



ASA NEWS

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Men Viewed More Favorably Than Women When Seeking Work-Life Balance

SAN FRANCISCO — While some suggest that flexible work arrangements have the potential to reduce workplace inequality, a new study finds these arrangements may exacerbate discrimination based on parental status and gender.

Study author Christin Munsch, an assistant professor of sociology at Furman University, analyzed the reactions both men and women received when making flexible work requests — meaning that they either asked to work from home or to work non-traditional hours.

Among those who made flexible work requests, men who asked to work from home two days a week in order to care for a child were significantly advantaged compared to women who made the same request. Munsch, who will present her research at the 109th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association, also found that both men and women who made flexible work requests for childcare related reasons were advantaged compared to those who made the same requests for other reasons.

For her study, Munsch used a sample of 646 people who ranged in age from 18 to 65 and resided in the United States. Participants were shown a transcript and told it was an actual conversation between a human resources representative and an employee. The employee either requested a flexible work arrangement or did not. Among those who requested a flexible work arrangement, the employee either asked to come in early and leave early three days a week, or asked to work from home two days a week. Munsch also varied the gender of the employee and the reason for the request (involving childcare or not). After reading their transcript, participants were asked how likely they would be to grant the request and also to evaluate the employee on several measures, including how likeable, committed, dependable, and dedicated they found him or her.

Among those who read the scenario in which a man requested to work from home for childcare related reasons, 69.7 percent said they would be “likely” or “very likely” to approve the request, compared to 56.7 percent of those who read the scenario in which a woman made the request. Almost a quarter — 24.3 percent — found the man to be “extremely likeable,” compared to only 3 percent who found the woman to be “extremely likeable.” And, only 2.7 percent found the man “not at all” or “not very” committed, yet 15.5 percent found the woman “not at all” or “not very” committed.

“These results demonstrate how cultural notions of parenting influence perceptions of people who request flexible work,” Munsch said. “Today, we think of women’s responsibilities as including paid labor and domestic obligations, but we still regard breadwinning as men’s primary responsibility and we feel grateful if men contribute in the realm of childcare or to other household tasks.”

Munsch fears that this will be an issue as marriages become more egalitarian. “For example, in an arrangement where both partners contribute equally at home and in terms of paid labor — men, but not women, would reap workplace advantages,” she said. “In this situation, a move towards gender equality at home would perpetuate gender inequality in the workplace.”

Regarding the findings on those who made flexible work requests for childcare versus non-childcare related reasons, Munsch said that “both men and women who requested to work from home or to work atypical hours to take care of a child were viewed as more respectable, likable, committed, and worthy of

a promotion, and their requests were more supported than those who requested flexible work for reasons unrelated to childcare.”

For example, among those who read a scenario in which an employee asked to work from home two days a week for childcare related reasons, 63.5 percent of the respondents said they would be “likely” or “very likely” to grant the request. However, only 40.7 percent of those who read a scenario in which an employee asked to work from home two days a week to reduce his or her commute time and carbon footprint said they would be “likely” or “very likely” to grant the request.

According to Munsch, these findings surprised her. “I was surprised because so much of the research talks about how parents — and mothers in particular — are discriminated against compared to their childless counterparts,” she said. “When it comes to flexible work, it seems that engaging in childcare is seen as a more legitimate reason than other, non-childcare related reasons, like training for an endurance event or wanting to reduce your carbon footprint.”

While feminists and work-family scholars have championed flexible work options as a way to promote gender equality and as a remedy for work-family conflict, Munsch said that her research “shows that we should be hesitant in assuming this is effective.”

Still, Munsch does not believe employers should eliminate flexible work arrangements, but rather they should be cognizant of their biases and the ways in which they “differentially assess people who use these policies, so as not to perpetuate inequality.”

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About the American Sociological Association

The American Sociological Association (www.asanet.org), founded in 1905, is a non-profit membership association dedicated to serving sociologists in their work, advancing sociology as a science and profession, and promoting the contributions to and use of sociology by society.

The paper, “Flexible Work, Flexible Penalties: The Effect of Gender, Childcare, and Type of Request on the Flexibility Bias,” will be presented on Monday, Aug. 18, at 10:30 a.m. PDT in San Francisco at the American Sociological Association’s 109th Annual Meeting.

To obtain a copy of the paper; for assistance reaching the study’s author(s); or for more information on other ASA presentations, members of the media can contact Daniel Fowler, ASA Media Relations Manager, at (202) 527-7885 or pubinfo@asanet.org. During the Annual Meeting (Aug. 16-19), ASA Public Information Office staff can be reached in the on-site press office, located in the Hilton San Francisco Union Square’s Union Square 1-2 Room, at (415) 923-7506 or (914) 450-4557 (cell).

This press release was written by Sydney McKinley, ASA Public Information Office.

Papers presented at the ASA Annual Meeting are typically working papers that have not yet been published in peer reviewed journals.