2008 Rosabeth Moss Kanter Award for Excellence in Work-Family Research Publication

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Announcing the 2008 Kanter Award Winner:
Getting a Job: Is There a Motherhood Penalty?

Shelley J. Correll, Stephen Benard, and In Paik
American Journal of Sociology Volume 112 Number 5 (March 2007): 1297–1338

Over the last decade or so, several studies have identified a “motherhood penalty” in the growth of women’s wages over time. The ‘mommy gap’ in wages (i.e., between mothers and childless women) is larger than the gender gap between men and women, at least for women younger than 35 (Crittenden, 2001). In fact, much of the gender gap may be explained by disproportionately low wages of mothers (Glass, 2004). Some studies also suggest that employed mothers are seen as less competent (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004).

This project included 2 separate experiments using ‘fake’ resumes. The goal was to measure the chances that mothers (so identified by their resumes) would be called for an interview or recommended for hire, compared to childless women, fathers, and childless men. In the first study, raters were asked to evaluate two job applications that were similar except for gender and parental status.

- Evaluators consistently rated mothers as less competent and less committed to paid work than nonmothers.
- In contrast, fathers were rated MORE positively than nonfathers.

Thus, in the first study, raters discriminated against mothers when making hiring decisions.

In the second study, the researchers submitted ‘fake’ resumes in response to 638 job ads over an 18 month period. Callbacks to request interviews were tracked via a computerized voice mail system.

- Childless women received 2.1 times as many callbacks as mothers with similar credentials. There were no differences between father and childless men.

The researchers concluded that the ‘motherhood penalty’ is alive and well, even when examined with highly controlled experimental methods in both laboratory and ‘real life’ settings.

How did you get interested in this topic of the motherhood penalty?
In my previous work on gender inequality in the workplace it was becoming increasingly clear to me that mothers were experiencing disadvantages that seemed unique. For example, the pay gap between mothers and childless women is actually larger than the pay gap between women and men. I began to wonder how it was that these disadvantages emerged and if discrimination was a contributing factor.

Were you surprised by the findings?
I was not surprised to find that mothers were discriminated against, but I was very surprised by the magnitude of the discrimination. With gender or race, we often talk about the subtle ways that stereotypes are disadvantageous. With mothers, the effects were huge, such as being about 100% less likely to be recommended for hire than childless women and being offered much lower starting salaries.

What do you think are the most important implications of your findings for women? For human resource practitioners?
I think the study documented a phenomenon that many working mothers suspected was going on. As one woman told me, “You confirmed my worst fear.” However, establishing that bias against mothers is a broad social pattern helps raise awareness of the issue. And raising awareness can help human resource practitioners be on alert to potential biases against mothers, which can help reduce the occurrence of bias.
1. Think now is the time to retreat from work-life efforts?
   a. When organizations foster positive family relationships, changes in employee satisfaction and commitment make such investments worth their cost (Ford, et al.). Now, more than ever, we need to reinforce our employees' commitment and dedication.
   b. The most successful work-life interventions address more than one source of stress -- such as overwork, workload, and work-family conflict (Ford, et al.). Employees are enduring a period of unprecedented stress due to the current economy, and employer interventions can go a long way to alleviate some of that stress and increase worker productivity.

2. Does the sheer number of women in management make a difference in reducing gender inequities?
   Inroads by women into upper-status managerial positions “lift all boats,” even for women who do not attain greater status. However, women managers must have real managerial authority and not just a title-change (Cohen & Huffman).

3. Can mothers give up the guilt?
   In general, the cognitive development of young children is unimpaired by their mothers’ participation in the workforce. In fact, reading scores for children of low-income moms who work are better than for those who do not work (Burchinal & Clarke-Stewart).

4. Do single employees resent “family-friendly” policies?
   Married employees perceive greater organizational equity than do singles. Thus, work-life policies should be referred to as “work-life” not “family-friendly” and they should be need-blind (Casper, et al.).

5. Is family-to-work conflict just a problem for the employee?
   a. Family-to-work conflict is a safety hazard - in that it is associated with decreased compliance with safety rules and less willingness to participate in safety training (Cullen & Hammer).
   b. High workload on any specific day, not just chronic high workload, affects employee mood and perception of work-family conflict (Ilies, et al.).
   c. These moods go home with employees at night such that employees are noticeably disengaged from family activities (according to their spouses) (Ilies, et al.). Organizations cannot optimize employee satisfaction without considering these non-work influences (Ford, et al.).

6. Are all flexible work arrangements equal?
   Daily flexibility (having the option to come and go as necessary during the day, with short notice) is more effective in reducing work-family conflict than more fixed flex time (flexible start and ending times) (Allard, et al.).

7. Are policies enough to create a culture of work-life integration?
   a. Policies are necessary but not sufficient for reducing work-family conflict - in fact a “positive work-family culture along with family support may be more instrumental in helping employees balance work and home roles” (Premeaux, et al.).
   b. Organizational leaders interested in facilitating work-life initiatives should place a high priority on increasing managers’ awareness of work-life issues and training them to be supportive of these programs (Wang & Walumbwa).
8. Should we work for longer parental leaves, or something else?

a. Policies that provide childcare support or onsite daycare are more likely to increase women's work involvement, which in the long run, decreases women's chances of living in poverty later on (Misra, et al.). Long leaves of more than 3 months, on the other hand, have the opposite effect.

b. Moreover, policies that actively encourage father involvement in childcare, such as leaves that only fathers can take, encourage more equal division of housework (Fuwa & Cohen; Misra, et al.).

9. Who is more likely to experience intimate partner violence?

a. Shedding light on an old debate, Villarreal (2007) shows that employed women are less likely to be at risk for family violence.

b. On the other hand, when employed women do experience spousal abuse, 21-60% lose their jobs. Authors encourage employers to enact policies that prohibit discharge or discipline for employees who take time off of work for reasons related to domestic violence (Rothman, et al.).

10. Are work-life issues the same across cultures?

a. Anglo models for work-life are less effective in collectivist societies. Authors recommend that organizational leaders incorporate team-based interventions and social networks as possible alternatives to decreasing work-family conflict among these groups (Spector, et al.).

b. Moreover, for work-life policies to have the greatest impact among employees of different ethnicities, companies should focus on reducing workload or strain which in turn reduces stress and increases job satisfaction (Spector, et al.).

c. Local implementation of work-life policies should reflect local needs (Spector, et al.).

d. Managers and supervisors who make a concerted effort toward improving the safety of their Latino employees, find that both worker health and productivity will benefit, as well as employee well-being at home (Gryzywacz et al.).
Kanter Top Nominated Articles arranged by AWLP Work-Life Pillars

Caring for Dependents


Health and Wellness

Cullen, J.C. & Hammer, L.B. (2007). Developing and testing a theoretical model linking work-family conflict to employee safety. *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*, 12, 266-278. cull@eecs.oregonstate.edu


Villarreal, A. (2007). Women’s employment status, coercive control, and intimate partner violence in Mexico. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 69, 418-434. avilla@prc.utexas.edu

Workplace Flexibility


Financial Support


Paid and Unpaid Time Off


Cultural Change Initiatives


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