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Mothers and Fathers in the Workplace: How Gender and Parental Status Influence Judgments of Job-Related Competence

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We investigated the influence of gender and parental status on employment decisions. The shifting standards model predicts that parenthood polarizes judgments of women and men such that mothers are held to stricter employment standards than fathers. Social role theory predicts that parenting role, rather than gender, guides judgments of mothers and fathers. One hundred ninety-six undergraduates at two universities evaluated a job applicant; the applicant was either male or female and was either single or married with two children. Results showed that parents were judged less agentic and less committed to employment than non-parents. Parental status also interacted with gender, indicating that fathers were held to more lenient standards than mothers and childless men. We discuss theoretical and practical implications.

Considerable research on stereotyping shows that an individual's gender affects the judgments that are made about him or her. Consistent with stereotypes,

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women are often judged more communal (e.g., warm, caring) and less agentic (e.g., assertive, achievement-oriented) than men (Bakan, 1966; Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1972; Deaux, 1984; Eagly & Steffen, 1984; Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1975). In the workplace, the domain under investigation, women are judged less competent than men in traditionally masculine domains (Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997; Boldry, Wood, & Kashy, 2001; Heilman, 2001). The present research examines how gender stereotypes interact with roles women and men adopt—specifically, the parenting role—to affect perceptions of job-related competence. In other words, are perceptions of mothers and fathers in the workplace driven by gender stereotypes, parental status, or a confluence of the two? Our approach to this question is framed in terms of the shifting standards model of stereotyping.

According to the shifting standards model (Biernat & Manis, 1994; Biernat, Manis, & Nelson, 1991), when we judge individual members of stereotyped groups on stereotyped dimensions, we compare them to within-category judgment standards. That is, because of stereotypes that women are less task competent than men, we are likely to judge the task competence of a particular woman relative to (lower) standards of competence for women, and the task competence of a particular man relative to (higher) standards of competence for men. The result is that evaluations of men and women may not be directly comparable: *Good* for a woman does not mean the same thing as *good* for a man.

With regard to parenting, this model suggests that stereotypes about women's greater involvement in parental care than men (i.e., greater nurturing behavior) lead observers to evaluate male and female parents relative to different standards. That is, gender matters, as well as specific parental roles. Evidence supportive of the shifting standards model was found by Kobrynowicz and Biernat (1997) who examined how gender stereotypes led observers to translate subjective descriptions into objective judgments. Participants decoded subjective descriptions of parenting effectiveness (e.g., being a "very good" or "all right" parent) into objective judgments (i.e., how many parenting behaviors does this individual perform?). Though mothers and fathers were judged equally effective at parenting, mothers were judged to perform *more* parenting behaviors than fathers. That is, the same subjective trait rating translated into different objective judgments: a *good* mother performed more childcare behaviors than a *good* father. Thus, gender stereotypes served as standards for decoding subjective descriptions of parenting effectiveness.

More recently, Bridges, Etaugh, & Barnes-Farrell (2002) asked participants to estimate the frequency with which stay-at-home and employed mothers and fathers performed various childcare behaviors and to judge their effectiveness as parents. Consistent with Kobrynowicz and Biernat (1997), stay-at-home mothers and fathers were regarded as equally effective parents, though a stay-at-home mother was judged to perform *more* physical and emotional caregiving than a stay-at-home-father. Whereas an employed mother was judged to provide more

physical care than an employed father, an employed father was regarded as a better parent than an employed mother.

There is evidence, then, that gender stereotypes interact with parental role to affect judgments of mothers and fathers. Mothers are expected to provide more physical and emotional care than fathers. Perhaps because of this expectation, mothers who violate gender roles by being employed full-time are perceived as less nurturing *and* less professionally competent than full-time employed fathers (Etaugh & Folger, 1998). Indeed, mothers who continue their employment after the birth of a child are perceived as less communal than mothers who leave the paid workforce after giving birth (Bridges & Etaugh, 1995).

Moving into a workplace setting, the shifting standards model predicts that judgments of competence will be driven by both gender stereotypes and parental role: mothers' workplace competence will be judged according to a stricter standard than fathers' workplace competence. In other words, one might expect a statistical interaction between gender and parental role on standards and inferences about competence on the job. Data consistent with this hypothesis are reported by Firth (1982). Firth mailed letters of application to several accounting firms in which the applicant's gender and parental status were manipulated. He found that motherhood decreased the likelihood that a female applicant was contacted, but fatherhood had no effect on a male applicant's success. Based on earlier research and predictions derived from the shifting standards model, we predicted that mothers—because they are perceived as unreliable and less committed in the workplace (Firth, 1982)—will be held to higher pre-employment standards than fathers or non-parent applicants. If parental role polarizes gender effects, fathers may be held to particularly low pre-employment standards.

An alternative prediction—one not positing an interaction between gender and parental role—would be made by social role theory. Social role theory (Diekmann & Eagly, 2000; Eagly & Steffen, 1984, 1986; Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000) proposes that gender stereotypes arise out of men's and women's distributions into social roles. Women are regarded as more communal and less agentic than men because women have traditionally been associated with the homemaker role. Men are regarded as more agentic because they have traditionally been associated with the provider role. Eagly and her colleagues assert that differential judgments of agency and communality reflect social roles. Indeed, when women are depicted as employees, they are assigned more agentic qualities than otherwise, and when men are depicted as homemakers, they are assigned more communal qualities than otherwise (Eagly & Steffen, 1984, 1986; Eagly et al., 2000). The implication of these findings is that social role (in this case, parenthood) may be more potent than gender in affecting judgments of mothers and fathers.

Of course, social role theory does assume that gender roles can affect judgments. Gender roles may “spill over to workplace roles and cause people to have different expectations for female and male occupants of the same workplace role”

(Eagly et al., 2000, p. 155; see also Gutek & Morasch, 1982). Research on the behavior of men and women in leadership roles does document that men and women may fill the same role in different ways (e.g., women may adopt a more democratic leadership style; Eagly & Johnson, 1990). However, the bulk of the research on social role theory that examines *perceptions* of women and men finds main effects of other roles (e.g., occupation) that override the effects of gender (Eagly & Steffen, 1984). With regard to judgments of mothers and fathers in the workplace, social role theory would predict that parent role should override the effects of gender. Mothers and fathers will be judged equivalently, resulting in a statistical main effect of parental status.

In addition to exploring how perceptions of mothers in the workplace compare with those of fathers and non-parent men and women, we are also interested in how judgments of parent and non-parent targets correspond to judgments of the ideal worker. In the United States the ideal worker is one who enters the workforce in young adulthood, works 40 or more hours per week, is always available to the employer, works consistently for 40 or more years, and does not take time off for raising children (Williams, 2001; Williams & Cooper, this issue). In short, the ideal worker is the “unencumbered” worker (Crittenden, 2001). Such a description is inconsistent with work patterns for many women, particularly women who have children. Indeed, many of the traits deemed necessary for being a good mother (e.g., nurturing, affectionate) are contrary to those needed to be successful in the workplace (e.g., independence, competitiveness, dominance; Halpert, Wilson, & Hickman, 1993; Schein, 2001). For these reasons, we anticipate that mothers will be perceived as less competent than the ideal worker. To the extent that parenthood does not encumber the employment patterns of fathers as it does mothers, we anticipate that fathers will be perceived as similar to the ideal worker.

Overview

To summarize, the extant literature shows that employed mothers are often judged more harshly than employed fathers: Employed fathers are regarded as better parents *and* more professionally competent than employed mothers (Etaugh & Folger, 1998), and mothers must do more than fathers to be labeled a good parent (Bridges et al., 2002; Kobrynowicz & Biernat, 1997). Based on this research, we hypothesize that the parental role will polarize judgments of mothers and fathers in the workplace such that mothers will be held to a stricter standard than fathers. However, if the parenting role is thought more important than gender on certain dimensions related to job competence, a main effect of parental status should emerge. Rather than viewing the shifting standards model and social role theory as competing approaches, we view them as complementary. To test predictions from these models, we present participants with a male or female job applicant who is depicted as single or married with two young children. Participants judge

the applicant's job-related attributes (e.g., competence, commitment to the job, expected availability on the job), they set standards for hiring the applicant (e.g., what level of performance would you require of this applicant before hiring?, what degree of time commitment would you require before hiring?), and they indicate whether they would hire the applicant. Again, a pattern showing that a female applicant with children is judged more harshly than a male applicant with children would support the shifting standards model. A pattern showing that applicants with children are judged more harshly than applicants without children would support social role theory. Regarding the ideal worker, if a female applicant but not a male applicant with children is held to stricter standards than the ideal worker, this finding would support the shifting standards model. Evidence that both parents are judged equivalently relative to the ideal worker would support social role theory. We present data collected from two samples. One sample is comprised of undergraduates from a large Midwestern university; the other sample consists of (slightly older) undergraduates from a mid-sized Eastern university.

Method

Participants

The Midwestern sample was comprised of 58 females and 49 males (with 1 gender-unspecified individual). The vast majority of the sample (90%) self-identified as White with the remainder identifying as Asian (3.8%), African-American (2.8%), or Hispanic (2.8%). The mean age of participants was 19 (range = 17–25). Each received course credit in exchange for participation. The Eastern sample was comprised of 66 females and 21 males (with 1 gender-unspecified individual). This sample was 8.0% African-American, 4.6% Asian, 13.9% Hispanic, 1.1% West Indian, and 72.4% Caucasian; the average age was 22 (range = 18–45). The alphas reported below are derived from analyses with samples combined.

Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions or a control condition. The experimental conditions crossed applicant gender with parental status. Participants in the control condition made judgments about the ideal worker.

Participants in every experimental condition received a binder containing a short introduction to the study, a description of the job for which the applicant was applying, and the job applicant's résumé. Participants read that they would evaluate an applicant seeking an entry-level position as an attorney. The position described was an actual job posting for an immigration law attorney whose responsibilities

involved conducting research for the U.S. Customs Service. All participants reviewed the same résumé (that of a law student about to complete his or her degree with some work experience in a legal setting), except that half received a résumé with a male name (Kenneth Anderson) and half received a résumé with a female name (Katherine Anderson). The names Kenneth and Katherine were chosen because they convey a nonspecific age (Kasof, 1993) and roughly equal intellectual competence (Mehrabian, 1990; J. Kasof, personal communication, January 19, 2001). In addition, half of the résumés identified the applicant as single and having no children; the other half of the résumés identified the applicant as married and having two young children. The purpose of the control condition was to assess whether judgments of mothers or fathers differ from judgments of the ideal worker. Participants in the control condition (hereafter referred to as the “ideal worker” condition) received an introduction to the study and the job description. The introduction described their task as reading a job description and making some judgments about what the *ideal* applicant for the position would look like. All participants completed the dependent measures after reviewing the materials. All were probed for suspicion about the true purpose of the study and debriefed before being excused.

Dependent Measures

Attributes of the applicant. One set of dependent measures assessed participants' impressions of the applicant's competence, commitment to the job, availability on the job, agency, and warmth. Participants in the experimental conditions judged how competent the applicant would be if offered the job. They judged how the applicant would perform compared to all others in the position (i.e., applicant would perform better than X% of all others), the applicant's rank relative to all other employees, the percentage of work responsibilities the applicant would competently perform, and what letter grade the applicant would earn. These four items were standardized and combined to form an impressions index ($\alpha = .72$). Participants in the *ideal worker* condition indicated the level of performance they would expect of “an employee” in this position. Participants in all conditions also indicated how committed to the firm they expected the applicant (or the ideal worker) to be (i.e., more committed than X% of all other attorneys).

Because mothers are assumed to take more time off than fathers to care for children, we assessed participants' expectations regarding the applicant's likely availability on the job. Participants in the experimental conditions indicated the number of hours per week they expected the applicant would be able to work (including time at the office and at home), the number of sick days per month they expected the applicant would take (reverse scored), and the number of times per

month they expected the applicant would arrive late or leave early (reverse scored). These five items were standardized and combined to form a predicted availability index ($\alpha = .68$). These items were not included in the ideal worker condition.

Trait judgments were included to assess perceptions of the applicant's agency and warmth. Participants indicated the extent to which each trait was true of the applicant on a 9-point scale (endpoints labeled "not at all true" and "very true"). The traits aggressive, competitive, dominant, independent, intelligent, self-confident, trustworthy, hard-working, irresponsible (R), and unreliable (R) were averaged to form the agentic index ($\alpha = .70$). The traits helpful, warm, kind, understanding, aware of others' feelings, unlikeable (R), unfriendly (R), and narrow-minded (R) were averaged to form the warmth index ($\alpha = .77$). Participants in the ideal worker condition indicated the importance of each of the above traits for the ideal worker.

Decisions regarding the applicant. A second set of dependent measures assessed the standards participants set for hiring the applicant, whether they would hire the applicant, and whether the applicant would make a good candidate for promotion. Regarding standards, participants in the experimental conditions indicated what level of performance they would require of the applicant in order to hire him or her for the position. They indicated the percentile ranking the applicant would need on a general standardized ability test, the percentile ranking the applicant would need on three letters of recommendation, and estimated scores (in % correct) the applicant would need on standardized tests of the following skills: decision making, interpersonal relations, leadership, monitoring, motivation, oral communication, problem solving, planning, and seeking/accepting advice. These eleven items were submitted to a principle components analysis. Six items (ability test score, monitoring, motivation, planning, seeking/accepting advice, and recommendation scores) were retained. These items were standardized and combined to form the performance standards index ($\alpha = .84$).

To parallel the items measuring participants' expectations regarding the applicant's likely availability on the job, a similar set of items assessed participants' standards regarding the time commitment they would require of the applicant before hiring. Participants indicated the number of hours per week the applicant would need to be available to work, as well as the maximum number of days per month the applicant would be allowed to call in sick (reverse scored) and arrive late or leave early (reverse scored) in order to be hired. Five items were standardized and combined to form the time commitment standards index ($\alpha = .56$). Participants in the "ideal worker" condition indicated the standards they would set for "a candidate." Lastly, participants in the experimental conditions indicated whether they would hire the applicant, and whether the individual would make a good candidate for promotion.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

The job of immigration law attorney was perceived as more masculine ($M = 3.99$) than feminine ($M = 3.40$; using two 7-point scales; $t(192) = 6.50, p < .0001$). These ratings were not affected by sample, participant gender, or any manipulation (all $ps > .22$). Also, the job of immigration law attorney was perceived as relatively high in status overall ($M = 5.38, 7$ -point scale).

We first tested whether sample (Midwestern or Eastern) affected any dependent measures. We conducted Applicant Gender X Parental Status X Participant Gender between-subjects ANOVAs adding sample as a variable. Sample did not interact with any independent variable on measures tapping attributes of the applicant or standards set for hiring. However, sample did affect perceptions of job status, hiring, and promotion decisions. An analysis of job status revealed a Sample X Parental status interaction $F(1, 148) = 7.47, p < .01$. Participants in the Midwestern sample perceived the job as higher in status when the applicant was a non-parent ($M = 5.62, SD = .88$) than a parent ($M = 5.28, SD = 1.18$). In contrast, participants in the Eastern sample perceived the job as higher in status when the applicant was a parent ($M = 5.62, SD = .92$) than a non-parent ($M = 4.91, SD = .97$); To test whether these differences in perceived status affected any other dependent measures, we covaried out the effect of status on all analyses. These ANCOVAs did not alter any of the reported findings. Main effects of sample also emerged on the hiring and promotion decisions: Participants in the Eastern sample were more likely to hire and promote the applicant than participants in the Midwestern sample. However, this tendency did not interact with applicant gender, parental status, or participant gender. Because sample did not interact with any of our manipulations on the main dependent measures, we elected to combine samples in all subsequent analyses.

For the main part of the data analyses, we first ignored the ideal worker condition to use a full factorial design, using Applicant Gender X Parental Status X Participant Gender between-subjects ANOVAs. For those measures also assessed in the ideal worker condition, we then computed one-way ANOVAs (with five levels of the condition variable) followed by post-hoc tests comparing the *ideal* mean to those of the other conditions. When indexes were based on standardized variables, the *ideal* condition was included in the standardization process.

Attributes of the Applicant

Impressions. Analysis of the index tapping overall impressions of the applicant's competence revealed no significant effects. There was no evidence that

parents or mothers, in particular, were expected to perform worse on the job than non-parents or the ideal worker.

Degree of commitment. Judgments of the applicant's job commitment were affected by the Parental Status main manipulation, $F(1, 155) = 4.13, p < .05$. Parents ($M = 72.99, SD = 19.49$) were perceived as less committed than non-parents ($M = 79.04, SD = 13.03$). The only other effect was an Applicant Gender X Participant Gender interaction, $F(1, 155) = 5.15, p < .03$. This pattern suggested outgroup favoritism: Female participants rated the male applicant as more committed than the female applicant; the opposite was true for male participants.

The one-way ANOVA that included the ideal worker condition (5 levels of condition) was only marginally significant, $F(4, 190) = 2.28, p = .06$. Both parent Katherine ($M = 73.16, SD = 17.57$) and parent Kenneth ($M = 72.83, SD = 21.29$) were perceived as less committed than the ideal worker ($M = 81.61, SD = 13.44$), $ps < .04$.

Predicted availability. Analysis of the index assessing participants' judgments regarding the applicant's likely availability on the job (predictions regarding number of hours worked per week, [in]frequency of leaving early and taking sick days) revealed two main effects: Parents ($M = -.24, SD = .62$) were predicted to be less available than non-parents ($M = .23, SD = .63$), $F(1, 156) = 22.40, p < .0001$, and female participants viewed candidates as less available ($M = -.05, SD = .70$) than male participants ($M = .10, SD = .61$), $F(1, 156) = 6.01, p < .02$. There were no effects for applicant gender.

Agency and warmth. The index based on the agentic traits was affected only by the Parental Status manipulation, $F(1, 156) = 5.53, p < .02$. Parents ($M = 6.98, SD = .95$) were judged to be less agentic than non-parents ($M = 7.26, SD = .68$) and the ideal worker ($M = 7.57, SD = .71$), $ps < .01$. Warmth ratings, however, were unaffected by the manipulations and did not differ from the ideal.

Decisions Regarding the Applicant

Performance standards. The analysis of the six-item index assessing the performance standards the applicant would need to meet to be hired revealed only an Applicant Gender X Parental Status interaction, $F(1, 156) = 6.33, p < .02$. As indicated in the top panel of Table 1, when the applicant was a parent, standards were higher for Katherine than for Kenneth, $p < .01$, but there was no gender difference in standards for non-parents. Simple effects tests also indicated that Kenneth was held to a significantly lower standard when he was a parent than when not a parent, $p < .01$. In short, standards were particularly low for the male parent relative to both the female parent and the male non-parent. The one-way ANOVA that included the ideal worker condition was significant, $F(4, 191) = 3.04, p < .02$. Post-hoc

Table 1. Performance and Time Commitment Standards for Hiring, Applicant Gender X Parental Status Interaction

	Female Applicant	Male Applicant
Performance standards for hiring		
Non-parent	-.06 (.65)	.15 (.67) ^a
Parent	.13 (.72) ^b	-.32 (.93) ^{ab}
Time commitment standards for hiring		
Non-parent	-.02 (.57)	.18 (.55) ^a
Parent	.06 (.40)	-.20 (.73) ^a

Note. Means reflect standardized values; higher numbers indicate the setting of a stricter standard. Standard deviations are in parentheses. Means with matching superscripts differed significantly from each other. Performance standards for ideal worker, $M = .12$ ($SD = .65$). Time commitment standards for ideal worker, $M = -.01$ ($SD = .69$).

tests indicated that the only mean that differed significantly from the ideal worker condition was the Kenneth/parent condition; standards for the father were lower than the ideal ($p < .02$).

Time commitment standards. The index assessing the time commitment the applicant would need to meet to be hired also produced an Applicant Gender X Parental Status interaction, $F(1, 156) = 6.66$, $p < .02$ (see bottom panel of Table 1). Consistent with findings for performance standards, there were no gender differences in time commitment standards for non-parents. Again, Kenneth was held to a significantly lower standard when he was a parent than when not a parent, $p < .01$. No means differed from the ideal worker condition.

Hiring and promotion. Hiring and promotion decisions were tapped with simple yes-no responses. These were recoded as no = 0 and yes = 1 to reflect proportions of affirmative decisions. These proportions were then arcsine-transformed and submitted to the factorial ANOVA. For hiring, there was only a marginally significant Parental Status X Applicant Gender interaction, $F(1, 156) = 3.09$, $p < .09$. Parenthood did not harm Kenneth's chances of being hired (untransformed $M_{\text{parent}} = .88$, $M_{\text{non-parent}} = .86$), though it had a detrimental effect on Katherine's chances ($M_{\text{parent}} = .98$, $M_{\text{non-parent}} = .76$). Analysis of the item assessing whether the individual would make a good candidate for promotion revealed a significant Parental Status X Applicant Gender interaction, $F(1, 155) = 4.04$, $p < .05$ (see Table 2). When the applicant was male, parental status made no difference in

Table 2. Promotion Rates, Applicant Gender X Parental Status Interaction

	Female Applicant	Male Applicant
Non-parent	97.67 (15.24) ^a	87.80 (33.13)
Parent	78.95 (41.31) ^a	87.80 (33.13)

Note. Range = 0–100; higher numbers indicate greater likelihood of promotion. Standard deviations are in parentheses. Means with matching superscripts differed significantly from each other.

Table 3. Correlations Between Hiring and Other Variables, Separately for Each Type of Target

	Female Non-Parent	Female Parent	Male Non-Parent	Male Parent
Attributes of the applicant				
Impressions	.10	.74*	.14	.36*
Predicted availability	.07	.23	.19	.06
Commitment	.13	.46*	.32*	.38*
Agency	-.05	.46*	.33*	.66*
Warmth	-.22	.03	.02	.30*
Standards set for hiring the applicant				
Performance standards	-.04	.13	-.05	.04
Time commitment standards	.07	.06	.11	-.31*

Notes: *N*s range from 38–43 for each correlation.

**p* < .05

promotion rates. However, when the applicant was female, she was significantly less likely to be promoted when a parent than when not a parent, *p* < .02.

Correlations

We were particularly interested in which dependent measures predicted whether the applicant was hired. To address this question, we ran a series of correlation analyses separately for each of the four targets (male and female parent and non-parent). As can be seen in Table 3, favorable impressions of the applicant strongly predicted hiring of the female parent (and, to a lesser extent, the male parent). Though parents were perceived as less available on the job than non-parents, predicted availability was not reliably associated with hiring decisions for any target. However, commitment to the job was positively correlated with hiring decisions for both parent targets, though parents were perceived as less committed than non-parents. An interesting pattern of results emerged for correlations with agency and warmth. Though parents were judged less agentic than non-parents, to the extent parents were perceived as agentic, hiring occurred. Warmth was negatively related to hiring the female non-parent but positively related to hiring the male parent. That is, the male parent was hired to the extent that he was agentic *and* (to a lesser extent) warm, the female parent was hired to the extent that she was agentic (but was unhelped by the perception of warmth), and the female non-parent was harmed by the perception of warmth (and unhelped by the perception of agency).

Though we anticipated that high standards would produce less favorable evaluations, both performance and time commitment standards were largely unrelated to hiring. The one exception is the relationship between time commitment standards and hiring for the male parent. The male parent was held to the lowest time commitment standards of the four targets (see bottom panel of Table 1). To the extent that the male parent was held to low standards, he tended to be hired.

Discussion

This research investigated how being a parent interacts with gender stereotypes to affect decisions regarding workplace competence. Parental status either acted alone or in concert with applicant gender to affect evaluations of applicant attributes, standards set for hiring, and hiring and promotion decisions. When these factors interacted, the resulting pattern indicated harshness toward mothers and lenience toward fathers. A male job applicant was held to significantly lower performance and time commitment standards when he was a parent than when he was not a parent. The male parent was also held to more lenient performance standards than the female parent. In contrast, a female applicant tended to be held to somewhat *higher* standards when she was a parent than not a parent. In particular, a female parent was judged less likely to be hired and promoted than a female non-parent. On measures assessing attributes of the applicant, parental status alone affected judgments. Parents were regarded as less committed, less agentic, and as less available on the job than non-parents. In sum, parents were judged to be poorly suited to the workplace compared to non-parents, and mothers were disadvantaged relative to fathers.

Social Role Theory and the Shifting Standards Model

These results suggest that social role theory and the shifting standards model are both valuable approaches to explaining perceptions of mothers and fathers in the workplace. To reiterate, social role theory posits that gender stereotypes reflect men's and women's distribution into different social roles: Stereotypes of men's greater agency reflect their traditional role as breadwinner, and stereotypes of women's greater communion reflect their traditional role as caregiver. As social roles change, so too will stereotypes. Thus, a woman employed in a traditionally masculine job—such as that of immigration law attorney—should be judged equally agentic compared to an employed man and as more agentic than an unemployed woman or man (Eagly & Steffen, 1984, 1986).

The main effects of parental status revealed in our research support social role theory. That judgments of commitment, agency, and job availability were affected only by parental status (and not applicant gender) suggests that parent role overrode gender stereotypes in participants' judgments: Any gender stereotypes participants may have held regarding these job-related attributes were subsumed under the social role of parenthood. Thus, expectations about parents' employment suitability were more potent than gender stereotypes on these measures.

Where decisions regarding the applicant were concerned (e.g., standard setting, promotions), both gender stereotypes and parental role affected judgments of job-related competence. On these measures, a job applicant's parenthood role

had a polarizing effect on gender stereotypes: Participants judged mothers harshly relative to fathers. These interactions between gender and parental status are consistent with the shifting standards model. The shifting standards model predicts that stereotypes prompt the setting of different standards for groups. In other words, when we judge others, we judge them relative to within-group standards. A woman's job-related competence is judged relative to expectations of competence for women in general, and a man's job-related competence is judged relative to expectations for men. In the workplace, parental status may exaggerate typical sex differences in competence judgments such that mothers will need to do more than fathers (i.e., meet higher standards) to prove their competence. Though we predicted that mothers would be held to stricter standards than women without children, our results showed that it was *fathers* who were held to more *lenient* standards than men without children. Though the polarizing effect of fatherhood is consistent with the shifting standards model, this pattern of results is not exactly as we had predicted.

The polarizing effect of parental status on judgments of mothers and fathers may reflect the fact that occupation roles conflict with parental roles for women but not men (Bridges & Etaugh, 1995; Etaugh & Folger, 1998). A full-time employed mother violates norms regarding the caretaker role, but an employed father embodies the provider role. Because mothers are more closely aligned than fathers with the parenthood role (Deaux, Winton, Crowley, & Lewis, 1985), observers may resolve women's role conflict by assuming that a mother's care-taking responsibilities take precedence over her job responsibilities. Thus, an employer may set strict standards for hiring mothers. Similarly, the relatively lenient standards set for fathers may reflect the congruence between a father's employment-seeking behavior and his role as provider. In addition, because fathers are assumed to be providers, they may be perceived as *needing the job more* than mothers.

The "Ideal" Worker

As suggested earlier, many of the traits deemed necessary for being a good mother are contrary to those needed to be successful in the workplace (Halpert et al., 1993; Schein, 2001). We thus anticipated that mothers would be judged particularly harshly relative to the ideal worker. Participants in the ideal worker condition were given only a job description and asked to indicate how well the ideal worker would perform on the job if hired, and how committed to the job the ideal worker would be, and the standards the ideal worker would need to meet in order to be hired. Though both parents tended to be judged as less committed than the ideal worker ($p = .06$), only the male parent benefited by being held to *lower* performance standards than the ideal worker.

Limitations and Future Directions

With the exception of time commitment standards and hiring of the male parent, the standards participants set for hiring were uncorrelated with their actual hiring decisions (r s ranged from $-.05$ to $.11$; see Table 3). One might expect that harsher standards would be associated with less favorable hiring and promotion decisions—to the extent that one holds an individual to higher standards, that individual should be less likely to meet those standards and, consequently, be less likely to be hired or promoted. That was clearly not the case here. In retrospect, our assessment of standards may not have been pure; that is, participants set standards after they had received all the applicant information. The perception that the applicant was qualified may have led participants to set high standards that the applicant had, in fact, obtained. Future research in which participants set standards before reviewing an applicant's credentials would help clarify the relationship between standards and decisions.

It is also noteworthy that applicant gender did not affect attribute judgments, standards, hiring, or promotion decisions for non-parents. That is, non-parent male and female targets received comparable evaluations, were held to similar standards for hiring, and were hired and promoted at equal rates. These results are inconsistent with earlier research showing that women are held to higher confirmatory standards (i.e., standards for inferring that one's competence reflects ability) than are men (Biernat & Fuegen, 2001; Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997). The absence of different standards for non-parents may be because the applicants were perceived as particularly well-qualified for the job. If this is the case, a replication in which the applicants' credentials are ambiguous may yield evidence of gender stereotyping of non-parents (see Dovidio & Gaertner, 2000, for evidence of race-based stereotyping when target credentials are ambiguous). The absence of gender effects among non-parents may also indicate that sexism is manifested in a more subtle fashion, as in judgments of mothers versus fathers.

In addition to varying the applicant's credentials, this research would profit from replications varying the sex-typing of the job. Because the job of immigration law attorney was perceived as more masculine than feminine, the perceived role conflict for employed mothers may have been accentuated. A job perceived as traditionally feminine (e.g., elementary school teacher) may attenuate perceptions of role conflict. Whether a mother is still held to stricter standards than a father when applying for a job where communal traits are thought important is a question worthy of research. Replications in which the applicant is an unmarried parent may also be informative. Our research confounds parenthood with marital status: the non-parent applicants are single, and the parent applicants are married. Studies independently varying parenthood and marital status would reveal whether it is parenthood—rather than marriage—that polarizes judgment of men and women. Evidence that an unmarried mother is evaluated more negatively than a married non-parent woman

would lend credence to the idea that the parental role rather than the marital role influence judgments of men's and women's job-related competence.

The research described here examines perceptions of women who have already become mothers—of two children. There is some concern that two children (rather than one) may truly signal a woman's lack of commitment to her job (Crittenden, 2001). Thus the effects we noted here may not be as extreme among potential employees with one child. At the same time, other research has documented that women about to assume the motherhood role are negatively stereotyped in the workplace. Pregnant women are less likely than non-pregnant women to be hired (Bragger, Kutcher, Morgan, & Firth, 2002), the performance of pregnant employees is evaluated more negatively than that of non-pregnant employees (Halpert et al., 1993), and individuals are less satisfied with pregnant managers than non-pregnant managers (Corse, 1990). This research suggests that the mere anticipation that a woman will adopt the motherhood role is sufficient to elicit negative work-related evaluations.

Because the findings presented here are based on college students' perceptions of employed mothers and fathers, conducting replications with older, employed samples is important. Participants who are parents and who have workplace experience may possess fewer negative stereotypes of employed mothers (Etaugh & Moss, 2001). For example, participants in our Eastern sample were older and more likely to be employed than participants in our Midwestern sample, and the former perceived the job as higher in status when sought by a parent than a non-parent. However, the fact that these two samples did not differ reliably in the standards they set for parents or in the manner in which gender and parental status affected hiring and promotion decisions suggests that older employed persons are not immune to the biases against mothers in the workplace. Results gathered from younger samples also permit a glance into what the future may be like. Both men and women—many of whom are not yet in the workforce—anticipate that motherhood will have a detrimental effect on women's career opportunities but an enhancing effect on men's opportunities.

Finally, it is interesting to consider the present results in light of Burgess and Borgida's (1999) analysis of descriptive versus prescriptive stereotyping. According to their analysis, descriptive stereotypes (which refer to the characteristics men and women are believed to have) are most likely to influence discrimination in hiring (i.e., disparate impact judgments). Prescriptive stereotypes are more normative, referring to characteristics and behaviors that women and men are expected to adopt. Burgess and Borgida (1999) argue that prescriptive stereotypes are more likely to operate in the case of discriminatory treatment on the job, where women are seen to violate the norms of what women should do. It seems likely that beliefs about parental roles contain both types of stereotypes. On the one hand, the close affinity between stereotypes of woman and mother suggests that descriptive stereotypes might well influence judgments of hiring suitability and goodness of

fit for women who are married. (Our data also suggest that descriptive stereotypes of parents as opposed to non-parent persons also affect hiring recommendations.) At the same time, normative beliefs about what mothers and fathers should do seem likely to influence on-the-job judgments and could result in stronger differences than we have observed here for hiring decisions. Clearly, it would be useful for future research to explore these different stages of employment decisions.

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