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TELECOMMUTING, PRIMARY CAREGIVING, AND GENDER AS STATUS

Lisa Slattery Walker
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

Shahar S. Gur
University of North Carolina at Charlotte

ABSTRACT

We contribute to the literature on flexible work arrangements by using status characteristics theory to examine whether telecommuting operates as a status characteristic and generates perceptions of and expectations for employees. Using the criteria for a status characteristic from related research, we also explore whether participants' age creates differential expectations for telecommuting workers in a hypothetical work setting. We found that older respondents believed men and non-primary caregivers to be deserving of more pay, compared to younger respondents. We discuss these findings and avenues for future research.

INTRODUCTION

While an increasing number of organizations are choosing to implement policies designed to improve the work-life balance of their employees, research has mainly focused on these policies and employee outcomes (Butts, Casper, & Yang, 2013; Golden, Veiga, & Simsek, 2006). However, little is known about the relationship between work-family support policies and others' perceptions of the individuals who use these policies (Gajendran, Harrison, & Delanye-Klinger, 2014). To improve the effectiveness of work-life policies, it is necessary to understand the ways in which individual perceptions regarding the use of work-life policies relate to employee outcomes. In addition, it is important to examine whether employee characteristics, such as gender and being a primary child caregiver, interact with work-life policy use when predicting employee perceptions and outcomes.

We examine individual perceptions related to the telecommuting work-life policy. Using status characteristics theory, we propose that telecommuting acts as a status characteristic, negatively affecting perceptions related to the competency of teleworkers. While previous literature has not directly assessed telecommuting as a status characteristic, researchers have found disparities between the pay of telecommuters and non-telecommuters that warrants further investigation (Glass, 2004).

Status Characteristics Theory

We study this topic from the framework of status characteristics theory (SCT) (Berger et al., 1977; Berger & Webster, 2006; Correll & Ridgeway, 2003; Ridgeway, 1991; 2001; Webster & Foschi, 1988), which grew out of expectation states theory (Correll & Ridgeway, 2003; Wagner & Berger, 1993; 2002). SCT was developed to account for the status-organizing process in which beliefs and evaluations about individuals' characteristics become the basis of inequalities that can be observed in interactions (Berger et al., 1998). For a characteristic to be considered a status characteristic it must consist of at least two states that are differentially evaluated in terms of esteem, honor, or desirability, and there must be distinct performance expectations associated with each of the states; the states are differentially evaluated if one is positively and the other is negatively evaluated (Berger et al., 1977).

Gender as a Status Characteristic

Gender status beliefs are a form of inequality. They are widely held cultural beliefs that see one sex as superior to - and more competent than - the other (Ridgeway, 1997). Studies have found that women are viewed differentially than men, particularly in the workplace (Agars 2004). Even when other identities are more powerful determinants of behavior in a situation, cultural gender stereotypes can become salient when the interactants differ in the sex category and when gender is relevant to the purposes of the interaction (Berger et al.,1977; Ridgeway, 1997).

Ridgeway's (1997) analysis supports that there are three outcomes when gender status is salient. First, men, as well as women, form status beliefs favoring men and expecting higher competence from men than from women. This expectation is usually self-fulfilling with consequences such as assertiveness, interaction rates, judgments of competence, and influence in work settings following the expectation. Second, expectations of competence affect expectations of rewards, judgments of outcomes of salary, and promotion rates (Berger et al.,1985; Rashotte & Webster, 2005). Finally, expectations of competence have an effect on standards, such that status-disadvantaged women might be held to higher standards before their performance is judged as "good" (Foschi, 2000; Foschi, Lai, & Sigerson, 1994; Rashotte & Webster, 2005).

Rashotte and Webster (2005) found that status beliefs appear both in diffuse and specific task expectations, thus providing evidence that status beliefs appear when gender becomes salient even when respondents are trying to respond fairly. The current study replicates these prior findings, hypothesizing that:

Hypothesis 1a: Gender will create status beliefs such that men will be rated higher than women on diffuse status measures.
Hypothesis 1b: Gender will create status beliefs such that women will be discriminated against more than males on discrimination proxy items.
Hypothesis 1c: Gender will create status beliefs such that women will be rated to deserve less yearly salary than males.

Primary Caregiving as a Status Characteristic

In general, workers are considered more competent if they are willing to drop everything for their job (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004), but that may not be possible for primary caregivers. Therefore, parents are rated as less agentic, less committed to employment, and less available on the job than childless job applicants (Fuegan et al., 2004).

The negative workplace impact of becoming a parent has mostly been examined for women. Using SCT, Ridgeway and Correll (2004) found that motherhood operates as a status characteristic such that when a worker takes on the salient descriptor of "mother," it downwardly biases the evaluations of her competence and suitability for promotion and maintenance of positions with authority. Moreover, an individual's status as a mother affects expectations about her performance competency and effort (Correll, Benard, & Paik 2007), whereas childless women were rated significantly more competent than working mothers (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004). However, researchers have yet to investigate the implications of simply being a primary caregiver of children, regardless of gender.

There are currently opposing empirical findings regarding the impact of fatherhood on a male's status. Ridgeway and Correll (2004) found that men face lower status once they are viewed as fathers. Alternatively, Cuddy and colleagues (2004) presented contradictory findings that, when men become fathers, they gain higher perceptions of warmth while maintaining their perceived competence.

These incongruities may be due to differences in a man's status as a father versus a primary caregiver. When fathers are viewed as the primary breadwinner, they may maintain perceptions of competence similar to that of a childless man; however, these perceptions of competence change depending on a man's status as a primary caregiver. We therefore hypothesize that:

Hypothesis 2a: Primary caregivers will be rated lower than non-primary caregivers on diffuse status measures.
Hypothesis 2b: Primary caregivers will be discriminated against more than non-primary caregivers on discrimination proxy items
Hypothesis 2c: Primary caregivers will be rated to deserve less yearly salary than non-primary caregivers.

Telecommuting as a Status Characteristic

Within the organizational setting, telecommuting may be a salient characteristic as differences in the physical locations of employees can clearly differentiate telecommuters from non-telecommuters. For example, a telecommuter's physical absence and "virtual presence" at office meetings may make employees aware of someone's telecommuting status. This awareness may lead to a lowered sense of collective orientation when working on tasks together (Kalkhoff, Younts, & Troyer, 2008).The lowered copresense may also impact the telecommuter's influence on coworkers who work from the office (Campos-Castillo & Hitlin, 2013). Additionally, research has found that the majority of telecommuting occurs in the form of working on tasks that extend the work day, as opposed to replacing the work day, but this does not lead to as much employee

growth as visible overtime in the office does (Glass & Noonan, 2016). Therefore, telecommuting may reduce perceptions of status and expectations of those who engage in it. Furthermore, Perin (1991) found that individuals perceive telecommuting to be task-relevant, with data suggesting that managers frequently worry about whether telecommuters can be trusted to complete tasks out of sight. Thus, telecommuting may contribute to decreases in trust and understanding (Cohen & Prusak, 2001), which cause an employee's telecommuting status to appear relevant to the completion of work-related tasks.

Due to the differing motivations behind the use of telework, specifically, the instrumental use of computer technology for information-rich professions versus the utilization of current technologies for the alleviation of work-family conflict, the authors propose that the relevance of telework to task performance has shifted since its conception. For example, as telecommuting is increasingly presented as a family-friendly policy (Breaugh & Frye, 2008), perceptions of telecommuters may shift such that these individuals are viewed as requiring organizational assistance in order attend equally to work and life. Research suggesting that individuals are considered more competent as workers if they are willing to drop everything for their job (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004) implies that this cognitive coupling of telecommuting with familial responsibilities may negatively impact perceptions of worker competence. Additional research finding that employees who telecommute also worry about appearing as though they lack commitment to their organization (Campione, 2008) may further suggest that taking advantage of teleworking policies adversely positions employees to be viewed undedicated, and therefore less competent at completing work related tasks and fulfilling organization-related responsibilities:

Hypothesis 3a: Telecommuting will create status beliefs such that telecommuters will be rated lower than non-telecommuters on diffuse status measures.
Hypothesis 3b: Telecommuting will create status beliefs such that telecommuters will be discriminated against more than non-telecommuters on discrimination proxy items.
Hypothesis 3c: Telecommuting will create status beliefs such that telecommuters will be rated to deserve less yearly salary than non-telecommuters.

METHODS

Sample and Procedures

Our sample consists of 550 undergraduates from a large public Southeast University who were recruited through email. The sample is 75.5% white (n = 416) and 62% female (n = 342).

Our study's vignette design is similar to other SCT studies (Bianchi, 2004; Childers, 2000). Participants completed the survey online and were randomly selected to read one of eight vignettes that describe a business consultant (Appendix A; adapted from Cuddy et al. 2004). The eight vignettes were created by varying gender (male vs. female), primary caregiver status (primary vs. not primary), and work type (telecommuter vs. non-telecommuter). Participants answered survey items after reading their vignette.

Measures

We present the survey items in Appendix B. We measured diffuse status using 7 items on a 9-point scale (Webster & Driskell, 1983; as used in Rashotte & Webster, 2005). We measured discrimination as a proxy using 3 items on a 7-point scale (Cuddy et al., 2004). We measured deserved salary with 1 item on a 5-point scale. [1]

RESULTS

Table 1 contains the descriptive statistics and inter-correlations. Table 2 contains the descriptive statistics for dependent measures presented by condition. To examine the proposed hypotheses, hierarchical multiple regression was used to test main effects (Table 3). Models were estimated for the dependent variables: diffuse status, discrimination proxy, and deserved salary. We regressed the dependent variables on the predictor variables: target gender, target caregiving, and target work type. We tested for two-way and three-way interactions that were not significant, so we do not discuss it further.

We tested for hypotheses 1a, 2a, and 3a in the first model. Main effects were found for both target gender ($p<.01$) and target caregiving ($p<.01$), however, both opposite of the hypothesized direction. We tested for hypotheses 1b, 2b, and 3b in the second model. Main effects were found for both target gender ($p<.05$) and target caregiving ($p<.01$), but again, both opposite of the hypothesized direction. We tested for hypotheses 1c, 2c, and 3c in the third model and did not find main effects.

Post-Hoc Analyses

Given the surprising, counterintuitive findings that both women and primary caregivers where rated higher on diffuse status and the discrimination proxy items than males and non-primary caregivers, we test for the possible effects of respondent age. We postulate that age as a respondent characteristic might be particularly meaningful in the context of the current study because age relates to workplace experience. Younger participants may not have many workplace experiences that involve telecommuting or primary caregiving, unlike older participants who might have direct or indirect contact with telecommuting and primary caregiving.

We assess the possible effects of respondent age in Table 4. Participants were divided into two age groups: 18-25 years old (N=310) and 46-65 years old (N=51). These categories were specifically chosen to contrast college-aged respondents from those who may have significant work experience, as participants who have spent a greater amount of time in the workplace are more likely to have been exposed to telecommuting and other work-life policies.

When regressing diffuse status onto target's gender, we found notable differences in effect size (albeit both statistically non-significant) when predicting diffuse status from work type: 18-25 year olds rated non-telecommuters higher on diffuse status than telecommuters ($b=-.06$, $p>.05$), while the effect for 45-65 year olds was in the opposite direction ($b=.40$, $p>.05$).

We also found notable differences for the discrimination proxy items. The analyses revealed that 18-25 year olds rated women higher on discrimination proxy items than men (b=-.22; p<.01), while a statistically significant effect was not found for 46-65 year olds. Additionally, while 18-25 year olds rated primary caregivers higher on discrimination proxy items than non-primary caregivers (b=.30; p<.05), this was not found in the 46-65 age group. Additionally, 46-65 year old respondents awarded considerably higher salaries to men (b=.74; p<.05) than to women, which is not the case for the younger age group.

DISCUSSION

Overall, our hypotheses were not supported by these data. For example, telecommuting was not found to have a significant relationship with diffuse status, the discrimination proxy items, or deserved salary. There may be several reasons as to why being or not being a telecommuter had no significant relationship with the outcomes under study.

First, it may be that status is not the underlying mechanism driving perceptions related to telecommuting. Whether telecommuting is associated with negative employee perceptions could have more to do with the organizational context within which employees operate (i.e., some organizational cutlures might be more supportive than others). Second, it may be that the manipulations in the current study were not strong enough. For example, simply stating that an employee was a telecommuter may not have been salient enough to activate status beliefs.

Third, telecommuting may act as a status characteristic for specific types of jobs. In the current study, participants were told that the focal employee they were ratings was a "consultant." It may be that the views associated with this white-collar job position interacted with the telecommuting characteristic in such a way that telecommuting was seen as unimportant for understanding the focal employee's level of competence. All three of these possible explanations provide fruitful areas for further research. Given the importance of improving the effectiveness of work-life policies, it is necessary for future research to continue to study the ways in which individual perceptions regarding the use of work-life policies such as telecommuting relate to employee outcomes.

In addition to the findings regarding telecommuting, there were several other surprising results, particularly in the context of previous research on status. For example, women and primary caregivers were seen as higher status, but previous empirical work on gender has reported that women are seen as lower status than men. Additionally, the previous work on motherhood suggests that those who are primary caregivers would be seen as lower status compared to non-primary caregivers.

We believe that these counterintuitive findings may be due to over-sensitivity on the part of men when rating female targets, out of political correctness (Rashotte & Webster, 2005). Rashotte and Webster's (2005) research revealed that individuals opted to express a politically-correct view of equality, even when this response differed from their own personal views. This effect is due to a number of factors, one of which is the general effect of college courses, which often examine the importance of diversity and inclusion.

Furthermore, when the sample is divided by age, we discover that the positive effects of being female and being a primary caregiver only remained for younger respondents. Respondents ages 46-65 did not rate women and primary caregivers as higher on status. In fact, they believed that men were more deserving of higher pay. This pattern of responses is more representative of the traditional view of workplace roles. It is quite interesting to note the effects of respondent age, as these findings might reflect changes in the overall view of status and the role of gender in the workplace. It is important to understand how age and life experiences relate to status beliefs, as this further contextualizes this line of research.

In conclusion, this study provides several interesting findings that contribute to the current understanding of primary caregiving and status beliefs. Further research is necessary to deepen our understanding of what factors affect both employee outcomes related to the use of work-life policies, like telecommuting, and the effect of group-differences on status beliefs. We hope that sharing our nonsignificant findings with other researchers in the field will aid in moving the conversation forward in the right direction.

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ENDNOTES

[1] The diffuse status measure was tested for reliability (alpha = .89) and a confirmatory factor analysis was run using Mplus 6.11. The CFA model showed good fit chi-square(14) = 42.81, $p < .01$; root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA: Browne & Cudeck, 1993) = .09, Tucker-Lewis index (TLI: Tucker & Lewis, 1973) = .96, confirmatory fit index (CFI: Bentler, 1990) = .97. All factors loaded at 0.69 or higher expect for item 7 (GPA). The high model fit, coupled with the highly established nature of this measure within the status literature, led the researchers to include item 7 (factor loading: 0.08) in the final data analyses.

APPENDIX A

Instructions: We're studying how people quickly form first impressions, making important decisions from little information. We'd like you to read the profiles of this consultant from McKinsey & Company and give us your first impression them. Imagine you're a client, trying to choose a consultant from very little information. Please try to respond with your first, uncensored impressions.

Diane [John] is a 40-year-old associate business consultant who graduated with an MBA. She's [He's] been working in her [his] current field for six years. When working with a client, her [his] duties include identifying issues, planning and conducting interviews and analyses, synthesizing conclusions into recommendations, and helping to implement change in her [his] client's organizations. Diane [John] is married and has two children for whom Diane [John] is [is not] the primary caregiver. Diane [John] works at the main office downtown [two days a week and works from home three days a week by telecommuting]. Her [His] hobbies include swimming and tennis.

APPENDIX B

Diffuse Status

1. How intelligent do you perceive [name] to be?
2. How well do you expect [name] to do at situations in general?
3. In terms of things that you think count in this world, how does [name] rate?
4. How capable do you think [name] is at most tasks?
5. How do you rate [name] concerning reading ability?
6. How do you rate [name] at abstract abilities?

7. How would you rate [name's] grade point average?

Discrimination Proxy

1. As a client, how likely would you be to request Diane [John] as one of your consultants?
2. As a client, how likely would you be to recommend Diane [John] for a promotion?
3. As a client, how likely would you be to recommend that McKinsey and Company invest in continuing training and education for Diane [John]?

Deserved Salary

The perception of deserved yearly salary item is measured using a five point multiple-choice scale ranging from $40,000 to $50,000 to $80,000 to $90,000.

APPENDIX C

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Zero-Order Correlations

	M	*SD*	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Sex (P)	.38	.49	—								
2. Race (P)	.23	.42	.01	—							
3. Age (P)	28.16	11.42	-.01	-.06	—						
4. Gender (T)	.48	.50	-.10*	.06	-.23**	—					
5. Caregiving (T)	.50	.50	0	-.02	.08	-.01	—				
6. Work Type (T)	.48	.50	-.03	.05	-.01	-.07	-.13**	—			
7. Perceived Diffuse Status (T)	6.93	1.02	-.08	.02	.13**	-.13	.16**	-.01	—		
8. Perceived Specific Status (T)	6.84	1.28	-.05	.01	.08	.02	.05	.01	.56**	—	
9. Discrimination Proxy (T)	5.14	.89	-.11**	.05	.07	-.10	.15	-.05	.65**	.38**	—
10. Perceived Deserved Salary (T)	2.40	1.09	.02	0	.16**	-.01	-.03	-.01	.37**	.26**	.27**

Note. *N*=550. $^{*}p<.05$; $^{**}p<.01$. (P)=Participant; (T)=Target in scenario; sex and gender coded as 0=woman, 1=man; race coded as 0=white; =non-white; caregiving coded as 0=non-primary caregiver, 1=primary caregiver; work type coded as 0=non-telecommuter, 1=telecommuter.

APPENDIX D

Table 2. Means and Standard Deviations for Ourcome Variables Per Condition

Condition (Target)	N	Diffuse Status	Specific Status	Discrimination Proxy
Woman, Non-Primary Caregiver, Non-Telecommuter	59	6.97 (.96)	6.63 (131)	5.16 (.87)

Woman, Non-Primary Caregiver, Telecommuter	81	6.84 (.97)	6.69 (1.29)	5.08 (.86)
Woman, Primary Caregiver, Non-Telecommuter	78	7.27 (.89)	7.10 (1.15)	5.36 (.85)
Woman, Primary Caregiver, Telecommuter	65	7.18 (1.01)	6.77 (1.46)	5.32 (.75)
Man, Non-Primary Caregiver, Non-Telecommuter	66	6.59 (1.23)	6.69 (1.36)	4.97 (1.00)
Man, Non-Primary Caregiver, Telecommuter	70	6.69 (1.07)	7.10 (1.19)	4.83 (.93)
Man, Primary Caregiver, Non-Telecommuter	82	6.89 (1.03)	6.82 (1.25)	5.20 (.86)
Man, Primary Caregiver, Telecommuter	49	7.05 (.75)	6.88 (1.20)	5.23 (.87)
TOTAL	550	6.93 (1.02)	6.84 (1.28)	5.14 (.89)

Note. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

APPENDIX E

Table 3. Unstandardized Regression Coefficients from the Results of Hierarchical Multiple Regression

		Model 1: Diffuse Status	*Model 2:* Discrimination Proxy	*Model 3:* Perceived Deserved Salary
Step 1				
	Intercept	6.67**	5.07**	1.94**
	Race	.07	.11	.02
	Age	.01**	.01	.02**
	Sex	-.15	-.21**	.05
	R^2	.02**	.02*	.03**
Step 2				
	Intercept	6.74**	5.15**	1.97**
	Target Gender	-.24**	-.18*	.05
	Target Caregiving	.29**	.25**	-.09
	Target Work Type	.00	-.07	-.05
	Change in R^2	.03**	.03**	.00
Model Summary				
	Total R^2	.06	.05	.03

Note. N=550. *p<.05; **p<.01. Sex and gender coded as 0=woman, 1=man; race coded as 0=white; 1=non-white; caregiving coded as 0=non-primary caregiver, 1=primary caregiver; work type coded as 0=non-telecommuter, 1=telecommuter.

APPENDIX F

Table 4. Unstandardized Regression Coefficients For Respondents age 18-25 vs. Respondents Age 46-65

		Respondents Age 18-25 (n=310)			**Respondents Age 46-65 (n=51)**		
		Model 1: Diffuse Status	*Model 2:* Disc. Proxy	*Model 3:* Perceived Deserved Salary	*Model 4:* Diffuse Status	*Model 5:* Disc. Proxy	*Model 6:* Perceived Deserved Salary
Step 1							
	Intercept	4.56**	3.91**	1.27*	7.86**	4.49**	3.04
	Race	.04	.04	.04	-.85	-.39	-1.31*
	Sex	-.20	-.21*	.04	-.46	-.33	-.72
	Age	.11**	.06*	.04	-.01	.01	-.00
	R^2	.05	.03	.01	.11	.06	.16
Step 2							
	Intercept	5.19**	4.56**	1.29	7.91**	4.81**	3.48
	Target Gender	-.20	-.22	-.03	-.19	-.55	.74*

Target Caregiving	.27*	.30*	-.06	.17	-.03	-.64
Target Work Type	-.06	-.09	-.12	.40	.13	.52
Change in R^2	.02	.03*	.00	.05	.09	.20**
Model Summary						
Total R^2	.08	.06	.01	.16	.16	.36

Note. N=550. *p<.05; **p<.01. Sex and gender coded as 0=woman, 1=man; race coded as 0=white; 1=non-white; caregiving coded as 0=non-primary caregiver, 1=primary caregiver; work type coded as 0=non-telecommuter, 1=telecommuter.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Lisa Slattery Walker (formerly known as Rashotte) received her PhD in Sociology from the University of Arizona in 1998. She joined the UNC Charlotte faculty in 1998 and was promoted to Professor of Sociology in 2010. Her research focuses on small group interaction, nonverbal behaviors, identity, emotions, gender, and expectations. Email: Lisa.Walker@uncc.edu.

Shahar Gur is a PhD student in Organizational Science at UNC Charlotte. She holds a bachelor's degree in Psychology from UNC Chapel Hill and a master's degree in Industrial-Organizational Psychology from UNC Charlotte. Her research focuses on prosocial workplace behaviors. Email: sgur@uncc.edu.