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Shelley J. Correll  
Minimizing the Motherhood Penalty

Research Symposium

# GENDER & WORK:

CHALLENGING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

WORK/FAMILY

GENDER & WORK

# MINIMIZING THE MOTHERHOOD PENALTY:

## What Works, What Doesn't and Why?

Shelley J. Correll

Stanford University

There is growing evidence that mothers are disadvantaged in the workplace. Mothers earn less than men, whether or not those men have children (Anderson, Binder and Krause, 2003). Mothers earn less than childless women, holding constant a wide array of factors that affect earnings, such as human capital factors (e.g. type and amount of education) and workplace factors (Anderson et al., 2003; Budig and England, 2001; Waldfogel, 1997). The fact that the motherhood wage gap persists in models that control for so many factors suggests that differences between mothers and childless women are not the primary cause of mothers' lower earnings. The magnitude of the motherhood wage penalty is not trivial: mothers earn 5-7% lower wages per child, compared with childless women who are otherwise equal (Budig and England, 2001). While fathers do not generally experience a wage penalty, one study of over 26,000 financial services managers found that both men and women who took family leave had a lower likelihood of promotion compared with those who did not take leave (Judiesch and Lyness, 1999).

After describing why mothers and other caregivers are penalized in the workplace, I address what can be done to overcome these disadvantages. I consider four possible interventions involving: 1) mothers' own efforts, 2) organizational policies to reduce unconscious bias, 3) "family-friendly" legal mandates, and 4) "family-friendly" organizational policies. Family-friendly legal mandates and policies are those intended to help workers balance the competing demands of work and family. My conclusion will be that legal mandates hold promise for reducing the motherhood penalty, but all other interventions fall short. This is not to say that organizations cannot successfully intervene. Instead, I will argue that a deep cultural change that fundamentally changes how we view workplace productivity is necessary if organizations are going to reduce the disadvantages that mothers and other caregivers experience.

### Why are mothers penalized in the workplace? Status-based discrimination

The fact that mothers experience a wage penalty even when human capital, workplace, and other factors are controlled has led researchers to suspect that a bias against mothers might be at least partially responsible for their lower earnings. Some of the most compelling evidence in support of this argument comes from experiments in which researchers have raters evaluate two identically qualified candidates for a job—one parent and one non-parent. The researchers establish that the two candidates are identically qualified by pre-testing the candidates' application materials (e.g. resumes, past performance reviews) with no mention of parental status. After establishing that the application materials for the two candidates produce equivalent ratings, the researchers then subtly mark one of the two candidates as a parent and evaluate whether parental status leads to a bias in how the candidates are evaluated.

In one experiment of this type, mothers were significantly and substantially less likely to be recommended for hire and, if they were recommended for hire, they were offered \$11,000

lower starting salaries than equally qualified childless women (Correll, Benard and Paik, 2007). Fathers were not penalized; they were instead offered significantly higher salaries than their childless counterparts. This study further found that raters offered mothers lower salaries and were less likely to hire them because they believed mothers were less competent and less committed to their jobs, a form of discrimination called "status-based discrimination." When mothers are judged as less committed to work they are perceived to violate the ideal worker norm that expects workers to be fully committed to paid work and "always there" for their employer (Williams, 2001).

While experiments like the one just described are often conducted on college student samples, research using other methods produces similar results. For example, Correll, Benard and Paik (2007) conducted an audit study of actual employers and found that, compared to childless women, employers were approximately 100% less likely to call back a mother who applied for an advertised job. Supporting the idea that perceived lack of commitment to paid work leads to a bias against mothers, Schultz's (1990) analysis of discrimination cases finds that employers did not consider mothers for promotion because they assumed that mothers were not interested in promotion. Thus, across a number of studies using different methodologies, we see that mothers experience status-based discrimination: they are offered fewer organizational rewards because they are stereotyped as less competent and less committed to their jobs.

### Intervention #1:

#### Can mothers overcome doubts about their workplace commitment?

What if mothers could overcome doubts about their workplace competence and commitment, by working harder, putting in longer hours or more face time, or making clear that they are "always there" for their employer? Would this eliminate the discrimination they face?

In an experiment designed to answer this question, researchers replicated the experiment described above, except this time they removed any ambiguity about the past workplace commitment of the candidates (Benard and Correll, 2010). For example, these hyper-committed candidates were described as being "one of the most productive employees that our division has hired in recent memory."

This study found that displays of heroic workplace commitment did eliminate status-based discrimination: hyper-committed mothers were in fact seen as equally committed to their jobs and just as competent as their hyper-committed childless counterparts. However, compared with childless women, these mothers were judged to be less warm, less likable and more "interpersonally hostile," a term that encompasses a suite of negative attributes, such as being seen as more selfish and arrogant. Hyper-committed fathers experienced no warmth, likability or hostility penalties. The study further found that being perceived as warm, likable, and not hostile is important. Because of their lower ratings on these dimensions, the hyper-committed mothers were offered fewer organizational rewards: they were less likely to be hired and were offered lower salaries than their childless counterparts even though there was no difference in how competent they were seen to be.

Benard and Correll (2010) call this form of discrimination "normative discrimination." It occurs when individuals violate gendered expectations that mothers should prioritize family over paid work. Mothers who display intense commitment to their jobs violate these expectations. In sum, efforts on the part of mothers to overcome doubts about their workplace competence do not eliminate discrimination; these efforts just change the mechanism of discrimination.

#### What about caregiving fathers?

While mothers are expected to prioritize family over paid work, fathers are expected to be breadwinners, prioritizing paid work over family. Fathers who violate these expectations by displaying high levels of commitment to family should also experience normative discrimination.

Indeed, research shows that while breadwinning fathers are generally rated as warmer than their childless counterparts (Cuddy, Fiske, and Glick, 2004), both male and female employees who take family leave experience status-based discrimination, being rated as less committed to their jobs than are non-leave-takers (Allen and Russell, 1999; Wayne and Cordeiro, 2003). Further and consistent with normative discrimination, Albiston (2005) shows that employers do not think men should take more than a few days of family leave, if that, and actively discourage them from doing so.

### **A collision of two norms**

The combined effect of status and normative discrimination creates a conundrum for mothers in the workplace. Because stereotypic expectations raise doubts about their workplace commitment, mothers are seen as violating the ideal worker norm that employees should display intense commitment to their jobs and be always there for their employer. Mothers who exert heroic efforts at work to avoid suspicion about their workplace commitment violate a gender norm that mothers should prioritize family over paid work. As a result, mothers are either viewed as less competent or committed to paid work or they are seen as less likeable and warm. Either way, they are offered fewer organizational rewards than other workers.

Fathers generally do not face the same collision between ideal worker norms and gender norms. It is only when fathers demonstrate intense commitment to family, thereby violating both the ideal worker norm and the breadwinner norm, that they reap fewer organizational rewards (Judiesch and Lyness, 1999).

### **Intervention #2:**

#### **Does reducing unconscious bias reduce the motherhood penalty?**

The biases that women and underrepresented minority groups experience at work are generally thought to be the result of an unconscious process where gender (or racial) stereotypes lead evaluators to rate women's (or minorities') performances lower than equivalent performances offered by white men (Foschi, 1996; Biernat and Kobrynowicz, 1997). Workplaces increasingly try to weed out stereotypic biases in their hiring, promotion, and performance evaluations by conducting training sessions for their employees about the role of unconscious bias and by recommending strategies to lessen the likelihood that bias permeates evaluations. Common workplace strategies, such as holding decision makers accountable for their decisions and establishing clear criteria for workplace evaluations have been shown to reduce or eliminate biases in decision making (Tetlock, 1983, 1985; Uhlmann and Cohen, 2005).

Would these strategies overcome biases that mothers face? While I know of no study that evaluates this possibility, it seems likely that unconscious bias reduction strategies would reduce some of the biased competence ratings mothers experience. However, as we have seen, the disadvantages mothers experience at work are not solely the result of doubts about their competence. Instead, mothers also encounter expectations that they prioritize family over work. Overcoming biases in the judgments of their workplace competence or commitment does nothing to change gendered norms about the domain or sphere where mothers' efforts should be directed in the first place.

In sum, neither fixing mothers by imploring them to work harder nor fixing decision makers by encouraging them to weed out their biases will eliminate the motherhood penalty. This is because the problem is fundamentally not with the people in the workplace; the problem lies in the norms that govern the workplace itself. Successfully eliminating the disadvantages that mothers and other caregivers face requires changing the ideal worker norm and the gendered norms about caretaking and breadwinning.

The question is: how? Below I consider how family-friendly legal mandates and organizational policies might lead to deep cultural changes in the norms that govern the workplace. I

argue and provide some evidence that laws that are designed to help workers balance work and family have the potential to change gendered norms about caretaking and breadwinning. I then speculate about the role of organizational policy and what type of policy might upend the linkage between face time and productivity, thereby destabilizing the ideal worker norm.

### **Intervention #3:**

#### **Law as norm changer?**

Can family-friendly laws reduce the biases mothers and other caregivers experience at work? There are many reasons to be doubtful. After all, these are very subtle subjective biases that would be difficult to prove via the legal system. In addition, even if a law were to render these biases illegal, it would be subject to two common objections. The first is that under-enforcement of employment discrimination law renders top-down regulation largely ineffective. The second objection is that legal prohibitions face backlash when they attempt to change deep-seated normative beliefs like those about appropriate behavior for mothers and fathers.

Nevertheless, social psychological research about how majority opinion affects judgments and behaviors suggests reasons for optimism. Law and society scholars have long contended that law can change norms or judgments about behaviors (Berkowitz and Walker, 1967). The central idea is that law affects society not only through punitive sanctions, but also through its symbolic or expressive effects. In this sense, laws imply a social consensus that a particular conduct is wrong or not wrong, and this implied consensus influences individual moral judgments and behaviors (Suchman, 1997). For example, individuals refrain from murdering those they dislike not only because they fear being punished, but also because they find murder to be morally reprehensible.

More specifically, law changes the meaning of a given behavior and, with it, individuals' normative evaluations of that behavior. Legal scholars have recently argued that, in addition to affecting normative judgments about behavior, law will also affect behavior itself (Sunstein, 1996a, 1996b). While this idea has yet to be evaluated, it is consistent with the well-established finding in social psychology that majority opinion influences judgments, beliefs and behaviors (Festinger, 1954). If law can change both behavior and normative judgments, then laws that prohibit discrimination against mothers and other caretakers should improve both their workplace outcomes and the perceptions that they face.

A recent study provides evidence to support the role of law in reducing bias (Abliston, Correll, Tucker and Stevens, 2012). In this experiment, participants learned that a firm was covered either by the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) or by the Occupational Safety and Health Act (the control condition). They then rated several highly skilled employees who purportedly worked at a firm described as being covered by one of these two laws (FMLA or control). In the control condition, with no family-friendly law in place, mothers who had taken family leave were judged as less competent, less committed to their jobs, less promotable, and were offered smaller raises than childless women. Fathers who took leave were offered smaller raises than their childless counterparts, but they did not experience the other disadvantages that leave-taking mothers experienced. Mothers who did NOT take family leave were judged to be less warm and more interpersonally hostile than childless women. By contrast, fathers who did NOT take leave (i.e. breadwinners) were rated as warmer and less interpersonally hostile than childless men. In other words, with no family-friendly law in place, raters made more positive normative judgments of mothers and fathers who conformed to the gendered norms about prioritizing family or work.

A family-friendly law clearly made a difference. When FMLA was salient, all of the disadvantages experienced by mothers and fathers who took leave were eliminated. This result suggests that even a limited law that is weakly enforced, such as the FMLA, can reduce the motherhood penalty. It does so by signaling a broad social consensus about the right of men and women to

participate both in paid work and in caregiving responsibilities.

#### Intervention #4:

##### Organizational policy as norm changer?

Would voluntary organizational policies designed to help workers balance the competing demands of work and family produce similar effects as law? The study just described had a different set of raters rate employees who were described as working for a firm that offered a family leave policy that allowed new mothers and fathers time to be at home with their new child. When this policy was made salient, it reduced some of the biases that had been found in the control condition described above. Yet, several biases remained. Further a new bias emerged: with a voluntary organizational policy in place, fathers who took leave were now judged to be more interpersonally hostile than childless men.

Family-friendly organizational policies, while helpful to workers in many ways, do not eliminate the biases that mothers and caretakers experience because they do not change the norms that govern the workplace. Rather than representing a broad social consensus, these policies are instead more narrow accommodations for individual workers who have specific needs to take time away from work. As such, these policies leave the “always there,” ideal worker norm in place and, if anything, boldly signal the perceived lack of workplace commitment of those who actually use family leave policies. Indeed, recent research (special issue of the *Journal of Social Issues* on “Flexibility Stigma,” forthcoming) shows that those who take advantage of family-friendly policies, such as working reduced hours or changing their schedules, experience a “flexibility stigma.”

Further, voluntary organizational policies do not change gender norms about prioritizing work and family. Instead, it is well known that women are more likely than men to use these policies and that employers actively dissuade men from doing so (Albiston, 2005). In sum, rather than changing norms, individual accommodation policies instead potentially fuel both ideal worker norms and gender norms by clearly signaling who is NOT an ideal worker and by gendering who takes family leave.

#### Conclusion: What might organizations do?

Despite the limits to existing organizational policy, I remain optimistic that organizations can reduce the bias mothers and other caregivers face. What is needed are policies that are more deeply cultural, changing the norms that govern the workplace. Norms are widely shared beliefs. In the case of work and family, they define who is a good and productive worker and who should be spending significant time at work and who should be spending significant time with family. If we simply accommodate the periodic needs of individuals without changing these overarching norms, we tee up for discrimination any employee whose workplace commitment is in doubt. This includes all employed mothers and any father who demonstrates a commitment to caregiving.

To change these norms, organizations need to redefine what it means to be a good and productive worker. This will not be easy, but to start policies must first be designed around the principle that all workers have needs outside of work. Second, policies must recognize that productive work can be accomplished outside of the traditional workday and outside of the physical workplace. That is, norms about work time and work place must be shifted for all workers.

An encouraging example comes from the research by Erin Kelly and Phyllis Moen on the Results Only Work Environment (ROWE) program implemented at Best Buy's corporate headquarters (Kelly, Moen and Tranby, 2011; Kelly, Ammons, Chermack and Moen, 2010). The program attempted to shift Best Buys' cultural from one that highly valued face time to one where ALL

employees were evaluated based on results only. Employees attended a series of participatory sessions where they critically examined the current culture and practiced moving toward a culture that valued results over face time.

No longer was it permissible to ask why someone was not in the office and, indeed, doing so would have run counter to the new norms that were being put in place (Kelly et al. 2010). Because the program affected all employees it signaled that all employees, not just mothers, had outside responsibilities.

An evaluation of this program found that it significantly increased the amount of schedule control that employees perceived they had and, consequently, reduced work/family conflict. And, importantly, it did so without reducing employee productivity. While not marketed as a work/family initiative, the program has obvious implications for workers with caregiving responsibilities. It is this sort of program that has the potential to promote deep cultural change that can decrease the disadvantages faced by those with caregiving responsibilities.

I will close with a speculation. To the extent that the disadvantages outlined here come about because face time at work currently signals both commitment to work and commitment to a masculine breadwinning role, we have reason to be hopeful that a deep cultural change that reduces the association of face time with productivity can minimize the motherhood penalty.

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## Shelley J. Correll

Professor of Sociology  
Stanford University



Shelley Correll is Professor of Sociology at Stanford University and the Barbara D. Finberg Director of the Clayman Institute for Gender Research. Her expertise is in the areas of gender and workplace dynamics. Her recent research on "motherhood penalty" illustrates how stereotypic beliefs associated with motherhood influence the workplace evaluations and pay and hiring decisions of women when they give evidence of being a mother. This research has been featured in several media outlets including *The New York Times*, *CNN*, *ABC World News Tonight*, *The Nation*, and *Ms. Magazine*. She is currently leading a project on "redesigning work," evaluating how workplaces' structures and practices can be better aligned with the needs of today's workforce. Professor Correll is also actively involved in developing applications of her research to real world problems. She consults on reducing stereotypic biases in the workplace, speaks to professional groups in computer science and engineering, and works with attorneys as they incorporate social science evidence into cases involving workplace discrimination against those with family responsibilities.



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