

RESEARCH

Motherhood in the Workplace: A Sociological Exploration into the Negative Performance Standards and Evaluations of Full-Time Working Mothers

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This research, entitled "Motherhood in the Workplace: A Sociological Exploration into the Negative Performance Standards and Evaluations of Full-Time Working Mothers," examines the conscious and unconscious presumptions that are made regarding pregnancy, and, by extension, women and motherhood in the workplace. These presumptions, colloquially coined as "motherhood penalties" lead to biases about a woman's commitment to her occupation and the workplace as a whole. The penalties—whether they be immediate financial repercussions or distant career stagnation—are placed onto a woman's presumed responsibilities beyond her present occupation. They perpetuate negative judgments as well as different, and often unfair, standards that a woman must achieve for professional success.

For women, it is historically perceived that being "inside the home" is prioritized primarily and being "outside the home" is prioritized secondarily, producing the uncredited and unpaid "double burden" of responsibilities for today's full-time working mothers. Utilizing a theoretical framework of the status characteristics theory, the cultural tension between an "ideal worker" versus a "good mother," as well as the second shift theory, this research seeks to sociologically examine the implicit and explicit devaluation of motherhood in the workplace. The extensive, lifelong, and generational repercussions contribute to the larger interlocking structures of sexism, burdening working women, and by extension, penalizing contemporary womanhood. These conclusions can meaningfully add to a broader understanding of the gendered social barriers imposed on working women, and thus inform the meaningful cultural changes needed for a more equal and equitable labor workforce.

Keywords: Motherhood penalty; employment; workplace; inequity; gender

In the domain of employment, conscious and unconscious presumptions are made regarding the nature of pregnancy and by extension about women and motherhood. These presumptions, colloquially coined as "motherhood penalties," lead to biases about a woman's commitment to her individual occupation and the workplace as a whole. Whether it be immediate financial repercussions or future career stagnation, there are a range of unconscious and conscious penalties placed onto a woman's presumed responsibilities beyond her present occupation. These consequences, which contribute to the systemic structure of sexism, burden all working women and, by extension, penalize womanhood.

The realm of preconceptions about motherhood can have a multitude of adverse, rippling effects onto a woman's short and long-term career (Ali). The perception of pregnancy—or even the possibility of a future pregnancy—can influence the trajectory of her initial hiring and prospective employment. For example, in the landmark federal case *Back v. Hasting on Hudson Union Free School District* in April of 2004, a ruling was made concerning pregnancy discrimination in the workplace. Winning the lawsuit, Elana Back, an employee of the school, disputed that the school's decision not to grant her tenure following her three-month parental leave was due to her employer's assumption that she would not succeed in her position while being a mother of young children. Furthermore, once the woman has been hired, this motherhood penalty can continue to perpetuate negative consequences on her long-term career. A recent study concluded that employed mothers had a lower recommended starting salary and suffered a 'per-child wage penalty' of approximately 5% on average (Correll 1297). Even after adjusting for common variables that influence wages (like human capital and occupational factors), the pay gap between mothers and non-mothers was measured to be larger than the pay gap between men and women. But these disadvantages are not exclusively restricted to wages, pay, or salary.

There are additional evaluative repercussions that tend to be founded upon premature assessments of a woman's general capabilities, competency, and capacity to succeed as a female presenting and/or identifying individual of child-bearing age. A recent study concluded that by even being distinguished as mothers, the employees were evaluated as less competent and poorly motivated to succeed than when described as not having any children. Women who were described as having children or who were visibly pregnant were judged as "less committed to their jobs, less dependable, less authoritative, but warmer, more emotional, and more irrational" than women who were not (Correll 1298). In the workplace, a woman's parental status—or even the perception of one—can lead to discrimination and disparities in hiring, promotion, and salary decisions.

In workplace performance expectations and evaluations, motherhood is a "status characteristic." Defined by the theory of the same name, a status characteristic is a "categorical distinction among people such as a personal attribute (e.g., race, gender) or a role (e.g., motherhood, manager), that has attached to it widely held beliefs in the culture that associate greater status worthiness and competence with one category of the distinction than with others" (Correll 1301). This individual attribute becomes noticeable when it either visibly differentiates those in the same setting or it is perceived as directly relevant to the completion of the task at hand. In essence, the status characteristics theory details that there are stricter ability standards for those with a devalued status characteristic. Those with a devalued status characteristic, as stated by the theory, are designated and described as "lower-status actors." Good performances conflict with the expectations for a lower-status actor; when "lower-status actors perform well at a task, their performances are critically scrutinized" (Correll 1302). In comparison, good performances do not conflict with the expectations for a higher-status actor; so, when "higher-status actors perform equally as well, their performances are consistent with expectations and are therefore less scrutinized" (Correll 1302). Generally, if motherhood is a devalued status characteristic in a workplace setting, mothers are judged by a harsher standard in which to work, and ultimately to succeed, than non-mothers.

Becoming a mother, or taking on the mother role, does not literally affect an individual woman's intrinsic competencies or capabilities. However, contemporary cultural attitudes reinforce the opposite: societal beliefs associate motherhood with a lessening of capacity. "Work devotion" and "family devotion" are conceived of as conflicting and incompatible with one another. The "ideal worker" is defined and characterized as an employee that works at least forty hours a week year-round and demonstrates commitment by forfeiting all other responsibilities outside of work. An example would be one's willingness to devote intensive and extensive hours to "face time" at work. While it has been proved that "face time" is not necessarily associated with actual performance or productivity, it "functions as a cultural sign of the effort component of performance capacity in the contemporary organization of work" (Correll 1306). The "good mother" functions similarly. There is a normative expectation for mothers to prioritize the needs of their dependent children above other responsibilities, supposing that they can, will, and more importantly, should, engage in an "intensive" mothering without any regard for limits or restrictions. The norm that mothers should always "be on call" for their children and the norm that workers should "always be there" for the employer, while similar in the prioritization of responsibilities, cannot coincide with each other. In essence, the cultural role of a mother is placed in opposition to the cultural role of a worker (Correll 1306, Williams 208).

There is cultural tension between the normative conceptions of the "ideal worker," which embodies the role of a committed worker, and the "good mother," which embodies the role of a committed mother. This ideal-worker norm is "framed around the traditional life patterns of men because it excludes most mothers of childbearing age" (Williams 207). A recent study concluded this "catch-22" position that women are caught between: if women were the ideal workers, then they were viewed as irresponsible mothers; but if women conformed to the norm of maternal care, then they were condemned as bad or inefficient workers (Vitelli). The very presence of non-domestic involvement for mothers is often regarded as a violation of social norms for motherhood. A mother's occupational participation and accompanying contribution is regarded as a kind of negligence of and failure in the care of her children (Vitelli). The perception and existence of this family-work conflict is directly associated with the working mothers, and by extension, women. It is this perceived cultural tension between these two roles that suggests that motherhood is a devalued status in workplace settings.

These unfavorable attitudes towards a woman's overlapping and simultaneous responsibilities are not new. In a traditional two-partner household, child care obligations have predominantly been carried out by the woman. Women are socially expected to act as the primary caregiver for the child and/or children, and they have been largely responsible for a majority of household duties. And historically, because a woman's role has been inside the home, her engagement outside the house is often regarded as extraneous and unnecessary. Joan Riviere, in her paper titled "Womanliness as a Masquerade" asserted that it is considered for women's "complete feminine development" to be "excellent wives and mothers, [and] capable housewives" (146). But, fulfilling perhaps more 'masculine' interests (such as the duties of a profession) can be done and performed "at the same time" (146). For women, non-domestic work is othered (Saunders 568). It is supplementary and secondary to her primary female and feminine occupation.

This sense of household obligations continues to be the persistent reality for full-time working mothers. Even in instances where women work more hours or longer hours than their male counterparts, the domestic expectation (of childcare, or household duties, or both) still remains. And as a result, to perform and fulfill the principal role of domestic

duties in addition to shouldering personal career responsibilities, working mothers tend to experience a variety of family-related career interruptions (Parker). Naeima Al-Hadad, in her debut book entitled *Working Women and their Rights in the Workplace: International Human Rights* emphasizes that the present household duties directly impact and influence a woman's "access (career initiation), maintenance and promotion (where the higher the level of responsibility, the lower the proportion of women may be found)" (190). Al-Hadad continues, stating that, in general, "the higher the level of responsibility at home, the lower is the workplace participation by women; and no matter her level of education or workload outside the home, a woman shoulders 'the lion's share' of the household duties" (Al-Hadad 190). Working mothers—by being physically and figuratively "inside" and "outside" the home—embody the overlap of domestic and non-domestic spheres.

The combined burden of domestic labor and non-domestic labor is a reality for many full-time working women. This established phenomenon has been coined as a "double burden" to characterize the gendered division of labor between men and women. Women who are employed as paid, non-domestic labor often are also responsible for unpaid, domestic labor at home. This portrayal of the "second shift" for women originated from Arlie Hochschild's book of the same name (Schulte). Historically, traditional gender ideologies—that situate men "outside the home" and women "inside the home"—have constructed and continued to perpetuate restrictive attitudes towards public and private labor. Betty Friedan asserts in the chapter "The Problem That Has No Name" from her book *The Feminine Mystique* that in order to achieve a kind of "feminine fulfillment," women should not want to be "poets or physicists or presidents" or, more generally, not want to have "careers, higher education, [or] political rights" (172). With this historical trajectory, it is not so much of a stretch to consider occupations with preferences for "masculine" characteristics.

In the workplace, these notions of gender roles perpetuate negative judgments as well as different, and often unfair, measures to which a woman can, and have the ability to, achieve success. The standards of performance for women, especially working mothers, are strict, and at times nearly impossible to uphold. The conscious and unconscious negative evaluations of those taking on the role of motherhood is a part of a systematic structure that produces significant inequalities in the workplace. For women, it is perceived that being "inside the home" is prioritized primarily and being "outside the home" is prioritized secondarily, which brings about a "double burden" for full-time working mothers. Considering a theoretical comprehension of the status characteristics theory, the underlying cultural tension between a "good mother" and an "ideal worker," as well as the second shift theory, there is an explicit devaluation of motherhood in the workplace. These conclusions can add to the broader understanding of the social barriers imposed on working women that lead to the perpetuation of gendered inequalities in the workplace, and thus inform the meaningful cultural changes needed for a more equal and equitable labor workforce.

Competing Interests

The author, Michelle Corinaldi, sits on the editorial board of *Philologia* as managing editor and served as an associate editor last year.

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How to cite this article: Corinaldi, Michelle. "Motherhood in the Workplace: A Sociological Exploration into the Negative Performance Standards and Evaluations of Full-Time Working Mothers." *Philologia* 11, no. 1 (2019): pp. 12–16. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21061/ph.172>

Submitted: 01 April 2019

Accepted: 01 April 2019

Published: 30 April 2019

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