WOMENS' EXPERIENCES OF WORKING SHIFTWORK WHILE CARING FOR CHILDREN

Authors: Annabel Matheson[1], Louise O'Brien[2], Jo-Anne Reid[1]

Affiliations: [1]Charles Sturt University, [2]University of Newcastle

Contact details:
Phone: 02 6338 4086
Email: amatheson@csu.edu.au

Background

While the physiological and psychosocial effects of shiftwork have long been documented, there is minimal research within the shiftwork literature base that provides qualitative accounts of the experience of shiftworkers, and the effects of shiftwork on their sense of self and relationships with others. This study aimed to uncover women's experience of working shiftwork as a nurse whilst raising children.

Methods

A qualitative approach based on philosophical hermeneutics was chosen. The hermeneutic (interpretive) approach focuses on the ideas and experiences of subjects in order to elicit a deep understanding of the phenomenon.

After ethical approval, semi structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of ten participants who worked either permanent nightshift or a rotating roster, though more of the women worked nightshift. Interviews ranged between one hour and two hours in length, and after verbatim transcription, were analysed using thematic analysis to draw out themes.

"But it's got to get done. Yeah well I'll come out and I try to have everything sort of done by the time Mick gets home from work because I know, I like having it done and in my head I think it's good for him to walk through the door to a relatively clean house.. It's that whole 50's housewife thing that really I don't live up to but it's, I like to think I try… And meet [him] with a beer and the paper."

Findings

Two main themes were revealed. The first was Being Guilty, which was the major theme of the study. The second was Being Juggler and this was comprised of three sub themes of Managing Children, Managing Home and Managing Self Needs.

Being Guilty was the overarching theme of the study as guilt pervaded aspects of the women's work and home life. The women in the study overwhelmingly felt they were not doing a good job either at work or at home and this drove them to feel guilt towards both parts of their lives.

The second theme, Being Juggler, was the sense of trying to keep all the balls in the air. The women felt it was their job to manage their children and home, all whilst working part or full time shiftwork. To do this most of women reduced their sleep time, often sleeping during the day for short periods, either when children were at day-care or school, or they slept whilst caring for their children, sometimes inadvertently.

Conclusion

The women in this study enjoyed the benefits of working and earning a wage, with the disadvantages of mostly undertaking the majority of childcare and house work themselves. This led to these women decreasing their sleep time to care for their children, thus increasing the risks of accidents or incidents at work and on the road. Gender roles in work and at home, and the implications of failing to recognise the impact of these on both personal and patient safety will be discussed.

"... I'm sure they don't, you talk to the women whose husbands work at the mine and they don't give it a second thought. Nor do they get up and care for them [the children]. And then they go to the pub when they wake up"

"I remember going to a woman – my kids were about 2 and 4 and saying "I do night duties and you said that you would look after my children …". Will you be okay if I drop them off at 10 and pick them up at 7 and she said "Oh yeah that's fine not a problem – and you will pack everything up for me and they will be – I said that's fine. I will probably take them to a park or something." "No 10 o'clock at night, no they will need to go to sleep." And she just looked at me blankly [and] still did not understand that somebody would be working during that period of time."

"I think all that (raising children) comes with guilt too, like I think parental guilt is actually one of the most amazing emotions ever and I think until you have a child you wouldn't know that that was the case."

Charles Sturt University

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