



## FlashReport

Should I stay or should I go? Implications of maternity leave choice for perceptions of working mothers<sup>☆</sup>Thekla Morgenroth<sup>a,\*</sup>, Madeline E. Heilman<sup>b</sup><sup>a</sup> University of Exeter, Washington Singer Laboratories, Perry Road, Exeter EX4 4QG, UK<sup>b</sup> New York University, Department of Psychology, 6 Washington Place, New York, NY 10003, USA

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## ABSTRACT

Working mothers often find themselves in a difficult situation when trying to balance work and family responsibilities and to manage expectations about their work and parental effectiveness. Family-friendly policies such as maternity leave have been introduced to address this issue. But how are women who then make the decision to go or not go on maternity leave evaluated? We presented 296 employed participants with information about a woman who made the decision to take maternity leave or not, or about a control target for whom this decision was not relevant, and asked them to evaluate her both in the work and the family domain. We found that both decisions had negative consequences, albeit in different domains. While the woman taking maternity leave was evaluated more negatively in the work domain, the woman deciding against maternity leave was evaluated more negatively in the family domain. These evaluations were mediated by perceptions of work/family commitment priorities. We conclude that while it is important to introduce policies that enable parents to reconcile family and work demands, decisions about whether to take advantage of these policies can have unintended consequences – consequences that can complicate women's efforts to balance work and childcare responsibilities.

## 1. Introduction

Women still shoulder disproportionate amounts of childcare responsibilities (Craig & Mullan, 2010) and, as a result, many women feel that they have to choose between having a successful career and having a family. This is reflected both in the number of qualified women who decide against having children (Mason & Goulden, 2002), and the fact that women disproportionately give up their careers once they start a family (Hewlett & Luce, 2005). There have been efforts to address this issue by introducing family-friendly policies such as maternity leave. Most Western countries require organizations to offer paid maternity leave, and more and more organizations in the US – where paid maternity leave is not mandatory – are introducing such policies.

As maternity leave policies become more prevalent, it is critical to ask what consequences they will have for those who are meant to benefit from them. It is important to consider not only the effects of the leave itself, but also the effects of the choice about whether to take it.

Whatever choice the working mother makes, she is vulnerable to the negative effects of gender stereotypes. Gender stereotypes depict women as relationship-oriented and concerned about others, not

career-oriented and concerned about achievement, with the result that they are seen as less competent and committed to work than men (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001). Motherhood makes gender stereotypes highly salient, and therefore is likely to intensify these views of women and amplify their negative consequences. Research has indeed shown that parenthood is more detrimental for working mothers not only than their male counterparts (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007), but also than their childless female counterparts (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008).

These findings give reason for concern. If a woman decides to take maternity leave, her motherhood status is likely to be further highlighted, reinforcing the belief that, for her, family takes precedence over work. In turn, the stereotype-based negativity directed at mothers in work settings is likely to be exacerbated, with perceptions of her competence and worthiness of rewards suffering as a consequence.

But how about the choice not to take maternity leave? The detrimental effects of being a working mother also occur in the family domain. Gender stereotypes are prescriptive as well as descriptive, and give rise to norms about the appropriate behavior for women and men (Heilman, 2012; Rudman & Glick, 2001). When it comes to work and

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family, the “should” for women is that the family comes first (Cotter, Hermsen, & Vanneman, 2011). Pursuing a career while being a mother is a potential violation of this norm, and can give rise to perceptions of misplaced priorities and impaired adequacy as a parent and long-term partner (Okimoto & Heilman, 2012).

The decision not to take maternity leave is apt to worsen this problem because it is a blatant demonstration of this gender norm violation. Refusing to stay home with one's child when maternity leave is offered is likely to leave little question that working mothers have their priorities wrong and to fuel the view of them as “bad parents” and undesirable partners.

In this study we present participants with information about a woman who has either chosen to take maternity leave or has decided against it, and examine how these decisions affect how she is evaluated in the work and family domain. We also include a control condition of working mothers for whom maternity leave is not currently an issue. Faced with the decision to take or not take maternity leave, we expect women to find themselves between a rock and a hard place:

**H1.** Mothers who take maternity leave will be viewed as prioritizing family over work, and mothers who do not take maternity leave will be viewed as prioritizing work over family, to a higher extent than women making the alternative choice or women not faced with a maternity leave choice.

**H2.** Mothers who take maternity leave will be seen as less competent at their jobs and less worthy of organizational rewards than mothers who do not take maternity leave or women not faced with this choice.

**H3.** Mothers who do not take maternity leave will be seen as less competent parents and less desirable partners than mothers who take maternity leave or women not faced with this choice.

**H4.** Perceived work/family commitment priority will mediate the effects of choices to take or not take maternity leave.

## 2. Method

We report all measures, manipulations and exclusion of participants, some of them in the online supplement.

### 2.1. Participants

Employed participants from English speaking countries were recruited via the Prolific Academic website. Data were collected in two waves within a three months period (see online supplement). The final sample consisted of 296 participants, 205 participants from the first and 91 participants from the second data collection wave. Participants included 137 women and 157 men, and were predominantly from the USA (148) and the UK (127). The majority of participants were working full-time (70%) and had no children (71%). The average age of participants was 33.32 years.<sup>1</sup>

### 2.2. Design and procedure

Participants were asked to form an impression of an employee based on an excerpt from an interview between the employee and an HR professional. Participants read one of three versions of the excerpted interview, which were identical except for a passage indicating the employee's decision regarding maternity leave; in a control condition, this passage was absent (see online supplement). The study was thus a 3 condition (Taking maternity leave vs. Not taking maternity leave vs. Control) between-participants design. Participants then completed a questionnaire, were

debriefed, and paid £0.90 or the equivalent in their currency.

### 2.3. Measures

Scales were constructed to measure perceptions of job commitment, family commitment, job competence, parental competence, and desirability as a partner. Each scale was composed of three statements to which participants rated their agreement on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). To measure worthiness of organizational rewards participants indicated the degree to which they would recommend a bonus, a salary increase, and a promotion on a 7-point scale. See Table 1 for all items and reliabilities.

To create a measure of perceived work/family commitment priority, we subtracted the job commitment rating from the family commitment rating. Positive values indicate degree of prioritizing family over work; negative values indicate degree of prioritizing work over family.

We included some additional exploratory measures in the first and second wave of data collection (see online supplement for further information).

## 3. Results

We conducted a series of one-way ANOVAs and LSD tests. Means, standard deviations and statistical test results appear in Table 2.

Preliminary analyses showed that there was no effects of gender, age, or parental status of the respondent (i.e., no main effects or interactions), and controlling for these variables did not alter the significance of our results. Data collection wave also did not affect results by itself or in interaction with condition.

### 3.1. Perceived commitment priority

As predicted, we found a significant effect of condition on perceived commitment priority. The target taking maternity leave was seen as prioritizing her family over work to a larger extent than the target not taking maternity leave and the control target, while the target not taking maternity leave was seen as prioritizing her work over family to a larger extent than the other two targets.

### 3.2. Job-related evaluations

We found only a marginally significant effect of condition on perceived job competence, but the pattern of the data was in line with predictions. The target choosing to take maternity leave was seen as significantly less competent than the target choosing not to take maternity leave and tended to be seen as less competent than the control target. In addition, there was a significant effect of condition on perceived worthiness of organizational rewards. As predicted, the target taking maternity leave was seen as less worthy of rewards than the target not taking maternity leave. However, there was no difference in ratings of the targets in the take maternity leave condition and the control condition; instead, the target not taking maternity leave was seen as more worthy of organizational rewards than the control target.

### 3.3. Family-related evaluations

Analyses revealed a significant effect for condition on both family-related evaluations. As predicted, the target not taking maternity leave was seen as a worse parent and less desirable partner than both the target taking maternity leave and the control target.

### 3.4. Does nationality affect the evaluations?

Taking advantage of our multi-national sample, we conducted a series of 2 (Taking maternity leave vs. Not taking maternity leave) × 2 (Nationality: US vs. non-US) ANOVAs to determine whether nationality

<sup>1</sup> There was no significant difference in the demographic composition of participants in the two data collection waves with the exception of age – participants in data collection wave 2 were approximately 3 years younger ( $p = 0.006$ ; see online supplement for more information).

**Table 1**  
Scales, items, and reliabilities.

Measure	Items	$\alpha$
Job commitment	This person is committed to his or her job This person is career-oriented	0.80
Family commitment	His or her job is not a high priority for this person (reversed) This person is committed to his or her family This person is family-oriented	0.90
Job competence	Family is not a high priority for this person (reversed) This person is probably good at his or her job This person has the qualities needed to succeed in his or her job	0.82
Parental competence	I don't think this person is good at his or her job This person is probably a good parent I would not want my children to be raised by someone like this person (reversed)	0.82
Partner desirability	I don't think this person is a good parent (reversed) This person is probably a good long-term partner I would like this person to be in a committed relationship with someone I care about	0.73
Worthiness of organizational rewards	I would not like to be in a committed relationship with someone like this person regardless of their gender (reversed) Bonus pay Salary increase Promotion	0.91

**Table 2**  
ANOVA and LSD-test results.

	Means and standard deviations			<i>Df</i>	<i>F</i>	Partial $\eta^2$
	Taking maternity leave condition	Not taking maternity leave condition	Control condition			
Commitment priority <sup>a</sup>	0.80 <sub>a</sub> (1.13)	− 1.88 <sub>b</sub> (1.85)	− 0.17 <sub>c</sub> (1.22)	2, 287	85.67***	0.08
Job competence	5.25 <sub>a</sub> (0.88)	5.56 <sub>b</sub> (1.00)	5.50 <sub>b</sub> <sup>†</sup> (1.02)	2, 290	2.37 <sup>†</sup>	0.02
Organizational rewards	4.24 <sub>a</sub> (1.18)	4.79 <sub>b</sub> (1.15)	4.41 <sub>a</sub> (1.23)	2, 293	5.43**	0.04
Parental competence	5.64 <sub>a</sub> (1.00)	4.68 <sub>b</sub> (1.27)	5.47 <sub>a</sub> (1.03)	2, 292	20.33***	0.12
Partner desirability	5.03 <sub>a</sub> (0.94)	4.56 <sub>b</sub> (1.20)	5.11 <sub>a</sub> (1.08)	2, 291	7.29***	0.05

Note. Values in brackets refer to standard deviations. Means in the same row that do not share subscripts differ at  $p < 0.05$  based on LSD tests.

\*  $p < 0.05$ .

<sup>†</sup>  $p < 0.10$ .

\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

\*\*\*  $p < 0.001$ .

<sup>a</sup> Positive values indicate prioritizing family over work and negative values indicate prioritizing work over family.

affected reactions to maternity leave choice.<sup>2</sup>

Results indicated a significant interaction between nationality and maternity leave choice for ratings of work/family commitment priority ( $F(1, 186) = 9.58, p = 0.002, \eta^2 = 0.05$ ), parental competence ( $F(1, 188) = 7.48, p = 0.007, \eta^2 = 0.04$ ) and partner desirability ( $F(1, 187) = 4.34, p = 0.039, \eta^2 = 0.02$ ). While the pattern of means was the same in both nationality samples participants from countries other than the US (compared to those from the US) saw the target not taking maternity leave as prioritizing work to a higher extent ( $p = 0.013$ ), and gave her more negative ratings of parental competence ( $p = 0.018$ ); they also rated the target taking maternity leave more positively in partner desirability ( $p = 0.047$ ) (see online supplement for descriptive statistics). Nationality and condition did not interact for evaluations of job competence or worthiness of rewards (both  $F < 1.08, p > 0.300$ ).

### 3.5. Mediation analyses

To test the mediating role of perceived work/family commitment priority (H4), we conducted mediation analyses using the procedure suggested by Hayes and Preacher (2014) for multi-categorical predictor variables. Condition served as the predictor with each of the two maternity leave choice conditions dummy coded and the control condition as the reference category. We then performed two mediation

<sup>2</sup> We chose to group all of the non-US sample together both because the small number of participants from most countries made separate analyses impossible, and because all of the non-US countries involved have similar maternity leave policies -policies that, unlike those in the US, are mandatory. Note that the results we report are the same regardless of whether we only include the largest non-US sample, the UK, as a comparison group or the UK combined with other non-US countries.

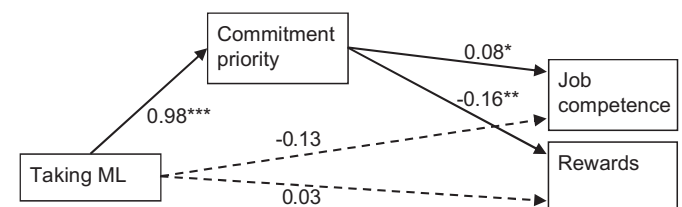
**Table 3**  
Bivariate correlations between all measures.

	1	2	3	4
1 Commitment priority <sup>a</sup>	–			
2 Job competence	− 0.17**	–		
3 Worthiness of rewards	− 0.26**	0.64**	–	
4 Parental competence	0.52**	0.48**	0.25**	–
5 Partner desirability	0.28**	0.56**	0.43**	0.67**

\*  $p < 0.05$ .

\*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

<sup>a</sup> Higher values indicate prioritizing family over work and lower values indicate prioritizing work over family.



**Fig. 1.** Mediation of the effects of the choice to take maternity leave on work-related evaluations. Note. ML = Maternity leave. Higher values in commitment priority indicate prioritizing family over work. Not taking ML is entered as a control variable. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

analyses, one with each dummy variable as the predictor (see Table 3 for correlations).

We expected perceptions of work/family commitment priority to

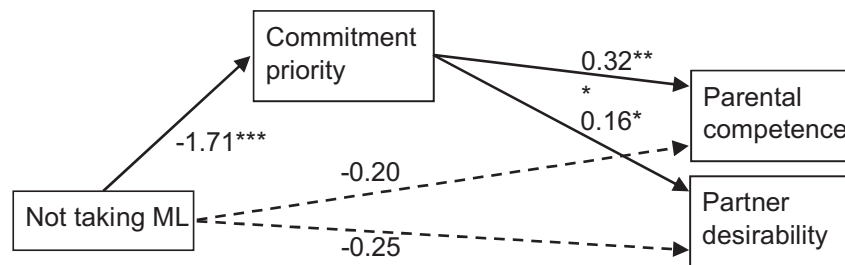


Fig. 2. Mediation of the effects of the choice not to take maternity leave on family-related evaluations. Note. ML = Maternity leave. Higher values in commitment priority indicate prioritizing family over work. Not taking ML is entered as a control variable. \* $p < 0.05$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ .

mediate the effects of the choice to take maternity leave on work-related evaluations and the effects of the choice not to take maternity leave on family-related evaluations. In support, the indirect effect of choosing to take maternity leave was significant in evaluations of both work competence ( $B = -0.08$ ; 95% CI  $[-0.18, -0.01]$ ) and worthiness of rewards ( $B = -0.15$ ; 95% CI  $[-0.28, -0.06]$ ). Also in support, the indirect effect of the choice not to take maternity leave was significant in evaluations of both parental competence ( $B = -0.55$ ; 95% CI  $[-0.79, -0.37]$ ) and partner desirability ( $B = -0.27$ ; 95% CI  $[-0.47, -0.12]$ ). The direct effect of maternity choice was not significant for any of the outcomes (see Figs. 1 and 2).

#### 4. Discussion

This study supports the idea that gender stereotypes, which dictate how women are and how they should be, can affect evaluations of women based on the decisions they make regarding maternity leave. Women who chose to take maternity leave were viewed as having work/family priorities that conformed to descriptive gender stereotypes and suffered in their work-related evaluations, and women who chose not to take maternity leave were viewed as having work/family priorities that violate prescriptive gender stereotypes and suffered in their family-related evaluations. Perceived work/family priority was found to mediate the occurrence of the negative outcomes in both the work and family domains. These effects occurred regardless of the respondent's gender, age, parental status, or nationality, attesting to their universality and pervasiveness in our culture.

It is interesting to note that our results were in line with our “damned if you do, damned if you don’t” argument: When compared with the control group, perceptions of competence, whether in the work or family domain, were never boosted, but only impaired, by the maternity leave decision. This pattern differed only for organizational rewards: it was the one instance in which a maternity leave decision had positive effects. In addition to its negative consequences for evaluations in the family domain, the counter-normative choice to not take maternity leave had a unique payoff for women.

Our analyses regarding participants' nationality revealed a consistent pattern of results, but responses were more extreme in the family-related evaluations in the non-US countries. This makes sense, given that the option of paid maternity leave is mandated by law in all of the non-US countries. In these situations, choosing not to take maternity leave is likely to be highly unusual, underscoring normative expectations about mothers' priorities. Further research should examine questions of typical practices around parental leave in greater detail.

This study raises other questions as well. Because our data are cross-sectional, the mediation results are in need of further investigation using longitudinal data or experimental manipulation of perceived work and family commitment. Moreover, assessing the effects of choice about family leave on perceptions of men is important for theoretical clarification of the effects we found here, particularly as research suggests that they may be punished more harshly for requesting family leave (Rudman & Mescher, 2013). Additionally, it is important to determine how working mothers themselves are affected by their

decisions regarding maternity leave. Finally, it is critical to test the effects of family leave choice in natural settings where the stakes are high and the hazards real.

What does this study tell us about our initial claim that working mothers find themselves between a rock and a hard place when maternity leave is offered? The results support that idea and imply that perceptions of work/family commitment priorities, and the extent to which they conform to stereotypic expectations, lie at the heart of these negative reactions. As these stereotypic expectations are deeply ingrained in our culture and shown to be stubbornly resistant to change (Haines, Deaux, & Lofaro, 2016), it seems unlikely that working mothers will escape this dilemma any time soon.

We conclude that while it is imperative to introduce policies that enable parents to reconcile family and work demands, we should be cognizant that the availability of these policies can inadvertently bring pressures of their own. Thus, as critical as family friendly policies may be in helping manage the demands working mothers face, the choice about whether to make use of them may be yet another consideration for women trying to balance their work and family lives.

#### Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2017.04.008>.

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