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Summary

This research explores the identified phenomena of the ‘fatherhood benefit’ and ‘motherhood penalty’ (Correll et al 2007; Fuegen et al 2004). Additionally, circumstances in which stereotypical gender norms are challenged by fathers applying for part-time work are examined to ascertain whether a ‘fatherhood forfeit’/‘motherhood merit’ emerges. Early findings support the existence of a fatherhood forfeit/motherhood merit and motherhood penalty/fatherhood benefit in such circumstances for parents, both in the workplace and at the point of selection. However, the latter effect was not observed during the selection process. Future directions for this work will include deeper analysis of the data and demographic information to try to explain the outcomes in more depth.

Introduction

Existing research has established that, when making judgements about individuals, there is a tendency to categorise individuals based on stereotypes (Heilman and Okimoto 2008), with decision-makers relying upon them when required to make sense of incomplete information (Uhlmann and Cohen 2005; Darley and Gross 1983). Research thus far indicates that such stereotypes can result in mothers being seen to face ‘penalties’ in the workplace and at the point of selection, whereas fathers reap ‘benefits’. This is often referred to as the fatherhood benefit and motherhood penalty (Correll et al 2007; Fuegen et al 2004).

In the UK, traditional patterns of employment and parenting are in decline, with an increasing number of fathers working fewer hours to accommodate family life, wanting to take an active part in childcare and mothers increasingly working full-time (Office for National Statistics 2013; Working Families 2017). It is suggested that in the context of these societal changes, the dual concepts of fatherhood benefit and motherhood penalty in the workplace have potentially become more complex and warrant further exploration. More recent research indicates that fathers who demonstrate a high level of involvement in family life may actually face a fatherhood penalty in the workplace (Berdahl and Moon 2013).

Using managers and working parents as participants, this research builds on these findings to explore the phenomena of the fatherhood benefit and motherhood penalty in circumstances in which stereotypical gender norms are challenged (mother working full-time, father working part-time) to ascertain if a reversal of the effect occurs and a fatherhood forfeit/motherhood merit emerges. A wider understanding of the ramifications of such forfeits can help mitigate against their impact in the workplace and inform HR policies and practices across a range of HR domains.

Methods

<p>Online survey</p> <p>Research aim:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> to establish if a motherhood merit/fatherhood forfeit occurs in management selection decision-making for a part-time role to establish if a motherhood penalty and fatherhood benefit occurs in management selection decision-making for a full-time role. <p>Further details</p> <p>Participants were asked to score fictitious applicants for a customer service manager role from summary CVs, which were equal apart from parental status (mother or father) and working hours (full time or part time). Participants were asked to score applicants on the basis of ‘perceived competence’, ‘workplace commitment’, ‘hireability’, ‘promotability’ and then choose words to describe the applicant and rank these words.</p> <p>Participants: 96 managers</p>
<p>Focus group</p> <p>Research aim:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do managers and working parents perceive that fatherhood forfeit/motherhood merit exists in the workplace for parents who work part-time? Do managers and working parents perceive that a motherhood penalty/fatherhood benefit exists in the workplace for parents who work full-time? <p>Further details</p> <p>Participants were asked to complete the same task as in the online survey; however, they were asked to do this as a group, rather than individually.</p> <p>Participants: 5 groups, over 26 participants (charity, manufacturing, healthcare and defence)</p>
<p>Semi-structured interviews</p> <p>Research aim: as above</p> <p>Further details</p> <p>Participants were asked to explore their perceptions of any penalties or benefits for parents during selection and more widely in the workplace.</p> <p>Participants: 21 interviews with parents (9), managers (6) and HR managers (6)</p>

Early findings

Online survey: part-time position – to establish if a motherhood merit/fatherhood forfeit occurs in management selection decision-making for a part-time role

The findings of the online survey support the existence of a fatherhood forfeit/motherhood benefit effect for a part-time position. The part-time mother applicant was scored more highly than the part-time father applicant (5% higher), with the strongest effect being with regard to 'hireability' (7% higher). The most frequently used words to describe the mother applicant were 'successful in job' (48 times), which was less frequent for the father (28 times), pointing to a fatherhood forfeit/motherhood merit.

However, it is important to note that there were some indicators of fatherhood benefit/ motherhood penalty for the part-time scenario. When scoring applicants on 'promotability', there was a reversal of the overall effect and the mother applicant scored 6% lower than the father applicant, which is surprising as she was scored more highly on every other element. The most frequently used words to describe the father were 'dedicated to family' (only ranked third for the mother) and 'likeable' (22 times), a word which didn't feature for the mother, pointing to an element of fatherhood benefit/motherhood penalty within the part-time scenario.

Online survey: full-time position – to establish if a motherhood penalty and fatherhood benefit occurs in management selection decision-making for a full-time role

While existing literature would predict an emergence of a fatherhood benefit/motherhood penalty in the full-time scenario, the mother applicant scored more highly (8% higher), which warrants fuller exploration through the qualitative data. This scenario saw greater similarity in the words used to describe the applicants than the part-time scenario, with 'dedication to career', 'reliability' and 'responsibility' all appearing in the top five in similar ranked positions and the most frequently used words to describe both parent applicants were 'successful in job'. Interestingly, as with the part-time position, there was a difference with regard to 'dedication to family', which was ranked in fourth position for the father but did not appear for the mother. So while the mother applicant was scored higher, she seems to have faced a penalty with regard to judgements about her parental commitment, in a way that the father did not, which is indicative of a fatherhood benefit/motherhood penalty.

Focus groups and semi-structured interviews – do managers and working parents perceive that fatherhood forfeit/motherhood merit exists in the workplace for parents who work part-time?

Manager focus groups – part-time scenario

While mixed views were presented, a theme of a fatherhood forfeit/motherhood merit was widely evident in the focus groups. Some of the key themes that emerged for the part-time parent applicants were as follows:

- **Fathers who want to work part-time face negative judgements** – 'I just think – lazy bastard', 'he is obviously up to the job but is he a high flyer? Is he slower off the mark?', and being described as 'Dozy David'.
- **Fathers who want to work part-time are viewed with suspicion** – 'I just wonder why he is applying for the job part-time ... I wonder, why?'

- **Mothers who want to work part-time are approved of** – *‘I like the idea she has recognised, herself, that she wants to get her home–work–life balance ... she recognised it herself.’*

Working parent and manager interviews – part-time

Further indications of fatherhood forfeits/motherhood merits were apparent in the semi-structured interviews. The main themes that emerged from interviews with managers and working parents were as follows:

- **‘Where is mum?’ discrimination** – *‘I was always asked, “Where’s Jacob’s mother?”, things like that. And although they weren’t barbed in any way, I could tell that they were kind of meant to be ... I think that there was a bit more of a point to them’* (father).
- **Less workplace support for fathers who wish to be actively involved in family life** – *‘And they’re [men] almost waiting to be given permission, that which I get the feeling that for mums, it’s not a negotiation.’*
- **Fathers needing to make more of a case for part-time or flexible working compared with mothers** – *‘[Fathers] may be not looked at as empathetically as if it was a female.’*
- **Deviance** – *‘I get a few funny faces’*; and a mother commented about her part-time partner, *‘You can see people thinking, “oh, that’s a bit weird, that’s a bit odd”’* (part-time father).

Some of the themes that emerged in the interviews with working parents where the mother works full-time and the father works part-time included:

- **Negative judgement** – *‘But some people could be fairly judgemental or at least seemed to be fairly judgemental about the working arrangement.’*
- **Loss of status** – *‘He found it really difficult [being part-time] ... really difficult. Lost all his ... and he still struggles I think sometimes now, his status. ... So, he lost a lot of his confidence and who he was as a man I think.’*
- **Friendship issues** – *‘He didn’t really mix with very many other fathers ... because he didn’t see them at the school gate. ... There was a big group of fathers that made really good friends with each other ... I’ve noticed that there is a group of fathers and he’s not one of them.’*

Do managers and working parents perceive that a motherhood penalty/fatherhood benefit exists in the workplace for parents who work full-time?

Manager focus groups – full-time

A theme of a motherhood penalty/fatherhood benefit was widely evident in the focus groups. Some of the penalties for the mother that emerged were as follows:

- **Concern about the reliability of the mother** – *‘With a young child it [working full-time] will be hard to maintain.’*
- **Negative judgement** – similar to those faced by the part-time father, with emphasis on judgements of parenting commitment: *‘I’m not worried about employing a mother full-time; it’s her kids that need to be worried.’*

- **Parental status is a factor when considering the selection of mothers but not fathers** – while this was not explicitly stated, all focus groups explored the family arrangements in detail for the full-time mother applicant in a way that they did not for the father applicant.

Working parent and manager interviews – full-time scenario

Further indications of motherhood penalty/fatherhood benefit were apparent in the semi-structured interviews. Similar themes as in the focus groups emerged from interviews with managers and working parents:

- **Concern about the reliability of mothers** – *‘Women will be a bit flaky and the men are going to be more reliable.’*
- **Parental status is a factor for consideration in the workplace for mothers, not fathers** – *‘Day-to-day perceptions are a man will work full-time and won’t have family commitments.’*
- **Parental status is a factor for consideration when selecting mothers, not fathers** – *‘I think they [managers] would always ask a woman if she’s a mother or, you know, if you can’t – there are ways to do that. I don’t think you would ever ask a man if he had children at home like a woman.’*
- **Deviance** – as with the part-time father, this theme emerged: *‘When I had my first son ... I went back full-time. ... That certainly raised some eyebrows. ... People seemed a little bit sort of concerned by it. ... People were expecting me to be away from work for longer certainly.’*
- **Suspicion** – as with part-time working fathers, there were many examples of suspicion surrounding mothers who work full-time: *‘Why isn’t he providing?’*
- **‘Sacrifices for flexibility’** – this theme focuses around working mothers needing to make career sacrifices to manage their home life, in a way that working fathers do not: *‘I have done my share of having shit jobs and shit shifts, just because that is what fits in with family life.’*
- **Negative judgement** – *‘she thought working mothers were, you know, the spawn of the devil...’* (full-time working mother describing how a head teacher viewed her).

Conclusions

These early findings strongly point to the existence of a fatherhood forfeit/motherhood merit for parents in the workplace. When parents of both genders applied for a part-time role, the fictitious father applicant was judged as less competent, having lower workplace commitment and hireability than his female counterpart. In the workplace more widely, fathers who wish to work part-time appear to face negative judgements, be given less support, need to make more of a case for reduced working hours, be viewed with suspicion, face ‘where’s mum?’ discrimination, and suffer friendship issues and loss of perceived status.

This early analysis appears to support the existing literature that motherhood penalties/fatherhood benefits occur in the workplace, with mothers who work full-time facing many of the same challenges of the part-time father. The key challenges outlined include being considered as less reliable than their male counterpart, needing to make sacrifices for flexibility, facing negative judgements in the workplace and with regard to parental commitment, being viewed with suspicion and considered deviant, and finally that parental status is considered in the workplace in a way that it isn’t for fathers.

Future directions for this work will include deeper analysis of the survey data and demographic information to try to explain the outcomes in more depth. In particular, in the part-time scenario, to understand why the fatherhood forfeit/motherhood merit effect appears to reverse with regard to scores of 'promotability' and understand why there is such disparity in the use of words to describe the parent applicants with regard to 'dedicated to family' and 'likeable'. Similarly, in the full-time scenario, to understand why an expected motherhood penalty/fatherhood benefit did not emerge in the survey and why the mother applicant was not described as having 'dedication to family' to the same degree as the father.

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