

Turning the “Motherhood Penalty” into a “Breadwinner Bonus”

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Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg made news when he announced that he would take a relatively lengthy two-month paternity leave after the birth of his daughter. In contrast, Yahoo! CEO Melissa Mayer announced that she would only take a “limited” two-week maternity leave after giving birth, despite her company’s generous eight-week maternity leave policy.

An extensive body of research has documented that parenthood leads to different career outcomes for mothers and fathers. For example, female employees have been shown to incur a so-called *motherhood penalty*: Relative to women without children, mothers in the workforce receive lower salaries and fewer promotions. In contrast, research has shown that working fathers often benefit from a *fatherhood bonus*: Fathers often experience a boost in salary and status compared to childless men.

In a new study, psychological scientists Julia B. Bear and Peter Glick found that the motherhood penalty and the fatherhood bonus may come down to employers’ assumptions about an employee’s role within their family.

Fathers are traditionally cast as the “breadwinners” of a family – bringing home the bacon – while mothers are assumed to be “caretakers,” taking on the lion’s share of child-rearing responsibilities. Thus, employers may assume that parenthood will reduce a woman’s dedication to her career while increasing a man’s commitment; the expectation is that mothers will need to leave work on time to pick up the kids, while fathers will double-down at work in order to provide for their families.

But Bear and Glick found that a little reframing could help reduce the motherhood penalty by turning the labels around, framing mothers as “breadwinners” rather than “caregivers.”

“Evidence from two studies supports the notion that the fatherhood bonus may be better understood as a breadwinner bonus that can apply to mothers as well as fathers, whereas the caregiver penalty remained gendered, occurring for mothers but not fathers,” the researchers write.

In one online study, the researchers recruited 475 participants (about 40% women) to play the role of a hiring manager for a fictional company. They were provided with detailed information about a top-notch job applicant. Half of the participants read about applicant “Lisa,” while the other half read about applicant “Gary.” Aside from the name, Lisa and Gary were identical – 10 years of experience, married with two young children, and described in glowing terms as “a real go-getter” by a former manager.

After reviewing the applicant’s background materials, participants were tasked with putting together a hiring package that would appeal to the job applicant. Participants could indicate a salary offer by selecting an amount on a sliding scale from \$55,000 to \$70,000. They could also offer flexible work options as a perk. However, the instructions mentioned that more flextime could hurt a candidate’s prospects for professional advancement (e.g. “Some candidates may not be interested in flexible schedule offers because they realize that limiting face time at the office can negatively affect future promotion rate and, therefore, salary).

The results revealed that participants offered Lisa, the female applicant, a lower salary and more flextime compared to Gary – despite their identical resumes.

The analysis also revealed that participants who rated Lisa as more of a breadwinner also offered her a higher salary. The more participants perceived Gary as a caregiver, the more they recommended offering him flextime as a perk.

“People who thought ‘she might be a breadwinner’ offered her more money, and those who thought ‘he might be a caregiver’ offered him more career-dampening flextime,” the researchers explain.

In a follow-up study, 482 participants (45% women) were again asked to play the role of hiring manager. Some of the participants were presented with a job applicant who had two children while others reviewed an applicant with “no children.” Some of the participants also read a former manager’s statement clearly defining the applicant’s family role as the primary breadwinner or caregiver for their family.

Again, participants were asked to put together an attractive hiring package for the job candidate based on salary offer and flextime. Additionally, they could also offer the candidate a spot in a special leadership training program.

Explicitly labeling a mother as a family’s breadwinner essentially reversed the motherhood penalty.

“A breadwinning mother was offered a higher salary and was more likely to be offered leadership training than mothers labeled as caregivers or with unspecified family roles,” the researchers write. “Indeed, a breadwinning mother garnered salary and leadership training offers on par with a

breadwinning father, supporting a breadwinner bonus.”

In contrast to the motherhood penalty, this study found “little evidence that a caregiving father was penalized.” Fathers explicitly labeled as caregivers received equivalent salary and leadership offers as fathers labeled as breadwinners.

“In both studies, when family roles were not specified, gendered assumptions about breadwinning and caregiving influenced workplace incentives, benefiting fathers over mothers,” Bear and Glick conclude. “However, explicitly labeling a mother as the family breadwinner mitigated these assumptions, short-circuiting discrimination relative to fathers and fully erasing the motherhood penalty.”

Reference

Bear, J. B., & Glick, P. (2016). Breadwinner Bonus and Caregiver Penalty in Workplace Rewards for Men and Women. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*. doi: 10.1177/1948550616683016