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EVIDENCE OF SHIFTING STANDARDS IN JUDGMENTS OF MALE AND FEMALE PARENTS' JOB-RELATED ABILITY

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ABSTRACT

We tested the hypothesis, derived from the shifting standards model of stereotyping, that parenthood would polarize judgments of men's and women's job-related ability. One hundred thirty-five attorneys evaluated the résumé of a recent law school graduate. The résumé depicted the graduate as male or female and as either single or married with two young children. We found that a mother was held to a stricter standard for hiring than either a father or a woman without children. Results suggest earlier research conducted with undergraduates generalizes to professionals (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007; Fuegen, Biernat, Haines, & Deaux, 2004).

INTRODUCTION

Women comprise 49% of the recipients of law degrees (NCES, 2005) but only 17% of partners in law firms (Samborn, 2005). Gender stereotyping and discrimination account for at least some of this gap (Agars, 2004; Eagly, 2005; Lyness & Heilman, 2006; Martell, Lane, & Emrich, 1996; Powell, Butterfield, & Parent, 2002; Schein, 2001). Women who become mothers face negative stereotypes about their workplace competence and commitment (Crosby, Williams, & Biernat, 2004; Hebl, King, & Glick, 2007; King, 2008). The purpose of this research is to examine how gender stereotypes affect standards for inferring job-related competence and hiring and promotion decisions for mothers and fathers.

Russo (1976) and Williams (2001) have argued that there exists a cultural stereotype that a “good” mother bears primary responsibility for the care of children. A mother who works full-time is seen as deviating from gender roles, though a father is not (Etaugh & Folger, 1998). Women receive more criticism than men for spending too little time at home (and too much at work). In contrast, men receive more criticism than women for spending too much time at home (and too little at work) (Deutsch & Saxon, 1998).

A growing body of literature suggests that mothers who violate gender roles by seeking full-time employment are negatively stereotyped and discriminated against. Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick (2004) asked undergraduate participants to read vignettes describing a consultant who was either female or male and either a parent or not a parent. Participants requested and recommended the consultant less when she was a mother than a woman without children, though fatherhood did not affect a man’s chances of being requested and recommended. Consistent with predictions derived from the stereotype content model (Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu 2002), participants rated a mother more communal (warm) but less agentic (competent) than a woman without children. Heilman and Okimoto (2008) asked undergraduate (Study 1) and graduate (Study 2) participants to evaluate a job applicant depicted as male or female and with or without children. Similar to Cuddy et al. (2004), participants recommended a mother less often than a woman without children. Fatherhood had no effect on a man’s chances of recommendation. Consistent with predictions derived from the lack of fit model (Heilman, 1983), lower ratings on agentic traits predicted lower expectations of a mother’s competence. These studies suggest that women are uniquely disadvantaged in terms of perceived job-related competence when they become mothers.

Higher Standards for Mothers than Fathers

We argue that negative outcomes for mothers reflect the setting of more stringent standards for inferring job-related competence in mothers relative to fathers and women and men without children. Testing predictions derived from the shifting standards model of stereotyping (Biernat, 2003), Fuegen, Biernat, Haines, and Deaux (2004) asked undergraduate participants to judge the level of ability (e.g., test scores and rankings on letters of recommendation) they would require of an applicant for an attorney position in order to hire him or her. Participants held a mother to higher standards than a father, and a father was held to lower standards than a man without children. Furthermore, a mother was somewhat less likely to be hired and significantly less likely

to be promoted than a woman without children. Fatherhood did not affect a man's chances of being hired or promoted, consistent with Cuddy et al. (2004) and Heilman and Okimoto (2008).

The premise of the shifting standards model is that stereotypes activate standards according to which individual members of stereotyped groups are judged. To the extent that motherhood highlights gender stereotypes (i.e., that women are warm, gentle, and caring; Spence & Buckner, 2000), mothers may be judged according to lower job-related competence standards *for women in general*, relative to fathers and women without children (Bridges, Etaugh, & Barnes-Farrell, 2002). Precisely because of lower expectations of competence, a mother must demonstrate more skill than a father or a woman without children to be judged equally competent.

Generalizing to a Non-student Population

One may question whether students' judgments are similar to professionals' judgments of job-related ability. Students are unlikely to have experience evaluating job applicants. Professionals who are parents may be more likely to hold egalitarian gender beliefs (Etaugh & Moss, 2001). Two studies have assessed perceptions of parent and non-parent job applicants among non-student professionals. Firth (1982) mailed application letters to accounting firms in which the applicant's gender and parental status were manipulated. Motherhood decreased the likelihood that a female applicant was contacted, but fatherhood had no effect on a male applicant's likelihood of being contacted. Correll, Benard, and Paik (2007) mailed same-sex pairs of résumés to employers advertising marketing positions. A mother received half as many callbacks as a woman without children. Though these results suggest that professionals may be less likely to interview mothers than women without children, the results provide no information about judgment standards or hiring decisions. To fill this gap, we conducted an experiment in which we manipulated the gender and parental status of a job applicant and assessed standards for hiring, hiring decisions, and promotion recommendations among a professional sample.

Predictions

We predicted that parenthood would polarize judgments of men's and women's job-related ability such that mothers would be held to higher standards than fathers. We base this prediction on the assumption that motherhood makes salient stereotypes that suggest that women are warm, gentle, and caring—attributes not thought to facilitate success in the workplace. To the extent motherhood makes gender stereotypes and the cultural role of care-giver salient, a female job applicant with children will be judged according to a stricter standard than a female job applicant without children. To the extent fatherhood makes the cultural role of breadwinner salient and suggests maturity, responsibility, or leadership, a male applicant with children will be judged according to a more lenient standard than a male without children.

Our predictions are unique in suggesting that men may benefit in terms of perceived job-related ability when they become fathers. Predictions derived from the stereotype content model (Cuddy et al., 2004), the lack of fit model (Heilman, 1983; Heilman & Okimoto, 2008), and expectation states theory (Correll et al., 2007; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004) suggest that parental status has no effect of judgments of men's job-related ability. Rather, mothers are uniquely disadvantaged in the workplace because they are perceived as warm but not competent (Cuddy et al., 2004), not

agentic (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008), or because motherhood is a status characteristic implying reduced performance capacity (Correll et al., 2007). We suggest that fathers are uniquely advantaged in the workplace because they are perceived as both competent and warm (Cuddy et al., 2004; Fuegen et al., 2004) and because paid employment is consistent with gender roles (Etaugh & Folger, 1998). Indeed, research has shown that fathers are held to lower standards than even the “ideal” worker (Fuegen et al., 2004), fathers are offered a higher starting salary than men without children (Correll et al., 2007), and fathers’ work hours and wages increase when mothers temporarily leave the workforce (Lundberg & Rose, 2000).

METHOD

Participants and Procedure

Participants were 135 law school graduates (74 women, 61 men). We randomly selected equal numbers of males and females from an alumni directory. Of the 588 participants contacted, 36 had undeliverable addresses, resulting in 552 potential participants. Eighty females and 68 males responded (response rate = 27%). Due to clerical error, we had to omit the responses of seven males and six females. Our sample had considerable professional experience, though males had more experience than females: males reported having an average of 21 years of experience ($SD = 14.47$), compared to 9 years ($SD = 7.47$) for females, $t(83.14) = 5.55$, $p < .0001$.

We mailed participants a recruitment script with a dollar bill attached, one of four résumés, a questionnaire, and a self-addressed stamped envelope. In the recruitment script, we stated that we were interested in how experienced decision makers evaluate job applicants. We assured participants that participation in the study was voluntary and that their answers were anonymous. We asked participants to review the résumé, complete the questionnaire, and return the completed questionnaire in the self-addressed stamped envelope. The dollar was theirs to keep regardless of whether they chose to participate.

The résumé was that of an actual law school graduate with some relevant work experience. We manipulated applicant gender via the name on the résumé (“Kenneth” or “Katherine”). We chose these names because they suggest roughly equal intellectual competence and a nonspecific age (see Biernat & Fuegen, 2001). We manipulated parental status under the résumé heading “Personal information.” We indicated the applicant was either single with no children or married with two young children (ages 5 and 3).

Dependent Measures

On the questionnaire, participants indicated what score in percentile ranking the applicant would need on a standardized ability test, letters of reference, and the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT) as well as in what percentage of his or her law school class the applicant would need to be ranked (e.g., the top 10%) to be hired as a first-year associate. These four items were standardized and combined to form the standards index ($\alpha = .75$). Participants also indicated whether they would hire the applicant and whether the applicant would be a good candidate for promotion.

RESULTS

Standards

An Applicant Gender X Parental Status ANOVA on the standards index revealed only the predicted interaction, $F(1, 97) = 8.75$, $p < .01$, partial eta squared = .08 (see Table 1). A female applicant was held to higher standards when she was a parent than when not a parent, $p < .02$. Standards were also higher for a mother than a father, $p < .01$. A father tended to be held to lower standards than a man without children, though this simple comparison was not significant, $p = .10$.

Table 1. Standards for Hiring as a Function of Applicant Gender and Parental Status

	Female parent	Male parent	Female non-parent	Male non-parent
N	25	22	31	25
Mean standard for hiring	0.35	-0.27	-0.16	0.09
Standard deviation	0.37	0.77	0.96	0.64

Note. Means reflect standardized values; higher numbers indicate the setting of a stricter standard.

Hiring and Promotion Decisions

Hiring and promotion decisions were recoded as no = 0 and yes = 1. A logistic regression on hiring revealed no significant effects. Thus, there was no evidence that a mother was hired less frequently than a father or a woman without children. Regarding promotion, there was only a main effect of Parental Status, chi-square (1, $N = 84$) = 4.42, $p < .04$. Unexpectedly, a parent was more likely to be recommended for promotion than a non-parent (Ms 71.43% and 48.98%, respectively). The odds that a parent would be recommended for promotion were 2.66 times greater than the odds that a non-parent would be recommended for promotion, Wald (1, $N = 84$) = 4.22, $p < .04$ (beta = 0.98; 95% confidence interval for odds ratio = 1.05, 6.79). This effect did not depend on Applicant Gender, $p = .57$.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

To our knowledge, this is the first study to vary the gender and parental status of a job applicant and to assess standards, hiring, and promotion decisions among professionals. Consistent with prior research, we found that mothers are negatively stereotyped in terms of job-related competence (Correll et al., 2007; Cuddy et al., 2004; Etaugh & Kasley, 1981; Firth, 1982; Fuegen et al., 2004; Heilman & Okimoto, 2008). We hypothesized that, to the extent motherhood highlights gender stereotypes, a mother will be held to higher standards than a female non-parent applicant. We found that a mother was held to higher standards than a woman without children and higher standards than a father. These findings support the shifting standards model of stereotyping. This model is unique in suggesting that because fathers are presumed to exhibit maturity, responsibility, or leadership (characteristics thought to facilitate success in the workplace), a father will be held to lower standards than a male non-parent. Also consistent with shifting standards, we found that a father tended to be held to (non-significantly) lower standards

than a man without children. In contrast to earlier research showing that parental status had no effect on judgments of men's job-related competence (Correll et al., 2007; Cuddy et al., 2004; Heilman & Okimoto, 2008), we found that parenthood benefited men (see also Haines & Bragger, 2007).

We anticipated that being held to high (or low) standards would result in a lower (or higher) likelihood of being hired. If this pattern had borne out, a mother would have been unlikely to be hired, and a father would have been likely to be hired. Instead, we found that parenthood did not harm a woman's chances of being hired, nor did it help a man's chances of being hired. These null effects for hiring suggest that standards do not predict decisions in a straightforward way, at least among a professional sample. Whereas Fuegen et al. (2004) found that undergraduate participants were marginally less likely to hire a mother than a woman without children, we did not find that effect in this sample. This difference in results may reflect reluctance among professionals to make decisions based on limited information. Indeed, many participants spontaneously commented that they would need more information to make a hiring decision. The same was true regarding promotion decisions: several participants reported that they would need more information to make a recommendation regarding promotion. Thus, although parents were judged as especially good candidates for promotion, caution should be exercised in interpreting this finding. The analyses for promotion are based on a smaller sample size ($N = 84$) than the analyses for standards ($N = 101$).

Future Directions

A topic in need of investigation is whether decision-makers who are parents are any more or less likely to hire a job applicant who is also a parent, relative to non-parent decision-makers. Future research examining how attitudes about work/family conflict affect standards and hiring among decision-makers with and without children is needed. Also, the ages of children may affect perceptions of job-related ability. The association between women and care-giving may be stronger for mothers of infants than mothers of school-aged children. Third, the sex-typing of the job may affect perceptions of ability. A job emphasizing communal traits (e.g., schoolteacher) may be less subject to maternal bias than a job emphasizing agentic traits.

CONCLUSION

This research contributes to a growing body of literature on the barriers mothers face as they enter or attempt to advance in the workplace. This research also highlights the value of testing hypotheses in a non-college population and increases the external validity of earlier research findings. We show that negative stereotypes of mothers' job-related ability are no less likely to affect judgment standards among experienced than naïve observers.

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AUTHOR NOTE

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