

Conversations with the Experts

The Motherhood Penalty



In Paik

Bio: In Paik is currently conducting her doctoral dissertation research in the sociology of gender, race, and higher education. She earned her B.A. in sociology at the University of Chicago and her M.A. in higher education policy and administration at Teachers College, Columbia University. She spent eight years working in student affairs, which included positions at Columbia University, the University of Michigan, Chapman University, Barnard College, and the Anti-Defamation League; and her experiences working in student leadership and organization development motivated her pursuit of a Ph.D. with a focus on gender and racial identity and their intersection, bias and discrimination mechanisms, and work and educational achievement. Her dissertation research examines the impact of graduate Ph.D. students' mentorship networks on their progress to degree, with an emphasis on the progress of women and people of color. Her work with Shelley Correll and Stephen Benard on the motherhood penalty and cognitive bias has appeared in the *American Journal of Sociology* (2007) and the *Hastings Law Journal* (2008).

An Interview with In Paik

by Julie Weber and Karen Corday

Weber: What is the “motherhood penalty” and how did you discover that such a penalty exists?

Paik: The motherhood penalty refers to the unequal treatment of mothers compared to childless women, childless men, and fathers in the workplace. This includes wages, promotions, performance evaluations, and notions of “hireability” in the job market as well as in workplaces. Past research revealed this penalty in several forms. For instance, employed mothers in the U.S. earn approximately 5 percent less wages per child, controlling for education and other workplace factors. Women who are presented as mothers in the workplace are considered less competent, albeit more likeable and approachable. There has also been research on pregnant women; pregnant women in the workplace were considered less committed to their job, less dependable, and less authoritative than their non-pregnant counterparts. We considered all of this research and decided to ask “Why?” Why does being a parent lead to disadvantages in the workplace for women and why wouldn't similar disadvantages occur for men?

In our project, we considered a status-based discrimination mechanism. The motherhood penalty occurs at least in part because cultural understandings of the motherhood role exist in conflict and tension with cultural understandings of what it is to be an ideal worker. This perceived tension between those two roles lead evaluators, perhaps unconsciously, to expect mothers to be less committed to their jobs. To the extent that mothers are perceived to be less committed, employers will subtly discriminate against them when making decisions about hiring and promoting individuals in the workplace.

We conducted two studies that were part of our overall study. The first was a laboratory experiment with paid student evaluators. The second was an audit study of actual employers. In both studies, we used the same materials; evaluators rated a pair of equally qualified job applicants who differed only by parental status. The lab experiment evaluated the hypothesis about status-based discrimination and its role in producing this motherhood penalty. The audit study of employers assessed its real world effects. The lab study found that mothers were penalized on a number of measures, including perceived competence, promotion potential, and recommended starting salary. Fathers were not penalized at all, and actually sometimes benefited from being a parent. The audit study did actually show that employers discriminate against mothers but not fathers.

Corday: How did you indicate that the applicant was a parent?

Paik: We weren't even sure that this manipulation would even have that great an effect! In the laboratory experiment, within the materials given to evaluators, the only indication was on the bottom of some resumes, we listed membership in a parent-teacher association under "community activities." It's also important to note that there were no gaps in the parents' resumes; all applicants had solid, uninterrupted work experience for seven to eight years. Also, in the HR memos included in the lab experiment packets, evaluators were given notes from the purported human resources staff, which for the parent stated that in a phone conversation, the applicant had mentioned two children. In the other applicant's information, she mentioned that she was married, but made no mention of children.

In the second study, the employers received, in my opinion, an even weaker manipulation. They received the same resumes, and there was a small difference between the two cover letters. The purported job applicants were both coming from a small metropolitan area to a much larger metropolitan area. The parent's cover letter stated that she was "relocating with [her] family" to the new city while the other cover letter just said "relocating" to said city." The type of family wasn't even specified!

Corday: Did both female and male "decision makers" in your studies reach similar conclusions about the value of mothers in the workplace versus other applicants?

Paik: Yes. In the laboratory experiment we found no significant differences between male and female evaluators' ratings of all the applicants. We wanted to see if men were discriminating against mothers more than women, but they weren't. This finding speaks to the pervasiveness of these cultural beliefs that we all have about what constitutes a good mom versus a good paid worker, and perhaps speaks to how unconscious these beliefs are.

In the second study, we were not able to get data on whether it was men or women collecting the information of purported applicants.

Weber: Why do you think parenthood enhances a father's value in the workplace?

Paik: Widely held beliefs within our culture might associate greater status and competence with fatherhood than with motherhood within the workplace setting. Cultural understandings of fatherhood and motherhood both evoke perceptions of warmth and caring, but the translation of that warmth and caring into the workplace setting differs by gender. Research has shown that women in the workplace exchange perceived competence for warmth and approachability when they become a mom. In contrast, it seems that fathers gain warmth and approachability without having to lose their perceived competence.

Corday: Do you think the current recession, in which men are losing the majority of jobs and women are, in many cases, the sole breadwinners in their families, will affect employers' perceptions of mothers' worth in the workplace?

Paik: If you consider pay to be a good reflection of one's worth in the workplace, you could say from an employer's point of view that perceptions have remained exactly the same. If an employer has to cut, say, 15 percent of the budget in the next quarter, he or she might cut those who don't necessarily do a ton more work than other workers but get paid more, and those workers are probably going to be men.

Weber: How does caregiver discrimination play into this phenomenon?

Paik: In terms of our study, we focused on motherhood as a stated characteristic. That relied on motherhood being a role or a status. Caregiver discrimination looks different in so many ways. Motherhood evokes a very specific, gendered image often located in a home. Caregiver discrimination is harder to characterize, and I haven't seen any research that pegs caregiving in general as a commonly understood role. This makes it harder to build specific policy aimed at caregiver discrimination, which makes it easier for employers to subtly discriminate.

Corday: What are some proactive steps that employers can take to fight this bias that leads to the motherhood penalty?

Paik: Our research speaks to the unconscious nature of this bias, so acknowledging the existence of this cognitive bias and making people conscious of it would be the first step in halting the discriminatory behavior that can result. A workforce that can enter into discussions about biases during the hiring or promoting process is ideal.

Weber: What are some proactive steps employers can take when implementing workplace work-family policies so that policies do not result in “mommy tracking” or derailing a career?

Paik: Although our study didn’t speak directly to this, it did speak to the pervasiveness of common understandings of motherhood. I often see flexible work and telework framed as responses or solutions for mothers at work. I believe that employers and employees would both benefit from approaching flexible work and telework as options for all types of employees regardless of parental status. The key is to avoid the framing of these options as “special arrangements” for working mothers. That will at least help avoid going down the road of mommy tracking or derailing.

Corday: What additional academic research would help us learn more about the motherhood penalty or ways to lessen or eradicate the penalty?

Paik: I know that there are other mechanisms being tested; I think Steve and Shelley are working on something related. Our study said “these applicants are entirely equal, except one is a mom and one is not,” which proved that motherhood is a status within the workplace. You could, and I think Steve and Shelley are doing this, present two applicants. One is outstanding and happens to be a mother; the other less so and there’s no mention of children. That kind of normative discrimination would believe “This applicant doesn’t belong in the workplace because she’s a mother. She ought not to be working and parenting at the same time.”

I’m personally interested in diversity training—educating ourselves about these biases. There’s not a lot about results of diversity training programs; they are, of course, hard to evaluate, but I’m curious about how to approach the problem of discrimination within the workplace. I think it has to be systemized; discrimination can’t be something someone just happens brings up on a search committee. It has to be part of the process, an initiative backed by the president down through human resources. It has to be an integral step in every search process. In the future, I’d like to examine how workplaces confront the discussion of bias in the first place.

Weber: State policy makers are working on caregiver discrimination. Do you think these initiatives will work towards eradicating the motherhood penalty?

Paik: Creating this type of legislation has been a big challenge. I think the greater challenge will be ensuring the enforcement of these policies once they are passed. It is the first step in transforming such policies into common accepted practices. Enforcement is the key to changing the workplace environment.

Proportion of Applicants in Audit Study Receiving Callbacks by Gender and Parental Status

	Callbacks/ Total Jobs	Proportion called back
Mothers	10/320	.0313
Childless women	21/320	.0656
Fathers	16/318	.0503
Childless men	9/318	.0283

Note: Mothers and childless women applied to the same 320 jobs; fathers and childless men applied to the same 318 jobs. See article for variable descriptions.

Source: Correll, S.J., Benard, S., & Paik, I. (2007). Getting a job: Is there a motherhood penalty? *American Journal of Sociology*, 112, 1297-1338.

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