

# Minimizing the motherhood penalty: What works, what doesn't, and why?

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# Motherhood wage penalty

- Employed mothers earn less than men employees, regardless of whether those men have children.
- Employed mothers earn less than childless women employees.
- Wage gap persists even with extensive controls for human capital factors and workplace factors, such as type of job, hours worked and the like.
- In one study, women and men who took family leave had a lower likelihood of promotion.

# Four possible interventions

- Mothers' own efforts?
- Policies to reduce unconscious bias?
- Family friendly legal mandates?
- Voluntary family friendly workplace policies?

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- **Family friendly legal mandates?**
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Why are mothers penalized in the  
workplace?

Status-based discrimination



**Allison**



**Sarah**



**Brad**



**Matthew**

# “Is there a motherhood penalty?”

- Childless women were approximately 2x more likely to be called back or recommended for hire.
- Childless women were offered significantly higher salaries of \$11,000.
- Fathers were not disadvantaged, but were instead offered significantly higher salaries.
- Mothers were less likely to be hired and offered lower salaries *because* they were judged to be less competent and less committed to their jobs.

# Evidence of status-based discrimination with other types of data

- Interviews with employers finds that employers believe mothers are less committed to work.
- An analysis of discrimination cases finds that employers did not consider women with children for promotion because they assumed mothers were not interested in advancement.



Can mothers' own efforts overcome the motherhood penalty?

“One of the most productive employees that our division has hired in recent memory.”

Benard & Correll 2010

- Mothers who display especially high levels of workplace commitment were judged as equally competent and committed as their childless peers.
- They were also are judged as more selfish, arrogant, and dominating and less warm and likeable than mothers whose workplace commitment was more ambiguous.
- Consequently, they were offered fewer organizational rewards.

# Normative discrimination

- Based on gendered expectations that mothers should prioritize family over paid work.
- Mothers who display intense commitment to their jobs violate these expectations, resulting in lower warmth and likeability ratings, which leads to fewer organizational rewards.
- In sum, mothers' increased efforts do not eliminate discrimination but instead change its form.

# What about caregiving fathers?

- Fathers are expected to prioritize paid work over caregiving.
- Fathers who violate these expectations by displaying high levels of commitment to family should experience normative discrimination.
- Research shows that while “breadwinning” fathers are viewed as warmer than their childless counterparts, fathers who take family leave are rated more negatively.
- Further, evidence suggests employers do not think men should take much leave.

Cuddy et al. 2004,  
Allen & Russell 1999, Wayne & Cordeiro 2003

“It’s okay for you to take a week off and maybe a week and a half off, but let’s not go crazy here.”

# A collision of two norms

- Ideal worker norms require steady work and being “always there” for one’s employer.
- Gender norms include expectations that mothers prioritize caregiving, and fathers, breadwinning.
- As a result, mothers are either viewed as less competent/committed *or* they are seen as less warm and likeable. Either way, they are offered fewer organizational rewards.
- Only breadwinning fathers escape the effects of both status and normative discrimination.

Can policies to reduce unconscious bias  
overcome the motherhood penalty?



# Reducing unconscious bias

- Training about bias, holding decision makers accountable for their decisions and establishing clear criteria for decisions have been shown to reduce gender biases in evaluations of *competence*.
- Yet, overcoming biased competence ratings does not change the gendered norms about the sphere or domain where mothers' efforts *should* be directed in the first place.
- Further, biases against mothers are often explicit.

The problem is not with the people in the workplace; the problem lies in the norms that govern the workplace itself.

Law as norm changer?

# Can law reduce these biases?

- These are very subtle biases that would be difficult to prove via the legal system.
- Under-enforcement of employment discrimination renders top-down regulation largely ineffective.
- Legal prohibitions face backlash when they attempt to change deep-seated normative beliefs like those about appropriate behavior for mothers and fathers.

# Yet, there are reasons to think law can reduce these biases

- Law affects society not only through punitive sanctions, but also through its symbolic or expressive effects.
- Laws imply a social consensus that a particular conduct is wrong or not wrong, and this implied consensus influences individual moral judgments (and behaviors).
- Laws can change the meaning of a behavior and, with it, individuals' moral evaluations of that behavior.

Berkowitz & Walker 1967; Suchman 1997

# The effect of law on motherhood/caretaker penalty

If law can change moral judgments and behaviors, then legal prohibitions against penalizing those who take parental or family leave should, if salient:

- Reduce negative judgments (warmth, interpersonal hostility) of employees who demonstrate caretaking responsibilities.
- Reduce penalties that caretaking employees face in terms of organizational rewards.

# U.S. Family & Medical Leave Act

- Provides 12-weeks of unpaid leave each year for certain family and medical reasons.
- Employees are eligible if they have worked for their employer for at least 12 months and in a location that employs 50 or more workers.
- Was designed to help employees balance work and family and to promote equal opportunity for men and women (US Department of Labor).

# With no law in place ...

- Women who took leave were judged to be less competent, less committed to their jobs, less promotable and offered smaller raises compared with childless women employees.
- Leave taking fathers were offered smaller raises than childless men employees.
- Mothers who did NOT take leave were seen as less warm and more hostile than childless women.
- By contrast, fathers who did NOT take leave were seen as warmer and less hostile than childless men.

Albiston, Correll, Tucker & Stevens, in progress



# When FMLA was salient...

- All biases were eliminated, except..
- Breadwinning fathers continue to be seen as warmer.
- Even a very limited law that is weakly enforced has the potential to reduce the biases mothers and other caregivers experience.

Albiston, Correll, Tucker & Stevens, in progress

Voluntary workplace policy as norm  
changer?

# When a voluntary workplace policy was salient...

- Some of the biases were eliminated, but several remained.
- A new bias emerged: fathers who took leave were now judged to be *more* interpersonally hostile than childless men.
- Rather than changing norms, family leave policies that are individual accommodations potentially fuel both ideal worker norms and gender norms by clearly signaling who is NOT an ideal worker and gendering who takes family leave.

Albiston, Correll, Tucker & Stevens, in progress

Conclusion: What might workplaces do?



# Changing ideal worker and gender norms

- Must redefine what it means to be a good and productive worker.
- Policies need to be designed around principle that all workers have responsibilities outside of work.
- Policies need to recognize that productive work can occur outside of the traditional workday and physical workplace.

# ROWE, Best Buy Corporate Headquarters

- ROWE attempts to change workplace culture from one that revolves around face time to one where ALL employees are evaluated based on results only.
- Employees are involved in a series of participatory sessions where they critically examine the existing culture and practice moving to a results only culture.
- For example, it is no longer permissible to ask why someone is not in the office.
- Main result: ROWE increases perceived schedule control and reduces work-family conflict.

To the extent that the motherhood penalty comes about because face time signals both a commitment to work and to a masculine breadwinning role, a deep cultural change that reduces the value placed on face time can minimize the motherhood penalty.





# Evaluations of mothers and others

	<b>Mother</b>	<b>Non-mother</b>	<b>Father</b>	<b>Non-father</b>
Competence	5.19**	5.75	5.51	5.44
Commitment	67.0**	79.2	78.5*	74.2
Days allowed late	3.16**	3.73	3.69**	3.16
Salary recommendation	\$137K**	\$148K	\$150K**	\$144K
Proportion recommended for hire	.47**	.84	.73*	.62

\*p<.10

\*\*p<.05

\*\*p<.01

Correll, Benard & Paik 2007