"I really don’t have a career. I just work and I like doing my work.

A qualitative study on the meaning of work for low-income women from a family perspective

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Background

Literature
- Career identity & expectations are linked to career success (Fugate, Kinicki, & Ashforth, 2003; Koen, Klehe, & Vianen, 2013; Stringer & Kerpelman, 2010).
- But vocational/career studies tend to focus on the individual rather than the family context.
- Family research tends to focus on how maternal employment impacts child outcomes (Moen & Coltrane, 2005).
- Cascading effects of socioeconomic disadvantage and family stress in one generation, can predict negative results in the next generation (Martin, Conger, Schofield, Dogan, Widaman, Donnellan, & Neple, 2010).
- Employment can be a tool or a burden, but it is required by many programs and policies.

Happenstance Theory: employment opportunities based on context

Intersectionality: social inequities related to race, class, and gender form the context in which career choices are made

Symbolic Interactionism: families make meaning of work, career, and context

Theory

Intersectionality: overlapping and cumulative experiences of race, gender, and social class inequity

Happenstance Theory: employment choices are made within contexts that afford varying opportunities. Emphasizes the impact of context rather than goal oriented and planned elements of work choices. Not all contexts are equal in terms of the random opportunities they afford.

Symbolic Interactionism: meaning is generated within families as family members communicate with each other about the events and situations in their lives.

Present Study

Purpose: To explore low-income women’s perspectives of the shared meaning of work and value of employment as communicated through their family across generations

Research Question: How has the family context shaped the experiences and meaning that low-income women have about work?

Grand Tour Question: Tell me about how values related to work were talked about in your family.

Method
- Participants were recruited in rural and urban areas at workforce development and nonprofit organizations.
- Purposive sample self-identified as female, and that they either currently or in childhood were in low-income contexts (n=14).
- Interviews were semi-structured and demographic forms were completed after the interview.
- Participants received a modest financial incentive for their time.
- Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Qualitative Analysis
- Hermeneutic phenomenology coding process based on van Manen’s 3 levels of analysis (1990) to understand the meaning-making process of the participants regarding their lived experiences of work.
- The authors compared findings for emergent themes to differentiate between essential and incidental themes.
- Authors practiced bracketing through memoing and peer checks.

Sample
- 14 women who had experience living in a low-income context
- 11 (78.6%) were employed at the time of the interview
- 13 (92.9%) had worked prior to age 18
- 5 (35.7%) were married at the time of the interview
- 8 (57.1%) were mothers at the time of the interview
- 7 (50%) were recruited in rural areas, 7 (50%) from urban areas
- White European American: 5 (36%), African American: 4 (29%), White Non-European American: 3 (21%), Asian American: 1 (7%), and Biracial: 1 (7%)

Results

Purpose to Work
- “I want to help people”
- “I always want something better for my kids”
- “Town was not the best for my family”
- “I didn’t really give myself a career”
- “A job is what you do”
- “They never had a woman doing it”

What Work is
- “A career is something you choose”
- “Why you education you don’t get anywhere in life”
- “It’s all about what’s best for my family”
- “It’s about first, first interest”

Happenstance Theory: employment opportunities based on context

Motherhood & Work
- “My mom being gone”
- “I had a mom, so it was easier”
- “Just not an easy road”
- “Some people are able to overcome”

Discussion & Implications
- Women in our study endorsed the idea that women “should” have careers, and “should” be making choices based on career goals.
- They also thought that 4 year college education was a pre-requisite of a career. When college was not feasible, they felt having a career was out of reach.
- The idea of “work-life balance” was not present in these stories. The ideological division of work and family as separate domains was not part of their descriptions. Work and family were in the same domain.
- Motherhood was an emergent category that was particularly salient for these women. Employment choices through the intergenerational family tree were often explained in terms of the role, relationship, or absence of the mother.
- Many of the participants said they had never been asked these questions before.
- Some of the research frame on middle-class women and employment (work-life balance) may not translate to women in working class and poverty contexts.

Selected References