

Dismantling Bias Conference Series

Does the Fatherhood Bonus Apply to Single Fathers? Evidence from a Survey Experiment

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Does the Fatherhood Bonus Apply to Single Fathers? Evidence from a Survey Experiment

Abstract:

The rhetoric on diverse and inclusive work organizations suggests that such workplaces welcome individuals of all backgrounds. These individuals fully participate in core organizational processes and are not expected to assimilate to existing dominant norms (Donovan 2017). However, when it comes to working parents, the grip of employers' expectation of workers' uninterrupted availability and commitment to paid work – the ideal worker norm (Acker 1990; Williams 2001) – remains strong. A violation of such norm then, stigmatizes and penalizes those who have families and require time to attend to the needs of family members. Given the gendered perception of care as “women’s work” (Folbre 2018), it is often mothers who are perceived as not satisfying the high standards of the ideal worker image even though mothers are found to put as much effort into work as fathers (Kmec 2011). The perception of mothers as compromised workers has been carefully documented and dubbed as a motherhood penalty – a price that many mothers pay in terms of employment prospects, wages, and the possibility of promotion (Budig, Misra and Boeckmann 2016; Correll 2017). On the other hand, research shows a hiring preference and a significant wage bonus for married, educated fathers – a fatherhood bonus (Budig 2014; Killewald 2013). It is assumed that such men fit the image of the ideal worker and deserve high-paying jobs to provide for their families (Correll, Benard and Paik 2007). What remains unclear is whether single fathers are perceived as fitting the ideal worker norm like married fathers or violating the norm like working mothers. To address this puzzle, the present study conducted a survey experiment that measured employers' hiring preferences for single fathers. The experiment was motivated by and developed as a test of status characteristic theory. According to existing status-based explanations of discrimination, cultural connotations assigned to categorical distinctions such as personal attributes (e.g. gender, race) or roles (e.g. being a father) can elevate or lower the levels of social worthiness attached to these distinctions (Berger et al. 1977; Correll and Ridgeway 2003). In a work setting, breadwinning is associated with higher performance expectations and caregiving is associated with lower expectations (Correll et al. 2007). In turn, these expectations produce the motherhood penalty and the fatherhood bonus for married parents (Correll et al. 2007; Benard and Correll 2010). Drawing on this discussion, the study examines three questions: (1) Does single fatherhood status affect employers' hiring preferences? (2) How do single fathers rank compared to married fathers and single mothers on employers' hiring preferences? (3) If single fathers are less preferred than another group, what mechanisms account for their relative disadvantage in employers' preferences? The foundational work of status characteristic theory conceptualized gender as a master status characteristic that is likely to be salient in most situations (Wagner and Berger 1997). While there is a debate regarding the universal application of gender's master status, it is generally agreed that when gender is salient, its role in determining behavior is dominant (Wagner and Berger 1997). In a work setting, male gender is traditionally assigned a higher status because the logic of organizational work was built around masculine traits assumed to be necessary for effective management: rational, tough-minded, analytic, and unemotional (Kanter 1977). The higher status of male gender builds upon the ideal worker norm interwoven with the structure of work organizations. A seemingly abstract, disembodied and genderless figure, the ideal worker role is shaped by a gendered organization of work (Acker 1990). “‘He’ is expected to be at work at set times, focused only on the tasks at hand, responsive only to demands of supervisors, available for long working hours, and unhampered by other responsibilities, such as for children and

housework. This is the ideal, unencumbered worker” (Acker 2011: 67). However, the survey experiment shows that the fatherhood bonus does not extend to single fathers. The job application of the single father was consistently ranked as the least preferred option out of the three candidates. These results suggest that single fathers experience a labor market disadvantage that is similar to the motherhood penalty. It can be inferred, then, that single fathers violate not only the ideal worker norm but the gendered logic of work organizations. The findings shed light on how the single fatherhood status operates within work organizations and deepen the current knowledge about how primary caregiving responsibility creates negative consequences in the labor market for a growing, yet understudied population of single fathers in the U.S.