29)	4.87† (2.58)	6.86† (3.75)	2.44 (3.39)	4.87† (2.58)	6.86† (3.75)	2.44 (3.39)
Employed full-time		2.09 (2.83)	-.62 (2.64)		4.77 (3.18)	2.68 (3.07)		-8.96 (6.62)	-9.66 (5.92)		-8.96 (6.62)	-9.66 (5.92)
Parental strains		5.16*** (1.15)	5.16*** (1.15)		5.16*** (1.15)	5.16*** (1.15)		5.21** (1.74)	5.21** (1.74)		5.21** (1.74)	5.21** (1.74)
Work-parent strains		1.91*** (.32)	1.91*** (.32)		1.91*** (.32)	1.91*** (.32)		2.48*** (.48)	2.48*** (.48)		2.48*** (.48)	2.48*** (.48)
R <sup>2</sup> (adjusted)	.02	.06	.20	.02	.05	.14	.03	.06	.27	.03	.06	.27
N	355	197	158	158	158	158	158	158	158	158	158	158

† p ≤ .10; \* p ≤ .05; \*\* p ≤ .01; \*\*\* p ≤ .001.

Note: Unstandardized coefficients (standard errors in parentheses) are reported.

<sup>a</sup> Controlling for marital status, age, race, education, household income, number of children under 18 in the household.

<sup>b</sup> Controlling for age, race, education, household income, number of children under 18, and the presence of children under 18 in the household.

<sup>c</sup> Controlling for age, race, education, household income, number of children under 18, the presence of children under 18 in the household, and whether the respondent was obtained through RDD or courthouse records.



identity are more affected by parental role strains. Moreover, by comparing the impact of strains on men's and women's distress under the same conditions of parental commitment, sex differences in response to parental role strains at each level of commitment can be assessed. For simplicity, only the coefficients for parental strains and the strain of combining parenthood with employment are shown in Table 5.

For these analyses, the marital status samples were pooled in order to retain a sufficient number of cases. (Analyses of interaction effects, not shown here, indicate no significant marital status differences in response to parental role strains.) The analyses in Table 5 are equivalent to adding interaction terms to the Table 4 equations, terms for parental strains and work-parent strains multiplied by parental commitment. Each coefficient represents the differential impact of parental role strains on the well-being of low compared to high commitment women and men. Three observations can be made.

First, most women (84%) and men (73%) are highly committed to the parental identity. Coefficients for low commitment males and females should be interpreted cautiously due to the small number of cases in these equations. Second, highly committed parents

are more affected by parental strains than less committed parents. Upon examining coefficients for parental strains under the conditions of low and high commitment (columns 1 and 2 for the total sample), it is clear that strains in the parental role have a significant effect on distress only for high commitment parents. This pattern of identity vulnerability applies to both fathers and mothers (see columns 1 and 2 for males and females). Supplemental analyses of interaction effects (not reported here) indicate that differences between coefficients for low and high identity parents are significant at the .05 level for the total sample and male subsample.<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the strain of combining the roles of parent and worker has a larger impact on employed parents' distress under the conditions of low parental commitment, suggesting that the work identity is implicated in low commitment parents' greater response to this source of stress. Additional interactional analyses confirm that the difference between coefficients for low and high commitment parents is significant for the total sample at the .10 level. Overall, these results support the second hypothesis. Parents who invest a great deal in the parental role for self-conception are more vulnerable to strains in this role domain, while parents who invest less are more affected by the strain of combining the role of parent and worker.

**TABLE 5. The Effects of Parental Role Strains on Distress Under the Conditions of Low and High Parental Commitment, Total, Female, and Male Sample<sup>a</sup>**

	Distress					
	Total		Females		Males	
	1. Low Commitment	2. High Commitment	1. Low Commitment	2. High Commitment	1. Low Commitment	2. High Commitment
Total <sup>b</sup>						
Parental strains	3.28 (3.04)	6.73*** (1.18)	.70 (5.04)	5.89*** (1.51)	4.89 (3.51)	8.74*** (1.96)
R <sup>2</sup>	.10	.20	.21	.16	.37	.27
N	87	343	39	212	48	131
Employed <sup>c</sup>						
Parental strains	4.26 (3.09)	5.68*** (1.24)	3.16 (5.76)	4.95** (1.58)	4.60 (3.59)	7.43*** (2.16)
Work-parent strains	2.42** (.81)	1.56*** (.35)	2.14 (1.37)	1.92*** (.47)	2.27* (1.06)	.99 <sup>†</sup> (.57)
R <sup>2</sup>	.26	.25	.40	.23	.41	.26
N	76	279	32	162	44	117

<sup>†</sup>  $p \leq .10$ ; \*  $p \leq .05$ ; \*\*  $p \leq .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p \leq .001$ .

Note: Unstandardized coefficients (standard errors in parentheses) are presented.

<sup>a</sup> Each equation controls for marital status, age, race, education, household income, number of children under 18 years, and the presence of children under 18 in the household, and, for the total sample, gender.

<sup>b</sup> Equations for the total, female, and male samples each control for employment.

<sup>c</sup> Equations for the employed samples each control for full-time employment.

Third, the most unexpected finding in Table 5 is that at both levels of parental commitment, women are *not* more affected than men by parental strains. In fact, the coefficients for low commitment males and females (columns 1) and high commitment males and females (columns 2) suggest that the impact of parental strains on distress is actually larger for men than for women. However, tests for the significance of differences between men's and women's response to parental strains (at each level of parental commitment and in general) reveal *no* significant gender differences in vulnerability to strains in the parental role.<sup>5</sup> With respect to gender differences in response to the strain of combining the roles of parent and worker among employed parents, women appear more responsive than men to this source of strain under the conditions of high parental commitment. However, supplemental interactional analyses indicate that this gender difference is not significant.

Thus, contrary to research which shows that females are more vulnerable to family role strains, these findings indicate that in general, mothers are not significantly more affected than fathers by either parental strains or the strain of combining parenthood with employment. Nor are women significantly more affected by either source of strain under the conditions of low or high parental commitment. If anything, the results of these analyses indicate that ongoing strains in the parental role tend to have a somewhat more deleterious effect on the mental health of men than on the mental health of women, even though the parental identity is less salient to men than to women.

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Previous theoretical and empirical work indicated that women's higher rates of distress result from their greater exposure to family role stress. Stress researchers have emphasized that women's mental health disadvantage also is explained by their greater vulnerability to role-related stress. This paper applied identity theory to the phenomenon of gender differences in distress among parents. From an identity perspective, I proposed that the salience of the parental identity in women's self-conceptions might contribute to

their vulnerability to ongoing parental role strains.

This research documented gender differences in distress, exposure to parental role strains, and the salience of the parental identity. Regression analyses confirmed that women's greater exposure to ongoing strains, both in the parental role domain and from combining the roles of parent and worker, is a major source of mental health disadvantage of mothers. Having found that gender differences in distress are explained by differences in exposure to parental role strains, I next examined whether parents who highly value the parental identity for self-conception are more vulnerable to parental role strains than individuals for whom the parental identity is less salient.

Subsequent analyses confirmed that parents who are highly committed to the parental identity are more vulnerable to strains in the parental role, providing support for the guiding hypothesis of this paper. In contrast, the strain of combining the roles of parent and worker was found to have a greater impact on employed parents' distress under conditions of low parental commitment, suggesting that the work identity may be involved in low commitment parents' greater vulnerability to this source of stress. Although I began with the expectation that the salience of the parental identity in women's self-conceptions would contribute to their vulnerability to parental role strains, further analyses revealed that the impact of parental role strains on men's and women's distress does *not* differ significantly. In fact, the most unforeseen finding is that ongoing strains in the parental role domain actually have a somewhat greater (although not significantly greater) impact on the psychological functioning of men than on the psychological functioning of women.

This paper demonstrated that salience of the parental identity contributes to men's *and* women's vulnerability to parental role strains. These findings highlight the utility of identity theory for explaining gender differences in distress and point to directions for further work. To assess its generality, the identity salience hypothesis needs to be extended to other role domains such as marriage and employment. Also, to rule out the alternative hypothesis, longitudinal data are crucial for future research. The restricted scope of this paper and data limitations preclude resolution of these concerns.

The tendency for fathers to have a marginally greater response to strains in the parental role domain than mothers, despite the lesser salience of this identity in men's self-conceptions relative to women, is interesting but difficult to explain. Conceivably, fathers are more affected by parental strains because they have become more involved in parenting, yet have less realistic expectations about the physical and emotional demands of children. This research clearly shows the need to take into account the social psychological conditions under which the strains of adult roles, especially the parental role, become troublesome in the lives of both women and men.

#### NOTES

1. Although studies show that marriage is associated with lower levels of disorder for men and women, research on parenthood has produced less consistent results. While earlier studies found that parenthood increases males' and females' distress (Cambell, Converse and Rogers 1976; Gove and Gerken 1977), recent research is less conclusive. Kandel (1985) and Aneshensel et al. (1981) found that parents are better off than non-parents. This discrepancy may be due to comparison groups. While parents of adult children are better off than non-parents, parents of young children are more distressed than parents of adult children (Umberson and Gove 1989). For a review of research on parenthood and well-being, see McLanahan and Adams (1987).
2. The different response rates for RDD and courthouse samples may reflect differential interest in the study. Having obtained a divorce recently, the courthouse respondents may have been more interested in a study of stress.
3. Respondents were asked whether they had undergone psychological treatment or counseling within the past two years. Respondents were assigned the value of "1" if they had been in treatment.
4. Interaction terms for commitment multiplied by parental strains and by work-parent strains were computed and entered into the equations for the total sample and male and female subsamples. The nonsignificant difference between the coefficients for low and high commitment mothers may be due to the small number of low commitment females.
5. Tests for the difference between the coefficients for males and females were conducted by entering interaction terms for gender multiplied by parental strains and by work-parent strains to the Table 5 equations for the total sample and for the low and high identity subgroups.

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