

"I'm Just Glad My Three Jobs Could Be During the Day": Women and Work in a Rural Community*

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Abstract: The purpose of this qualitative study was to better understand the experience of wage-earning women in the context of rural economic restructuring. An ecological and life course theoretical framework was used. Nine community leaders and 17 wage-earning women residing in a rural northern Michigan county participated in semi-structured interviews, and the prevailing economic concern was low wages and lack of jobs with benefits. Women workers were affected by factors such as ties to rural family business, childcare concerns, and long commutes to work and children's schools. Informal social support and family ties were identified as reasons for remaining in these challenging circumstances.

Key Words: coping, female workers, rural families and communities, social support, work and family.

Economic restructuring is considered a primary cause of stress for rural Americans (Imig, Bokemeier, Keefe, Struthers, & Imig, 1997). Primarily, it exacerbates poverty, a historically persistent condition in rural areas (Huang, 1999). In addition to affecting rates of poverty, economic restructuring corresponds with changing family structure (McLaughlin, Gardner, & Lichter, 1999). Gender differences in agriculture and service-sector dominated areas, as well as childcare concerns of rural women, contribute to rural work and family concerns (Albrecht, Albrecht, & Albrecht, 2000). Females are less likely than their male counterparts to find agricultural employment. Further, women are more likely to be employed in service-sector jobs with lower pay and fewer benefits also has specifically addressed rural mothers' social networks and the need for adequate childcare resources (Marks, Dewees, Ouellette, & Koralek, 1999). Research (Kratras, Zuiker, & Bauer, 2004; Voydanoff, 2004).

Families in economic and occupational transition and those with lower socioeconomic status are more vulnerable than those with more stability and higher socioeconomic status (Lorenz, Elder, Bao, Wickrama,

& Conger, 2000). Outcomes of such stress can include compromised physical and emotional health, increasing the risk of morbidity and mortality. These factors, combined with less access to health care, may compound the vulnerability of rural residents. In addition, lack of technology, distance from adequate health care centers, and lower rates of insurance coverage also create health care barriers (Albrecht, Clarke, & Miller, 1998).

The present research aims to better understand the experience of rural, wage-earning women in the context of rural economic restructuring. Viewed through the lens of this rural community context, the specific objectives include (a) to describe the work lives of rural wage-earning women, (b) to identify the challenges and concerns faced by rural wage-earning women, (c) to determine the coping strategies used by rural wage-earning women, (d) to determine the role and sources of formal and informal social support, and (e) to describe the aspirations rural wage-earning women have for themselves and their children.

This study makes a unique contribution to the literature in three ways. First, it uses qualitative

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methodology, whereas the majority of work/family studies are quantitative in nature. In describing the poverty of hard work, Gringeri (2001) laments that current theoretical perspectives do not deepen the understanding of ways in which families in rural communities experience working poverty. Pini (2002) also supports the use of focus groups in feminist research with farmwomen. Second, this study is unique in that it focuses exclusively on rural families. In a discussion of the importance of rural areas in the 21st century, Singelmann (1996) notes an urban bias and marginalization of rural populations. Atkinson (1994) also laments the lack of attention to rural childcare needs. A third unique aspect of this study is the consideration of a total community context. Community, the context in which rural working families are embedded, clearly affects stress and concomitant quality of life as well as availability and access to resources. Voydanoff (2001) proposes an ecological approach to examining the importance of community to working families. Further, Bowen, Mancini, Martin, Ware, and Nelson (2003) specified that “informal networks and the support they provide influence how positively people experience their neighborhood, how safe they feel in their community” (p. 35).

Conceptual Framework

This project is informed by the human ecological and life-course perspectives, which facilitate the examination of contextual factors, the process of time, and the complex interactions among variables. Human ecology is concerned with interaction and interdependence of humans with the environment (Bubolz & Sontag, 1993). Bubolz and Sontag propose three embedded and interrelated environments: the natural physical-biological, the social-cultural, and the human built. These environments, which provide a wide range of both resources and stresses, affect growth and development of individuals and families within the community context. Bengtson and Allen (1993) noted that the life-course perspective provides insight into change over time in individuals and families as social units, involving both micro- and macrosocial levels of analysis. Micro and macro levels of analysis are addressed in research related to the work-family interface and the role of community in family life (e.g., Huang, 1999; Imig et al., 1997; Katras et al., 2004; McLaughlin et al.,

1999; Voydanoff, 2004). Use of the ecological and life-course perspectives will address Voydanoff's (2001) emphasis on ecological research and Gringeri's (2001) call for research that expands scholarly understanding of ways in which rural families experience working poverty. The authors employ this perspective by hearing the voices of both elite community members and workingwomen, while incorporating multiple data sources.

Method

The context of this study was a rural county in northern Michigan—a community in transition that demonstrates both vulnerability and potential. In the past decade, the overall population has increased more than 13%, with the number of retail and wholesale employment opportunities increasing by almost 45% (United States Bureau of the Census [USBC], 2001). Although certain types of employment have increased, this particular county ranks low in the state in residents with a college degree. Overall, this rural county can be characterized as primarily white, older, low income, and dominated by retail and service employment. However, it is experiencing increases in population, education, and employment opportunities, and has a proactive economic development corporation.

Research Timeline and Recruitment

The research team collaborated with the county extension staff. The research process included multiple data sources and was conducted in two phases as summarized in Table 1. County Extension staff supported recruitment of female workers by announcing the project during relevant county programs and providing names of parents whose children participated in 4-H. One hundred names were randomly selected from this list, and invitation letters were sent to mothers and grandmothers of 4-H members. Advertisements were placed in the local newspaper and in key locations. Some employers who participated in elite interviews announced the opportunity to employees, creating a form of opportunity sampling.

Additional demographic data. Table 1 provides a demographic description of participants. Additionally, the number of children living at home ranged from zero to seven, with a mean of 2.06. The

Table 1. *Research Timeline, Data Sources, and Analyses: Phase I and II*

Data Source	Phase I	Data Source	Phase II
Initial community assessment	Initial meetings with extension staff and prominent employers	Demographic assessment	Demographic data were collected during semistructured interviews
Pilot data	Pilot focus group with women who earn an hourly wage and pilot interviews with women who earn an hourly wage	Ecomap (Hartman, 1995)	Workers were asked to complete an ecomap which illustrated Community and social systems central to their lives Relationship to systems
“Elite” interviews (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 5)	Nine interviews with key community members Three women, six men Two school administrators One major employer Three employment program administrators Two city/county officials One news media manager Trajectory in achievement of position Perceptions of community Challenges and goals	Individual worker interviews ^a	Seventeen semistructured interviews with female workers Age range 28–54 ($M = 39.17$) All earned high school diploma Nine had college coursework Sixteen were mothers All Caucasian (county residents Caucasian = 97.5%) Interview content: three stages Life history Details of current experiences; family and community interface Reflections on both past experiences and about future plans for self and children
Community worker focus group ^a	Seven hourly paid women Aged 36–55 Interview content Specifics of daily life as employees, mothers, citizens Experiences in rural context Community challenges Community strengths	Interview analysis: this process occurred twice, once for the elite interview data and once for the worker interview data	Stage 1: independent review of transcripts and open coding of data by the three authors Stage 2: three peer debriefing sessions where the codes were compared and a collective coding scheme was formed Stage 3: translation of codes into family science terms and pairing of terms with narrative data

Note: Ongoing data collection: (a) document review and analysis—year long, weekly review of newspaper articles, classified ads/employment opportunities, county land survey, economic development corporation annual report, and extension materials; (b) Field notes and photographic record—researcher field notes after each interview; community context photographed.

^aParticipants in the focus group and worker interviews should meet the following criteria: (a) female, (b) aged 18–55, and (c) employed as an hourly rather than salaried worker in the county.

average number of years lived in the county was 25.3, with an average of 9 years in current job. Six women worked in clerical roles, five were employed in labor/manufacturing, and two each worked in child care, medical/dental, and school/social service roles. Participants' total family income was as follows: one ranged from \$10,000 to \$14,999; another was in the \$15,000–\$24,999 range; five were between \$25,000 and \$34,999; three reported \$35,000–\$49,999; six ranged from \$50,000 to \$74,999; and one participant's family income ranged from \$75,000 to \$99,999. Participants at the upper income levels who met the study criteria were not excluded because a range of wage-earning women's experiences was sought.

Triangulation and Trustworthiness

Multiple triangulation strategies increased the study's trustworthiness. First, data source triangulation was achieved through multiple interview types, content analysis, and field notes. Second, a team of three investigators, each with different experiences, provided investigator triangulation. This research team used peer debriefing following independent reviews of transcripts, lending credibility to the data analysis process (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, methodological triangulation occurred within the worker interviews as both semi-structured questions and ecomaps were employed.

Data Analysis

Narrative data. The focus group, elite, and semi-structured interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim, and the data analysis process occurred in three stages (see Table 1). It is important to note that the three-stage data analysis process occurred twice—once for the elite interview data and once for the worker interview data. The research team agreed that although related, the sources of data were unique and warranted autonomous reviews.

In Stage 1, each of the three research team members independently reviewed transcripts to understand the overall experience of each informant. Following the initial review, each team member reread the transcripts using open coding to identify key messages. During the open coding process, terms/messages were documented in table format to facilitate a comparison.

The second stage of analysis involved peer debriefing, including table comparisons and discussions

about common messages. The team met three times to discuss parallel codes and to ensure that the final coding scheme reflected the team's analysis. Stage 2 ended with the use of MAXqda (2001), a qualitative analysis program, to organize and sort codes and narrative data.

The third and final stage consisted of translation of codes into themes well recognized by family science scholars. The combination of these themes and related narrative data in the "informants'" words enriches the discussion on families and communities. At the conclusion of the narrative data analysis, three categories emerged from the elite data and five categories emerged from the worker data.

Ecomap data and content analysis. Each of the 17 workers completed an ecomap, which is used to "map in a dynamic way the ecological system ... major systems that are a part of the family's life and the nature of the family's relationship with the various systems" (Hartman, 1995, p. 113). Each woman was given an ecomap template to document relevant persons and systems and the nature of her relationships with those identified. For analysis, systems and relationships identified by each informant were documented in table format to reflect frequencies and common themes. Documentation of news articles and employment opportunities occurred weekly and lasted for 11 months. Employment opportunities were categorized as service, clerical, professional, sales, and other. These analyses supported narrative findings from both the elite and worker interviews. In order to protect informants' confidentiality, pseudonyms were used.

Findings

Elite Interviews

Limits to opportunity for youth and adults. One comment that captured the elite interview participants' (EIPs) perspective on opportunities for young adults was "but even though it is a good place to raise kids, where do the kids go when they're grown up?" Similarly, a high school principal expressed concern about mentoring and lack of role models, "To aspire to higher education, you need to be surrounded by people who have it ... being isolated and away from that ... going to [a university 50 miles away] is a big move for them." For those who do pursue higher education, others described

a circuitous route. When asked what proportion of graduates go on to college, another high school principal explained that it is difficult to determine:

It's [% who go to college] not a solid figure. A lot of them get out in the real world and I can attest to quite a few of the kids who spent their first year at a college and then decide that, "Hey, this isn't worth it; I've got to go home." They start in at [the nearest community college] and work their way through.

High school officials expressed the importance of family business and social capital. The overall sentiment seemed to be that adolescents and young adults would become integrated into the family business, limiting the focus on exploring options unfamiliar to the family. "There are a lot of people and students who are doing coop [cooperative education]—are working for family businesses—owned by their grandparents and great-grandparents." Another EIP expressed concern about diminishing opportunities in family business, "These farms have been in the families for over 100 years and they're going condo. Because the farm that sustained Grandpa and sustained Dad can't sustain me and my three kids." These findings also were supported through content reviews, specifically by news stories about the disappearance of the family farm.

Community development challenges. General community issues centered on leadership for planned growth and development, economic conditions, and employment for people of all ages. A manager of a local manufacturing plant noted, "People think life's cheaper up here, but it's not. [Everything's] higher. People come up here looking for jobs, there's nothing ... that's why our welfare rolls are so high." Similarly, pay scales were of major concern. A county/city official commented, "I would like to see our pay scale increase. We still have a tremendous number of employers who say, 'This is the north and I don't have to pay the same kind of wages in say, [a bigger city].'" Another EIP expressed frustration: "We have very temporary, seasonal jobs up here, and we've got one of the highest unemployment rates in the state ... It's amazing how many people in the county are still on cash assistance and working full time." These data also were supported by year long, weekly content review of employment opportunities.

The need for benefits was expressed by multiple EIPs. A news media manager who had moved from a larger city noted, "We need some guaranteed form of health insurance ... if people didn't have to worry about health insurance, it would unleash a lot of entrepreneurial effort." Even those who had access to health care expressed concerns about physician turn over. The ecomap data revealed that half of workers were frustrated by health care options, despite the EIP's celebration of a new health care facility.

Child care availability and flexibility surfaced as a concern for work force development. This is particularly salient in a context of seasonal, service employment. One EIP noted, "One of our problems has been late hours to be open. We have a lady out there who opens before six ... and goes to 11 at night, and she is open on Saturday during the day in the summer."

Community strengths. Although many challenges were identified, EIPs spoke enthusiastically about community strengths. First and foremost, this was seen as a caring community. A high school official commented, "Community-wise, I'm just amazed at how much the community gives to anyone who needs help. Just amazed ... that's its strength—its ability to, 'it takes a village to raise a child,' is very strong here."

General comments about quality of life reflected the community spirit as well as small population. One county/city official noted the quality of life but added a caveat, "One of our major strengths is the quality of life. With life up here, [even though you are making] less money ... you can enjoy the quality of life here. *If you are lucky enough to get work.* [italics added]."

Schools also were perceived as a strength. One official had moved from a larger city, and his daughter had found the schools excellent and challenging. He noted, "Our school system up here is one of the better ones I've ever seen."

In summary, these nine individuals involved in education, work programs, local industry, government, and media described the conundrum of rural communities: balancing quality of life with workforce preparation and opportunities for workers in a context of limited resources. They expressed common goals, primarily related to economic development, but sometimes differed in the means by which to achieve them.

Worker Interviews

Work history and characteristics. Respondents often were involved in very interdependent work circumstances, with no clear demarcation between their jobs and those of their spouse and extended family. Family owned businesses, some agricultural, were a common source of employment but often in addition to other jobs. For example, Anne, a 44-year-old who works in the medical field, described her commitment to family business:

My father passed away last year and my brother and sister took over. She needed some help, so I started helping her out. Now it's developed into a 5 or 6 day a week job ... Both my husband and I work out [of the family business] even though we have to run the farm. It's a huge commitment.

Although family businesses could be considered assets, economic and or interpersonal problems created complications for some families. Carol, a 35-year-old mother of three, reflected, "I was glad [to be out of the family business] because you had to be dedicated, never could go away on no weekends ... You had to be there morning and night. I didn't care for that."

In addition to being involved in family business, women's employment was directly affected by their spouse's circumstances. Ilene, a 33-year-old mother of two, revealed:

My husband is currently not working. He was ... [traveling] for three weeks at a time and home for two days. But then we started having problems with our oldest daughter and he could see it ... So he did find something local and was working there for a couple of months. But they decided not to pay him, so he quit ... so stress is real heavy right now.

Seasonal work also was a reality for many families, as reflected in both the content and interview data. Carol, whose family left farming, noted, "He works excavating—he was a farmer. His parents sold the farm so we had to get out ... He has a seasonal job. He'll be laid off in 2-3 weeks."

In addition to the complexity of family work circumstances, a pervasive issue for the respondents was lack of jobs with adequate wages and benefits.

This often created the need for multiple jobs, sometimes at considerable geographic distance. Betty, a 54-year-old clerical worker, described her circumstances prior to finding her current job:

I'm a bookkeeper at heart—it's a passion of mine, so they had an opening in the accounting area and I took that. I was still in [local town] which was a 45-minute drive in the winter. I don't know why I did it, but I also took a part-time job.

Another respondent described a difficult decision to change jobs as a result of conflicting family and work schedules. Her statement also illustrates the limited number of jobs that offer benefits:

I worked [out of town] for six years and loved my job and had benefits and my boss was wonderful to me. The kids were getting older and they wanted to be in sports. I couldn't get home before 6:30/7:00, so with the daycare I had to be there by 6:00. Plus the drive in the winter. The only reason I left was to be closer to home. I gave up all of my benefits.

Wages and benefit issues have repercussions for women over the entire life course. Darcy, who has worked for the same employer for 30 years, reflects on retirement, "I don't look at retiring at 65. I feel that I might have to work a side job, because we don't have good retirement here. I see the economy going up and up and nothing happening."

Rural women's employment, which typically began in early youth, was intricately woven with that of spouse and or extended family. Additionally, employment frequently involved a sequence of several jobs characterized by low wages and few, if any, benefits. Working multiple jobs simultaneously also was a common pattern. The community offered limited opportunities for benefits, causing several women to commute long distances under difficult conditions.

Complexity of daily life. In addition to managing complex and often tenuous job circumstances, women described heavy family responsibilities, struggles with child care, and complicating nonnormative events such as divorce, illness, and children's disabilities. Frances, a 29-year-old mother of two, said, "A typical day ... starts at 4:00 in the morning.

I leave my house at 5:00 and drive 28 miles one way to work. So I get there and put in my day until 2:30 ... by the time I get home, it's usually close to 4:00." Frances goes on to say, "My son gets off the bus at 4:30 and by that time I'm usually cooking, doing laundry ... We live 12 miles from the school. By the time I got home ... then ran back for her [daughter], it made for a very long day."

Child care was a major concern for the respondents, either currently or as they reflected on earlier family life. The urgent need for reliable, affordable child care that accommodates those with nontraditional schedules was a persistent theme. Ginny described complications with childcare hours, travel, and single parenting:

It is difficult finding child care for non-traditional hours ... I don't have a dad to pick them up, and my parents lived 10 miles away which is not far but I couldn't expect them every night to pick them up. So most daycares are open to 5 or 5:30 and that's it. The one I found that was open until 6:30 was so full.

Two study participants were childcare providers and offered an important perspective. One provider spoke of a schedule not conducive to her own family life:

I do a whole lot more than my family would like me to do. I feel bad for people. I try to keep a kind of schedule, like usually runs 7:00 in the morning to about 6:00 in the evenings. But Mondays and Fridays, I sometimes have to keep kids until 7:00.

The women also described challenges created by nonnormative circumstances. For example, Hannah resorted to late night Internet research to assist her two hearing-impaired sons and lamented the lack of community resources.

The daily lives of the rural women were characterized by long days of paid and family work often complicated by long driving distances. Childcare concerns for both mothers and providers were persistent, and nonnormative circumstances created further complications.

Adaptation, coping, and social support. Despite complicated work and family lives, the respondents described an array of strategies and personal

employment circumstances that assisted them in managing. Not surprisingly, support from friends and family was a major resource. Francis described help from her mother-in-law, who lived next door, "When my husband and I had to both work, my mother-in-law kept my son ... which was real nice. I had to be on 2nd shift for a while ... she kept my son for the night and it made it very nice." Kathy was pleased with the flexibility of her job and said, "My sister-in-law had just had her baby and she always told me to find a job that was flexible so that I could also look after her baby, too."

Some respondents had resided in the community for their entire lifetimes, but others described struggling with establishing social support:

A couple of times I would just cry in the shower. We didn't know anybody then and didn't have friends. Shortly after that, this job sort of fell in my lap. Being up here and being away from my people and not having anything when I was used to going anywhere and having friends and family. It was quite a shock ... now, I wouldn't trade it for the world.

One notable omission from the discourse on social support was use of formal community resources. Laura noted, "We're pretty much an independent family. We've never really depended on the community for anything." Although many reasons were cited as to why participants did not use community resources, one respondent simply stated, "I don't have time for anything like that." However, one respondent alluded to the general benefit of living in a small town as she noted, "The biggest thing is that you can go anywhere and know somebody who can help you." A long history of informal community support was described by a third respondent as she said, "Growing up in this community, everyone was real supportive. If my mom was having a rough time getting along, people would help her out."

In addition to extended family, friends, and their own jobs, respondents found support within their immediate families. Interestingly, their spouse's shift or seasonal work sometimes served as an asset, particularly in families with less traditional gender roles. Kathy described her spouse's family involvement, whose shift facilitated his central role in child care, "Fortunately, my husband's shift right now is 2:00–10:00 p.m. so my day starts at 6:00 [a.m.] when I

get ready for work ... until we found the daycare provider, he was ... Mr. Mom and he's still ... until he takes the kids to school." However, when shift work was long distance and gender roles were traditional, husbands provided little support. Olivia lamented, "My husband works as a machine builder/electrician ... down in [larger city]. He goes out of town quite a bit on business. He works nights mostly, so that everything that has to be done gets done by me." Older children also were cited as resources. They assisted with child care and household work and sometimes provided emotional support.

In a context of economic and employment pressures and complex family lives, respondents cited multiple social supports and coping resources. Extended family and friends fulfilled important roles, and spouses and older children, depending on circumstances, provided support. However, respondents appeared to be unaware of formal community resources or cited "independence" or "lack of time" as reasons for not using them.

Centrality of education. During the final component of the interview, women were asked to reflect upon the future for themselves and their children. Many described a desire to further their education and were hopeful for the futures of their children. Carol, a 44-year-old mother of three with an associate's degree, considered going back to school if her employment situation changed:

There are times when I wish that I could go back to college. I have a 2-year business degree. When I was laid off from here for two years, I was an assistant manager out at the mall and I didn't like it ... I can see me staying here or there [could be] a major layoff. If there was I think I would figure out a way to go back to school.

Other women described complex arrangements necessary to allow them to seek further education. Both access to education and lack of jobs even if higher education is pursued were common issues. Ginny, a displaced state worker, talked of furthering her education by commuting:

There's not a lot of places you can go to further your education, unless it's technical or nursing at [local community college] ... I have to leave

my house at 6:00 [a.m.] to go to school on Saturdays. So they [her children] stay Friday nights with my Mom and Dad.

The lack of access to education and adequate jobs was reflected in the frustrations of Nancy, a single mother of two who works three part-time jobs, "It is so discouraging ... that they wouldn't pay for child care while I went to school. What do they want—me working for 20 hrs/week, living on food stamps for the rest of my life? It's very humiliating and degrading."

Although the women had both regrets about opportunities lost and definite plans for changing their own circumstances by furthering their education, they also expressed optimism for their children and a strong desire for them to attend college. Some respondents talked about the role of the military as a source of opportunity for young adults in the community. For example, one participant, both a mother and a teacher, focused on the importance of the military, "I tell the kids, especially if they have decent grades and the service comes in there, I tell them that they need to go—not to stay around here unless they want to flip hamburgers the rest of their life."

As the respondents reflected on their own lives, they often cited the lack of financial and social support for pursuing higher education. Some reflected poignantly on opportunities lost, but others were very determined to still pursue advanced education, even in the face of complicated employment, family, and financial circumstances. They also were adamant about their children's need for higher education and often cited the military as a potential avenue toward that goal.

Community contextual factors. With regard to women's perceptions about the community, one source of discontent was the interdependent issue of high prices and lack of retail options. One woman said, "Look at the prices around here—we're one of the highest and that's kind of contradicting ourselves." In contrast to some respondents, Olivia, a resident of the community for 7 years, was very pleased and remarked, "I love the community. [City name] is awesome ... They offer so many things here. If the kids get bored, I tell them that it's their own fault because there are so many things going on even for every age."

The environmental setting of this community also was important as respondents reflected upon

the natural beauty of the area as an asset. This also was reflected in prior discussion of the seasonal nature of employment, concerns about long distances and winter driving, and the researcher's field notes and photographic records. However natural setting implications were made abundantly clear in a discussion with Rene, a childcare worker, that took place in late October. Rene was explaining that she typically had two to four children during the day, but would have 12 children on Friday. When asked the reason, she replied incredulously, "Hunting season!" These findings also were supported through employment content analyses, which revealed that seasonal jobs in retail, agriculture, and construction were common income sources.

Although a range of community factors were addressed in prior discussion, respondents reflected on additional issues. Growth was perceived as both positive and negative, with traffic and "strangers" cited as concerns. Frustrations regarding lack of retail choice and high prices also were noted. However, positive sentiments were expressed, and schools were considered an asset. The implications of the community's natural environment also were apparent.

Analysis of the classified advertisements for employment supported the elite and worker narratives with opportunities primarily in seasonal, temporary, and service positions. The majority of "professional" category positions were in the medical field. The local public schools, health care, and a community college located in another county were primary sources of employment.

Discussion

Our findings reinforced the need to examine work and family issues from a holistic, ecological, and life-course perspective, while noting the specific importance of doing so through a community lens. Political, social, economic, and natural environmental factors affected these working-women and their families, and these factors ranged from global politics to community and family circumstances. Their narratives give a voice to rural women, an often marginalized group (Singelmann, 1996), and suggest the importance of examining families in the context of the communities in which they are embedded.

From a macroperspective, it is important to note that the fieldwork for this project began in summer of 2002. "Operation Iraqi Freedom" was building

and ultimately resulted in war. A consistent theme throughout both the elite and worker interviews was the role of the military in providing immediate full time careers or college funding for the youth in the community. This was reflected in the workers' own history as well as the experience of current youth. Military action may have more direct effects upon this rural community than on more populated, affluent areas where youth have more access to employment and education. Strong feelings about the Iraq situation, both pro and con, were reflected in the editorial page of the local newspaper.

National, state, and local policy issues also converge in relation to the intersection of the social, built, and natural environments. Many of the workers and elite participants referred to new construction near an interstate highway. Consisting of a strip mall, fast food restaurants, and discount retailers, this newly developed area clearly has an influence on the community, both economically and socially. Several respondents lamented the destruction of the rural landscape for what was dubbed "hamburger hill." The resultant congestion and unplanned development was a serious aesthetic and safety concern, but many welcomed the related opportunities. Brehm, Eisenhauer, and Krannich (2004) advocate for a community analytic framework that incorporates both social and natural environmental dimensions, an approach consistent with ours.

One's context also affects availability and access to resources. Due to the project's collaboration with extension staff, the county was the primary context or "community" studied. In an examination of the relationship of "person poverty" and "place poverty," Cotter (2002) concluded that rural poverty is likely to remain intractable if attention is not given to both individual and structural issues that create poor people in poor places. In a discussion of multiple levels of community effects, Small and Supple (2001) describe second order effects as including both physical and social barriers persistent in rural communities. For example, Wells (2002) found rural poverty was a result of community factors such as local wage structure and lack of community connections rather than insufficient labor force attachment. Similarly, Snyder and McLaughlin (2004) attributed poverty in rural women to context rather than individual characteristics. A repeated theme in our interviews was the trade-off between hardships and inconveniences inherent in rural communities and the positive factors of ties to family and friends,

perception of safety, advantages of rural lifestyle for raising children, and enjoyment of the beauty and tourism opportunities in the area. This suggests an answer to Gringeri's (2001) question as to how people compensate for the disadvantage of rural labor markets. Bowen et al. (2003) and Toth, Brown, and Xu (2002) found that community affected family life satisfaction and that persons use notions of community to make sense of their daily lives. Filkens et al. (2000) also found noneconomic variables and community rating as friendly/trusting/supportive to be more important than employment considerations in satisfaction with community.

Although there was general consistency between the concerns voiced by EIPs and the experiences of the workers, two issues were notably different. First was the issue of formal social support. Several community leaders spoke proudly of the "community support team," which had been developed to help families in need, and a major article appeared in the newspaper regarding this initiative. In a discussion of the social capacity in communities, Bowen, Richman, and Bowen (2000) describe social capital outside the family as the "level to which the family system is embedded in an integrative network of people and institutions in the community ..." (p. 120). Our respondents' narratives did not reflect attachment to formal social support, as not one worker mentioned the "community support team" or any other formal community program as they described the support used. Our respondents may have experienced a lack of fit between their current needs and the resources provided by this rural community.

In contrast to the findings related to formal community social support, women relied on immediate and extended family members, as well as friends and coworkers. These data support previous research (Bowen et al., 2003) and highlight the dissonance between citizens' perceptions of support and those of community leaders. Careful consideration of availability and accessibility of community resources should occur, and county extension personnel are central to this process. Both formal and informal social support networks and their value to rural families should be considered.

A second issue on which the elite and worker respondents differed was child care. This issue was of limited concern to the EIPs, with few voicing the need for child care for nontraditional hours. In contrast, the workers verbalized great concern about child care and the strong influence availability had

upon their work opportunities and the well-being of their children. This disparity between the issues on the minds of the EIPs and the workers may, in part, be a function of both gender and socioeconomic status.

Access to adequate employment and education have been discussed as impediments to rural residents, but access to health care also surfaced as an issue. Workers were grateful for public-funded health plans that provided for their children but expressed frustration and worry over their own lack of health insurance due to employment circumstances. This disconnect between workers and the health care system also was very graphic in the ecomaps, as nearly half of the respondents described a distant, stressful, or conflictual relationship with the health care system. The recent Department of Health and Human Services Task Force Report on Rural America spoke to this concern (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2002). The first goal of the task force was to improve rural communities' access to quality health and human services. Clearly, our participants and their counterparts would welcome this improved access.

Another factor that is not unique to rural families but can exacerbate hardship is changing family structure. McLaughlin et al. (1999) provided strong evidence that industrial restructuring corresponds with the changing family structure in America. Elite interviewees who worked with youth expressed concern about family circumstances. Our workers also reflected this change in family structure. Although 15 workers reported being married at the time of the interview, 4 of those were in second marriages or divorced and reunited. One woman was divorced and living alone, and another was always single. In the recounting of their work and family experiences, the women's diverse family situations affected their economic opportunities and the complexity of parenting roles. Swisher, Sweet, and Moen (2004) note that there is little consensus on what constitutes a family-friendly community. Certainly a community that supports diverse family forms should be among the criteria, and this represents a potential challenge for rural communities.

A third issue which emerged from our data, although not unique to rural women, involves the complex interaction between the gendered institutions of family and workplace. In discussing equal rights legislation, Heymann (2000) notes that "it will address neither the current disparities in family caretaking burdens nor the fact that those disparities

contribute to women's lower wages and more limited opportunities in the labor force" (p. 155). Similarly, in a discussion of women's coping with disproportionate work and family demands, Hesse-Biber and Carter (2000) describe individualistic strategies pursued by women because structural solutions were inadequate. These individualistic strategies are reflected in the narratives of our participants and parallel findings for women in urban contexts. For example, a study of low-income mothers in Chicago found that the mothers negotiated long distances between home, children's schools, and employment, and they struggled to find child care that accommodated inflexible shift work (Roy, Tubbs, & Burton, 2004). Consistent with our participants, their individual strategies designed to cope with systems over which they had little control resulted in complicated and often exhausting routines.

Implications for Future Research

Voydanoff (2001) calls for a long-term agenda to integrate community into the analysis of work and family. Our study addressed that need using a qualitative approach with primary focus on the effect of rural context on the women's work and family experiences. Future studies, using both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, should examine reciprocal interactions between workers and communities, considering both contextual effects on workers and the effects of workers' circumstances on community vitality. In addition to the economic consequences of limited work opportunities in rural communities, how do circumstances such as shift work, lack of benefits, and long commutes affect social capacity of communities? Closer examination of congruence between perceptions of community "leaders" and daily experiences of lower waged workers and their families also is needed. If those in decision-making roles are indifferent to or unaware of the needs of working families, local policy and formal systems will not be effective.

Further research also should address complex family circumstances related to work and future opportunities. The interdependence of worker and partner work roles, particularly with family business, has not been adequately explored. Additionally, intergenerational dynamics of work life development offer intriguing questions. Our study suggested change and continuity across cohorts in socialization

related to both gender and education that could be further explored.

Additional research is also needed on the special childcare challenges faced by rural families with young children, including the need for flexible and nontraditional hours. A further concern is the actual rural childcare providers, their characteristics, and the effects of this demanding and often isolated role on the providers and their families. The work of both Williams (2004) and Voydanoff (2004) supports the need for additional research on families where mothers engage in often unpredictable service work. The lack of congruence between rural childcare hours/options and nontraditional hours of available work is of particular concern.

Further elucidation of the experience of men also is needed. As earning opportunities diminish concurrently with changing family structure and expectations for household and parenting roles, males are encountering challenges in both rural and urban contexts. Large-scale studies of male and female lower-wage earners in both rural and urban settings would provide understanding of the effect of current economic conditions and family circumstances on a broad range of workers. Finally, Voydanoff (2004) proposed the need for a shift in research focus from work-family conflict to better understanding "work-to-family facilitation" (p. 285)—the identification of factors that support better integration of work and family demands. One critical factor in this facilitation may be community social capacity.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Although there are comprehensive studies that have made excellent policy recommendations for rural America (Bailyn, Drago, & Kochan, 2001; Marks et al., 1999; U.S. Department of Agriculture National Commission on Small Farms, 1998; USDHHS, 2002), many needs continue to be unmet. Our findings provide personal testimony and reinforce the need to empower women in the midst of rural economic restructuring. Empowering this population will require new modes of delivery for advanced education, addressing childcare needs, and increasing access to secure, flexible employment with benefits.

Although not a panacea, technological approaches to providing both formal and informal education show great promise and should be further developed. Offering courses via teleconference or the Internet

would lessen commutes and scheduling difficulties, allowing more women to pursue an advanced degree. For those without Internet access in their homes, such courses can be offered through the local high school, county extension facilities, library, workplace, or other accessible locations. In addition to increasing access to education, this model also would diversify the types of training available and extend the options beyond those offered at the nearest community college or trade school.

Because child care is a crucial economic development issue and a means to empower female wage earners, a collective effort should be made to develop the local childcare network. Incentives such as tax breaks or vouchers provided by employers could help support childcare providers who offer nontraditional hours. Additionally, training of additional childcare providers could be facilitated by the local schools or extension personnel.

Childcare policy is historically controversial and has been poorly addressed in the United States, regardless of rural or urban context. The greater use of family care and urgent need for care during nontraditional hours is of particular concern for rural families. As family structure continues to evolve and rural populations are disproportionately elderly, work and kin care policy will be particularly important. Health care also is controversial and poorly addressed in U.S. policy. In addition to economic and employment related barriers, rural workers and their families face shortages of primary health care providers and long commutes to receive specialized care.

It is unequivocal that agriculture and the rural communities and lifestyle once supported by this industry will continue to change. Further, the United States will not return to a predominantly manufacturing economy. Family structure also will be increasingly diverse. This study provides support for policies at the community, state, and federal levels that address social and economic issues affecting rural Americans. We advocate better integration of family studies scholarship and community and economic development as one step toward this end.

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