The Quality of Life in the Chicago Collar Counties: Work, Family, and Well-Being

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Abstract

Among a sample of 545 Chicago Collar County residents surveyed in the spring of 2000, average levels of physiological stress symptoms are substantially high levels. Women report significantly greater levels of symptoms regardless of work status, domestic labor hours, child rearing hours, and marital status. The family oriented, suburban life-style provides little insulation from the gross stress induced by modern life, nor does variation in income provide much of a mediator to the major structural stressors of modern life.

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The Quality of Life in the Chicago Collar Counties: Work, Family, and Well-Being

Modern life, even with its higher levels of affluence of among the middle-class, has not been accompanied by greater leisure activity and a care-free existence. A spat of recent reports have chronicled the plight of contemporary families seeking to achieve and maintain a level of middle-class life-style, comfortable as well as affluent (e.g. Family and Work Institute, 2001; Schor, 1992) On the other hand, reports have showed the benefits of family life (Waite, 1995) and have argued that the major determinants of general life satisfaction are the major stages in the life cycle (Hamilton and Wright, 1986).

The report contributes to this line of ongoing research on the quality of life by analyzing a sample of Chicago Collar county residents surveyed in 2000. In this report, the focus is on the level of symptomatic stress, measured by a series of physiological indicators; and in explaining the distribution of stress among the sample.

Sample Characteristics

The sample consists of 545 adult residents of the six collar counties surrounding Chicago. (http://www.socqrl.niu.edu). The distribution of characteristics relevant for this report are summarized in Table 1. Post-stratification weights were applied to the descriptive statistics to adjust for the age, sex, and race biases that usually accompany random digit dialing surveys. We note that 70% of the sample is employed in some capacity outside the home; 60% are currently married; and that the Chicago Collar County is an affluent area: the median family income reported is just under $65,000.

(insert Table 1)

Stress

Sixteen items comprised the inventory of stress symptoms (see Appendix A). Respondents were asked if they experienced each symptom over the last three month period. The indicators are incidence markers only, not measuring the extent or severity of the symptoms. The most frequently reported symptom, feeling easily tired, was experienced by over 61% of the sample. The more extreme physiological symptoms: shakiness, lump in throat, nausea, and heart pounding still was experienced by between 10 and 20 percent of the population. The more psychological manifestations of stress: feeling on edge, being restless, and particularly irritable were experienced by more than half the respondents.

(insert Figure 1)

Factor analysis of the 16 indicators confirmed a single factor model, with the possibility of correlated second subscale comprised of the cognitive function items: Q316-Q318. The items were summed to produce an index of total symptoms experienced over the past 3 month period. We note that practically no suburbanites were stress free over the last 3 months, only 25 or fewer than 9% reported no symptoms. The modal category, three symptoms, was experienced by just over 11% of the sample. Fifty percent of the sample experienced 5 or more symptoms over th4 past three months; and the most stressed-out respondents, the top 25% reported 9 or more of the symptoms. But as we can see in the chart, although the average level of stress symptoms experienced is relatively high, there is a substantial amount of variation in stress; it is to the task of explaining this variation that this report is addressed.

(insert Figure 2)

Analysis of Stress

The major life statuses that have been correlated with the social epidemiology of stress as well as other well-being indicators are age, sex, work and marital status, (race is also a major life category correlated with stress, but the Collar County survey contains too few non-white respondents to make that inquiry useful).

In addition to these major status categories that distribute stress, the allocations of time to work, domestic chores and child care have also been useful in explaining the different levels of stress experienced. Indeed, as we will see shortly, a general linear model predicting stress from these major statuses does show significant variation. These patterns of stress, along with some time allocation variables, are summarized in Table 2.

(insert Table 2)

Suburban women experience greater stress that suburban men; and this is true regardless of whether the respondents are married or not, or employed or not. To illustrate, focusing on the single employed respondent – men report a total of 6.86 stress symptoms, a high level; but women report an average of 8.04 symptoms.

The effect of married life, contrary to the images often portrayed in the popular media but consistent with other more rigorous reports, is to reduce the level of stress. And this benefit accrues to men more than it does to women. Among employed-married men, an average of 4.19 stress symptoms were experienced compared to an average of 5.72 among employed married women.

We begin the explanatory analysis of stress in a stepwise fashion, entering first major demographic variables that have been associated with levels of well-being. Several studies have related various measures of well-being to sex, marital status, and age; so we begin our analysis with these variables (Hamilton, 1986; Schor, 1992; Waite, 1995).

The sex of the respondent accounts for a substantial variation in reported stress. Women, on average, report 1.66 more stress symptoms that men (Model 1, Table 3). Marital status serves to reduce stress: compared to the never married, being married lowers the number of reported stress symptoms by 1.87. Even the divorced report lower stress symptoms than the never married (-.93). Those currently separated from their spouses report the highest levels, 1.33 above the levels of the never married (Model 2, Table 3).

(insert Table 3)

Model three simplifies the effect of marital status by collapsing the information into a dichotomous indicator variable: married v. not married and adds an interaction term: married by sex. This tests whether the relative reduction in stress that accompanies married is different for men and women. The interaction effect which is not statistically significant shows that the reduction in stress symptoms may be slightly more for women than for men; but this is after the quite substantial main effect that shows women with an average 1.71 symptoms reported than men.

The effect of age is introduced in Model 4, and is statistically significant even though the numerical impact is small; only decreasing the average number of symptoms reported by .04 per year of age. In models 5 and 6, the reported hours worked in employment and the hours spent commuting to work in a typical day were entered (all those with no employment were logically recorded with the value 0). No effect was found for the variation in hours employed. As we will see in the next stage of the analysis, employment status, rather than hours worked, does have an effect on increasing stress. This finding is somewhat surprising among the suburban sample given the large exposure of in the popular press about the “overworked” and frazzled suburban worker. We note from Table 2 that there is substantial variation in the hours worked, among married males, a quarter report more than a 10 hour day at work. Further analysis of this relationship might detect some non-linearity in the association between hours worked and stress levels. For now, we conclude that there is no general linear pattern relating hours worked to

stress, although we have the reservation that at the extreme tails of the distribution of hours worked, stress would vary as well.

Models 7 and 8 add the domestic labor commitment and an interaction of that variable with sex. Again, somewhat surprisingly, among this more affluent suburban sample, no strong relationship is found with hours allocated to domestic work and stress. Model 9 repeats the strategy by adding in the amount of time spent in child care (note that this analysis is based on a the subsample who reported having children < 18 living at home). Again, there is considerable variation in the amount of child care required based upon child's age, and it may be the case that those with pre-school children, who allocate greater amounts of time to child care, may report more stress symptoms, but we do not have detailed information the ages of the children present in the household.

Model 10 adds in final control variables, income and education, two personal resources that can be applied to counteract the structurally induced stress resulting from the factors previously included. Neither of these effects are substantial numerically, nor statistically significant. Furthermore, their signs suggest that stress increases, rather than decreases, with higher levels of income and education. Perhaps the demands associated with greater levels of income and education offset the resources implied in the indicators that could be applied to lowering stress levels.

In the last stage of analysis undertaken for this report, a series of simpler models were specified that captured the main structural parameters that induce variation in stress symptoms. We also conducted a more detailed search for factors that could be more proximate causes of stress. Model 1 (Table 4) captures the major effects previously identified and shows that two additional factors seem to have a slight effect on stress levels: importantly – the hours slept in a typical day; and mysteriously, the hours spent watching TV. There have indeed been a series of reports recently discussing the problem of sleep deprivation in the United States, and here we see a consequence – an increase in reported stress symptoms, most obviously in the item "feeling easily tired." We note in passing that the average reported hours slept in a randomly selected day from the previous week was 6.75 for this sample; and 25% of the sample reported sleeping fewer than 6 hours. The effects of TV watching may be consistent with other reports that perceptions of the chances for negative life events occurring are higher among those with greater exposure to TV.

(insert Table 4)

Models 2 and 3 (Table 4) add in domestic labor and child care hours. While these effects are not statistically significant at the .10 level, they do add up numerically. An increase of 4-5 hours of domestic labor would result in an average increase of one-half of a stress symptom.

Income does not help in ameliorating the overall stress levels (Model 4, Table 4). In fact the sign is positive; added income induces stress rather than relieves it.

Summary and Discussion

Even as modern suburban living offers an environment conducive to family lifestyle: ample living space, good schools, and relative safety, the suburban lifestyle is accompanied by substantial amounts of stress. This can be quantified: the baseline level of stress experienced by the average Chicago Collar County resident results in about 4.5 stress symptoms reported over the past 3 months. To that baseline, female residents experience an additional 1.8 symptoms on average, the stress of working adds an additional symptom (1.03); being married helps, lowering the number of stress symptoms by one (-1.19). And sleep helps.

The major life statuses: marital, family, work, examined in this stage of our research on the sources of stress in contemporary suburban life account for just over 10% of the variation in the levels of stress experienced by the nearly 300 respondents in our 2000 survey who were asked the detailed questions about stress symptoms. Within each life status, more proximate causes of

stress will likely emerge. For example, among married individuals, certain features of married life are significantly correlated with stress, and may be much more psychological and idiosyncratic: simply reporting the frequency with which one's spouse "…gets on my nerves", is correlated with the level of stress symptoms. Similar detailed characteristics of the work environment will undoubtedly provide additional explanations of stress levels.

Apparently, the suburban life style does not buffer the stresses induced by our modern society. But life is less stressful in the suburbs if you are a married male who works but does not have to work long hours for your solid middle-class income, and who puts in few hours around the house. Perhaps more evidence can be found on the suburban golf course!

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