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The "Bad Parent" Assumption: How Gender Stereotypes Affect Reactions to Working Mothers

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Although balancing work and family commitments is a significant source of strain for working parents, working mothers in traditionally male positions face additional anxiety due to unfounded assumptions about their competence as employees, assumptions rooted in gender stereotypes. However, stereotype-based assumptions can also bias competence impressions of these working mothers in family domains, depicting them as bad parents. In four experimental studies, we documented evidence that working mothers are seen as less effective parents than nonworking mothers. Consistent with the argument that gender stereotypes underlie these findings, the bad parent assumption was apparent only for mothers and not fathers (Study 1), only when working in a male sex-typed occupation (Study 2), more intensely when job success was clear (Study 3), and only when working out of personal choice (Study 4). Similar patterns were observed in ratings of interpersonal appeal (e.g., likability, friend desirability, coworker desirability), relational judgments suggesting that there are also negative social consequences for working mothers.

Commonly cited pressures facing working parents are often attributed to the time constraints imposed by both work and family obligations and the commitment trade-off they produce (e.g., Cooke & Rousseau, 1984; Gutek, Repetti, & Silver, 1988; Kandel, Davies, & Raveis, 1985). Consequently, many of the work/family policies instituted by organizations focus on alleviating (or being flexible with) the time demands of their employees who have children. But working parents face

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problems even when time management is not actually an issue—they are assumed to have commitment deficits. Family obligations are assumed to reduce working parents' commitment to the job (Fuegen, Biernat, Haines, & Deaux, 2004), and work obligations are assumed to reduce working parents' commitment to their families (Bridges & Etaugh, 1995; Etaugh & Nekolny, 1990).

These assumptions can be troubling for mothers and fathers alike. However, mothers have been shown to face an additional problem. On top of the assumption that they lack commitment, they are also assumed to be less capable as employees than nonworking mothers or working fathers, particularly in management and other male sex-typed occupations (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004; Heilman & Okimoto, 2008). These beliefs about job ineffectiveness are a consequence of cultural stereotypes depicting women as relationship-oriented or, as termed in the literature, "communal" (i.e., warm, caring, sensitive, and emotional), characteristics that are thought to be inconsistent with the attributes necessary for job success (i.e., assertive, strong, dominant and task-focused), resulting in a perceived "lack of fit" (Heilman, 1983, 2001; see also Eagly & Karau, 2002). Research has indicated that this perceived lack of fit is particularly stark for working mothers, as motherhood epitomizes our cultural conception of being a woman and thus exaggerates perceptions of a mother's embodiment of stereotypically feminine characteristics (Cuddy et al., 2004; Heilman & Okimoto 2008). As a result, working mothers are seen as ill-equipped to handle male sex-typed organizational roles and less deserving of these positions than nonmothers.

Importantly, these findings suggest that gender stereotypes and the lack of fit perceptions they produce can give rise to yet another negative consequence for mothers working in male sex-typed occupations. If, despite incompetence assumptions, a working mother is successful at obtaining and holding a traditionally male job, this implies that she in fact has the attributes necessary for success in a male field. However, because there is a perceived inconsistency between the attributes believed critical for success in male sex-typed work and the communal characteristics associated with women, her success also implies a deficit in the attributes believed to be essential for being a good mother. This can produce a lose-lose dilemma for working mothers; motherhood prompts assumptions about their work ineffectiveness, but if those assumptions are proven wrong by evidence of job competence, they are assumed to be ineffective as parents.

Assumptions of working mothers' parental ineffectiveness (Bridges, 1987; Bridges & Orza, 1992; Etaugh & Study, 1989) can serve as an additional source of psychological stress. Concerns about maternal inadequacy can be disturbing and debilitating, distracting working mothers from being effective both at home and at work. The perception that work impinges on the family can also lead to feelings of guilt and counterproductive work behaviors (Morgan & King, 2012). Even more concerning is the research linking perceptions of parental self-efficacy to depression and mother–child attachment problems (see Teti & Gelfand, 1991).

In addition, assumptions about working mothers' lack of communality are likely to lead to dislike and the ascription of harsh and unflattering characterizations (Heilman & Okimoto, 2007; Heilman, Wallen, Fuchs, & Tamkins, 2004; Rudman, 1998). This negativity in interpersonal appeal can promote social isolation from both coworkers and parental peers, resulting in the absence of the social support that can be crucial to the mental health and well-being of new parents (LaRocco, House, & French, 1980).

The Bad Parent Assumption

In four experimental studies, we investigated the "bad parent" assumption, attempting to determine whether, why and under what conditions working women employed in traditionally male jobs are denigrated as mothers. We examined beliefs about the parental effectiveness of working and nonworking mothers, and also assessed their interpersonal appeal. We predicted:

Hypothesis 1 (The Bad Parent Assumption Hypothesis): Working mothers will be seen as less effective parents and as less interpersonally appealing than nonworking mothers.

Each of the four studies tested this primary hypothesis. In addition, we sought to demonstrate the importance of gender stereotypes and the lack of fit perceptions they produce in provoking the bad parent assumption. We have proposed that the diminished evaluations of working mothers' effectiveness are driven by a presumed deficit in communal traits that derives from the perceived lack of fit between the attributes believed necessary for career success in a male sex-typed job and the attributes believed necessary to be a good mother. Therefore, we also predicted that beliefs about a target's lack of communal traits would mediate evaluations of parental effectiveness, accounting for the bad parent assumption over and above perceptions of insufficient family commitment:

Hypothesis 2 (Mediation Hypothesis): The effect of mothers' employment status on parental evaluations and interpersonal appeal ratings will be mediated by perceived lack of communality, even when controlling for the variance explained by diminished perceptions of family commitment.

Taken together, the four studies were designed to provide converging evidence for the role of gender stereotypes in evaluations of and reactions to working mothers, impressions that serve as an understudied barrier for working mothers' effectiveness in both work and family domains.

Table 1. Studies 1–4: Descriptive Statistics and Intercorrelations between Dependent Measure Scales

Study 1 ($N = 105$)		Scale reliability	1	2	3
Study 1 ($N = 105$)					
Mean age = 36.8 (13.2)	1. Family commitment	$r = .87$	–		
% female = 70%	2. Communality	$\alpha = .82$	.65*	–	
% with children = 51%	3. Parental evaluations	$r = .88$	.83*	.70*	–
	4. Interpersonal appeal	$\alpha = .89$	.69*	.71*	.78*
Study 2 ($N = 188$)					
Mean age = 35.9 (13.3)	1. Family commitment	$r = .82$	–		
% female = 69%	2. Communality	$\alpha = .87$	.64*	–	
% with children = 45%	3. Parental evaluations	$r = .82$	.86*	.69*	–
	4. Interpersonal appeal	$\alpha = .90$	.63*	.66*	.70*
Study 3 ($N = 256$)					
Mean age = 35.4 (13.2)	1. Family commitment	$r = .83$	–		
% female = 64%	2. Communality	$\alpha = .90$	.65*	–	
% with children = 50%	3. Parental evaluations	$r = .89$	.88*	.71*	–
	4. Interpersonal appeal	$\alpha = .94$	.74*	.71*	.81*
Study 4 ($N = 196$)					
Mean age = 35.0 (12.8)	1. Family commitment	$r = .83$	–		
% female = 71%	2. Communality	$\alpha = .89$	.63*	–	
% with children = 50%	3. Parental evaluations	$r = .76$	.81*	.68*	–
	4. Interpersonal appeal	$\alpha = .94$	.70*	.74*	.79*

*$p < .05$. Standard deviations appear in parentheses.

General Methodology

Participants for the studies were U.S. volunteers who were recruited for online research participation in exchange for a 1/40 chance of winning a $10 lottery reward. Although susceptible to many of the limitations of online research (Skitka & Sargis, 2006), the participant pool from which these participants were drawn was more representative than most online or student samples: only 13% students, 50% without a college degree, median household income $50K–$75K, 75% Caucasian, 14% Asian, 4% Hispanic, 4% Black, and normally distributed in political orientation. Descriptive statistics for each individual study are presented in Table 1.

In all four studies, participants were told the study investigated first impressions, and were asked to read one short description of a target:

> "Jennifer is 38 years-old. She is married and the mother of two children ages 4 and 8. She is originally from the San Francisco Bay area, and first moved to Illinois when she attended

the University of Illinois at Chicago. She currently lives in the suburbs of Chicago. In her free time, Jennifer enjoys reading and is an avid tennis player."

The target description varied depending on experimental condition, but all other details were held constant and all targets were described as being parents.

After reading about the target, participants were asked to report their impressions. *Family commitment* was evaluated on two 7-point scale items (1 = not at all, 7 = very much): "How committed do you think this person is to his/her family?" and "How family oriented do you think this person is?" *Communality* was evaluated using four 7-point bi-polar adjective ratings: "not supportive-supportive," "insensitive-sensitive," "not understanding-understanding," and "cold-warm." *Parental evaluations* were assessed by two 7-point scale items: "How good of a parent do you think this person is? (1 = very bad, 7 = very good)," and "Do you feel like this person is a good parent? (1 = not at all, 7 = very much)." *Interpersonal appeal* was assessed by four 7-point scale items (1 = not at all, 7 = very much): "Would you want this person to be your neighbor?", "Would you want to be friends with this person?", "Would you want your children to be friends with this person's children?", and "Would you want to work with this person?" Ratings within each multi-item scale were averaged to form a composite measure. See Table 1 for reliability statistics and inter-scale correlations.

Study 1

In the first study we sought to demonstrate the existence of the "bad parent assumption" for working mothers (Hypothesis 1) and show that it is mediated by a perceived lack of communality (Hypothesis 2), implicating the underlying "lack of fit" process. To this end, we compared evaluations of working mothers to nonworking mothers, as well as to mothers with no employment information provided (reflecting baseline beliefs about mothers in general). We also examined reactions to working mothers as compared to working fathers. Because there is a lack of fit between the attributes thought necessary for employment success and the attributes thought necessary to be a good mother, but *not* the attributes thought necessary to be a good father, information about employment status should only diminish evaluations of mothers.

Hypothesis 3: Information about employment status will negatively affect the parental evaluations and interpersonal appeal ratings of mothers but not fathers.

Since working fathers were included solely to provide another comparison group for working mothers, we did not fully cross the study design to include a condition of nonworking (full-time parent) fathers. Reactions to this relatively

Table 2. Study 1: Means and Standard Deviations by Condition for Each Dependent Measure Scale

		No info	Working	Nonworking
Family commitment	Mother	5.81 (0.91)$_a$	4.69 (1.15)$_b$	6.48 (0.66)$_c$
	Father	5.31 (0.75)$_a$	5.29 (1.09)$_a$	–
Communality	Mother	5.60 (0.84)$_a$	4.69 (0.68)$_b$	5.56 (1.05)$_a$
	Father	4.94 (0.73)$_b$	4.85 (0.82)$_b$	–
Parental evaluations	Mother	5.79 (1.01)$_a$	4.62 (1.25)$_b$	6.07 (1.04)$_a$
	Father	5.07 (0.68)$_b$	5.12 (0.88)$_b$	–
Interpersonal appeal	Mother	5.62 (1.02)$_a$	4.64 (0.86)$_b$	5.54 (0.91)$_a$
	Father	5.15 (0.68)$_{ab}$	5.21 (0.95)$_a$	–

Note. Standard deviations appear in parentheses. Cell means that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$.

scarce group, while no doubt interesting, are immaterial to our purpose and beyond the scope of this investigation.

We experimentally varied the target description to create the five conditions in our between-subjects design: nonworking mother (i.e., full-time parent), working mother, mother with no job information, working father, and father with no job information. *Target gender* was manipulated by altering the names and pronouns to reflect "Jennifer" or "Jason." In the *no job information* conditions, only the filler information was provided (as above). In the *working* conditions, the target was described as working full-time as a Financial Advisor (a male sex-typed occupation). Finally, in the *nonworking* condition (mothers only) the target was described as having decided to put her career on hold to stay home and raise her children.

Results and Discussion

Preliminary analysis indicated no participant gender differences on any of the rating scales. There was, however, a significant interaction between the manipulations and participant parental status (i.e., whether or not they have children) on parental evaluations, $F(4,93) = 2.76$, $p < .05$ ($\eta^2 = .107$). The effects of the manipulations appeared to be stronger when participants were parents themselves. Nonetheless, the overall pattern was similar, and including participant parental status as a covariate did not change the results of the analysis; thus, participant responses were combined for all subsequent analyses. Table 2 presents all cell means, standard deviations, and intercell comparisons as indicated by planned Fisher's LSD tests.

Comparisons between mothers. For each dependent measure, we conducted a one-way ANOVA to test for differences between the three motherhood

conditions. Analyses of variance for each dependent variable consistently indicated a significant effect of condition on parental evaluations, $F(4,100) = 7.36$, $p < .001$ ($\eta^2 = .23$), interpersonal appeal, $F(4,100) = 3.94$, $p = .005$ ($\eta^2 = .14$), communality, $F(4,100) = 5.37$, $p = .001$ ($\eta^2 = .18$), and family commitment, $F(4,100) = 10.81$, $p < .001$ ($\eta^2 = .30$). Consistent with our predictions, when the target mother was presented as being employed, she was seen as a worse parent than when no employment information was mentioned or when it was made clear that she was a nonworking mother. This pattern of data was the same for ratings of commitment and communality. Employed mothers were also rated as having less interpersonal appeal than other mothers, suggesting that the negative consequences for working mothers may go beyond parental disapproval, having potential implications for social ostracism.

Mediation analyses. We then conducted mediation analysis to test for the predicted mediation effects. We dummy-coded the three mother conditions (with no information mothers reflected in the constant) and examined the indirect effect of working motherhood, simultaneously considering both family commitment and communality as competing mediators in a multiple mediator model using bootstrapping techniques that facilitate the examination of indirect effects with small samples (see Preacher & Hayes, 2008).

Analysis indicated a significant negative indirect effect of working motherhood on parental evaluations, through family commitment ratings, $B = -.74$, $SE = .23$ (95%CI $= -.326$ to-1.303), and also through communality ratings, $B = -.29$, $SE = .10$ (95%CI $= -.129$ to $-.552$). Similarly, there was a negative indirect effect of working motherhood on interpersonal appeal, through family commitment, $B = -.44$, $SE = .15$ (95%CI $= -.191$ to $-.794$), and communality, $B = -.42$, $SE = .14$ (95%CI $= -.182$ to $-.715$). These results showed that, consistent with our mediation prediction (Hypothesis 2), perceived communality was partially responsible for working mothers' lower parental evaluations and ratings of interpersonal appeal, even when controlling for family commitment; each explained independent variance when considered together in a multiple mediator model. This finding supported our assertion that the bad parent assumption is a consequence of a perceived lack of fit between the requisite attributes for an employee in a male sex-typed position and for a good mother.

Comparisons of mothers to fathers. In a separate analysis excluding the nonworking mother condition, we conducted a 2×2 ANOVA to test for the interaction between work information and target gender (Hypothesis 3). The analyses for each dependent variable consistently indicated no main effect of target gender on parental evaluations, $F(1,80) = 0.25$, $p = .62$, interpersonal appeal, $F(1,80) = 0.08$, $p = .78$, communality, $F(1,80) = 2.22$, $p = .14$, or family commitment, $F(1,80) = 0.05$, $p = .83$. In contrast, there was a consistent main effect of work

information on parental evaluations, $F(1,80) = 6.89$, $p = .01$ ($\eta^2 = .08$), interpersonal appeal, $F(1,80) = 5.61$, $p < .05$ ($\eta^2 = .07$), communality, $F(1,80) = 8.87$, $p < .005$ ($\eta^2 = .10$), and family commitment, $F(1,80) = 7.03$, $p = .01$ ($\eta^2 = .08$). However, these main effects were qualified by significant interactions on each measure: parental evaluations, $F(1,80) = 8.11$, $p < .01$ ($\eta^2 = .09$), interpersonal appeal, $F(1,80) = 7.17$, $p < .01$ ($\eta^2 = .08$), communality, $F(1,80) = 5.81$, $p < .05$ ($\eta^2 = .07$), and family commitment, $F(1,80) = 6.46$, $p = .01$ ($\eta^2 = .08$). For mothers, the provision of employment information significantly lowered her parental evaluations, as well as ratings of her interpersonal appeal, communality, and family commitment. However, this same information had no effect on any of the ratings of fathers. Further scrutiny of these data indicated that the parental evaluations and perceived communality of mothers was *higher* than that of fathers when no information about work was provided; however, this advantage disappeared when they were explicitly depicted as employees. This pattern was slightly different for ratings of interpersonal appeal and family commitment; working mothers were rated as the lowest of all the parents in interpersonal appeal and family commitment.

These results provided support for Hypothesis 3; only mothers faced the bad parent assumption implied by employment in male sex-typed work. While the provision of work information diminished the parental evaluations and interpersonal appeal of mothers, this same information had no effect on equivalently described fathers. The specific pattern of these results was also notable. Consistent with past research (Kobrynowicz & Biernat, 1997), mothers were actually seen as better parents than fathers when no information about employment was available; however, this perceived superiority was eliminated by information about employment. By contrast, employment information appeared to create a difference between mothers' and fathers' interpersonal appeal where none existed in absence of employment information. In other words, when said to be employed, mothers lost their traditional edge and were viewed to be no better than fathers in parental skills, but they slipped from equivalence in their ratings of interpersonal appeal, coming to be seen as the least appealing of all the experimental targets. Despite different starting points for these comparisons, both patterns demonstrated that employment information can degrade evaluations of mothers.

Scope of the Bad Parent Assumption

As argued earlier, we believe that the diminished evaluations of working mothers' effectiveness as parents are driven by the perceived lack of fit (Heilman, 1983) between the attributes required for career success and the communal attributes required to be a good mother. If our reasoning is correct, the bad parent assumption should be moderated by variables that affect this lack of fit perception.

Hypothesis 4: Working mothers will be seen as less effective parents and less interpersonally appealing than nonworking mothers when there is a greater lack of fit between the attributes believed to be necessary for the job and the attributes believed to be necessary for parental success.

In other words, the bad parent assumption should only occur in conditions where the stereotype of a good mother is inconsistent with necessary job attributes. Thus, we should be able to *diminish* the bad parent assumption by manipulating situational characteristics that increase perceived fit. Likewise, we should also be able to *exacerbate* the bad parent assumption by manipulating situational characteristics that decrease perceived fit.

To test this hypothesis in the remaining studies, in addition to replicating the "bad parent assumption" (Hypothesis 1) and documenting the underlying mediating processes (Hypothesis 2), we examined different moderating variables that influence the degree of perceived fit. In Study 2, we examined the effects of job sex-type. We expected mothers employed in male sex-typed jobs to face stronger bad parent assumptions because the attributes of a good mother are a greater mismatch with the attributes deemed necessary for success in male sex-typed roles than in female sex-typed roles. In Study 3, we examined the effects of evidence attesting to work success in a male sex-typed job. We expected the bad parent assumption to be exacerbated with indisputable evidence of a working mother's career success because that success increases the perceived lack of fit by further substantiating her embodiment of the job-relevant attributes believed to be incongruent with those attributes believed necessary to be a good mother. Lastly, in Study 4, we examined reactions to mothers in male sex-typed jobs working out of necessity versus choice. We expected that mothers working out of choice would face stronger bad parent assumptions than those working out of necessity because information suggesting external constraints on a mother's employment decreases the perceived lack of fit by providing an excuse for behaviors that are thought to be incongruent with the attributes of a good mother (i.e., this is not what she really is like). Taken together, these follow-up studies were designed to provide convergent evidence that lack of fit perceptions underlie the bad parent assumption.

Study 2

In Study 2, we again tested for the "bad parent assumption" while also determining whether this assumption was elicited more when working mothers were employed in male sex-typed occupations. The "bad parent assumption" should be more apparent in male sex-typed occupations because the attributes assumed to be necessary to be a successful mother (e.g., warmth, sensitivity) are mismatched with the attributes deemed necessary for success in male sex-typed roles (e.g., toughness, dominance), but are congruent with the attributes deemed necessary

for success in female sex-typed roles (e.g., relational aptitude, compassion). Likewise, perceptions of communality should follow this same pattern and mediate the effect of the manipulations on parental evaluations and interpersonal appeal. However, regardless of the sex-type of the job, working mothers should be seen as less committed to their families than nonworking mothers, as commitment impressions are likely to vary as a function of the time constraints associated with employment rather than role congruity.

In Study 2, all targets were described as mothers (Jennifer), but we experimentally varied the target mother's employment status in a 3-cell between-subjects design: nonworking, working in a female sex-typed job, or working in a male sex-typed job. Manipulations were identical to those used in Study 1, although we included a female sex-typed condition that varied the target's job title. Following from past research examining job sex-type (Heilman & Wallen, 2009; Heilman et al., 2004), targets in the *female sex-typed job* were described as an "Employee Assistance Counselor," while targets in the *male sex-typed job* were, as in Study 1, described as a "Financial Advisor." A manipulation check asking participants to rate the job (1 = masculine, 7 = feminine) indicated that the "Financial Advisor" job ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.96$) was significantly more masculine than the "Employee Assistance Counselor" job ($M = 4.46$, $SD = 0.89$), $t(119) = 4.03$, $p < .001$. It is worth noting that additional checks indicated the "Financial Advisor" job was also seen as higher in prestige ($t = 4.38$, $p < .001$) and salary ($t = 5.03$, $p < .001$), but the two jobs did not differ in perceived difficulty or time investment ($ts < 1.4$).

Results and Discussion

Preliminary analysis indicated a main effect of participant gender on evaluations of family commitment, $F(2,182) = 5.55$, $p < .05$ ($\eta^2 = .03$), and communality, $F(2,182) = 4.19$, $p < .05$ ($\eta^2 = .02$). Regardless of condition, female participants rated targets more favorably. There was also a main effect of participant parental status on parental evaluations, $F(2,182) = 4.69$, $p < .05$ ($\eta^2 = .03$), and interpersonal appeal, $F(2,182) = 5.77$, $p < .05$ ($\eta^2 = .03$). Again regardless of condition, participants with children rated targets more favorably. Notably, these demographic variables did not interact with the manipulations, and including them as covariates did not change the results; thus, participant responses were combined for all subsequent analyses.

The data analysis scheme was the same as that used to compare ratings between mothers in Study 1. Cell means, standard deviations, and inter-cell comparisons are presented in Table 3. Analyses of variance indicated a significant effect of condition for each dependent variable: parental evaluations, $F(2,185) = 20.82$, $p < .001$ ($\eta^2 = .18$), interpersonal appeal, $F(2,185) = 5.29$, $p < .01$ ($\eta^2 = .05$), communality, $F(2,185) = 7.41$, $p = .001$ ($\eta^2 = .07$), and family commitment, $F(2,185) = 24.25$, $p < .001$ ($\eta^2 = .21$). Mothers working in a male sex-typed job

Table 3. Study 2: Means and Standard Deviations by Condition for Each Dependent Measure Scale

	Nonworking mother	Mother working in a female sex-typed job	Mother working in a male sex-typed job
Family commitment	$6.30\ (0.85)_a$	$5.43\ (1.14)_b$	$5.14\ (0.94)_b$
Communality	$5.59\ (0.92)_a$	$5.34\ (0.95)_a$	$4.97\ (0.84)_b$
Parental evaluations	$5.93\ (0.92)_a$	$5.22\ (1.03)_b$	$4.86\ (0.93)_c$
Interpersonal appeal	$5.46\ (1.00)_a$	$5.24\ (0.97)_a$	$4.88\ (1.06)_b$

Note. Standard deviations appear in parentheses. Cell means that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$.

were rated as worse parents than mothers working in a female sex-typed job, and both were rated as worse parents than nonworking mothers. Mothers working in a male sex-typed job were also evaluated as less interpersonally appealing and less communal than both nonworking mothers and mothers working in a female sex-typed job. In contrast, working mothers were seen as less committed to their family compared to nonworking mothers, regardless of their job sex-type.

Mediation analyses. For the bootstrapping analysis, we dummy-coded conditions to examine the indirect effect of male and female sex-typed employment (with nonworking mothers reflected in the constant). Analysis indicated that perceived communality was partially responsible for the lower parental evaluations and interpersonal appeal of working mothers, even when controlling for family commitment. There was a significant negative indirect effect of *male* sex-typed employment on interpersonal appeal, through family commitment, $B = -.44$, $SE = .12$ (95%CI $= -.223$ to $-.698$), and through communality, $B = -.28$, $SE = .09$ (95%CI $= -.141$ to $-.535$). Similarly, there was a negative indirect effect of male sex-typed employment on parental evaluations, through family commitment, $B = -.76$, $SE = .12$ (95%CI $= -.530$ to-1.034), and communality, $B = -.17$, $SE = .06$ (95%CI $= -.073$ to $-.293$). In contrast, the parental evaluations of mothers working in the *female* sex-typed job were only mediated by family commitment; there was a negative indirect effect through commitment, $B = -.57$, $SE = .12$ (95%CI $= -.348$ to $-.853$), but not communality, $B = -.07$, $SE = .05$ (95%CI $= +.020$ to $-.176$).

These results replicated Study 1, again showing that mothers' employment in a male sex-typed job resulted in lower parental evaluations. Moreover, the results demonstrated that these effects were stronger when the mother was employed in a male sex-typed rather than a female sex-typed job. This finding provided critical information about the processes underlying the bad parent assumption ascribed to working women. If our assertions are correct, negativity toward working mothers should be strongest when there is lack of fit between the attributes thought

necessary for motherhood and attributes thought necessary to do the job. Our data supported this idea, as did the meditational analyses. The parental evaluations and interpersonal appeal of mothers employed in male sex-typed work, which is inconsistent with maternal attributes, reflected judgments of communality. In contrast, the evaluations of mothers employed in female sex-typed work, which is more consistent with maternal attributes, only reflected concerns about job commitment, not about communality. Moreover, only mothers in male sex-typed jobs suffered from diminished interpersonal appeal. Evidently, it was not working per se that decreased working mothers' social acceptance, but working in a gender-inconsistent job.

Study 3

In Study 3, we examined another variable implicating perceived lack of fit as underlying the "bad parent" assumption faced by working mothers. When there is clear information that a working mother is successful in male sex-typed employment, the lack of fit between motherhood and employment is particularly stark. Clear work success implies greater congruence with the masculine attributes required for male sex-typed jobs, exacerbating the perception of lack of fit between the characteristics implied by employment and the feminine characteristics assumed necessary to be a good mother. As a result, the negative parental evaluations of working mothers should be amplified when there is clear information that a working mother is successful.

Holding male sex-type job constant, we experimentally varied the target mother's employment success in a 3-cell between-subjects design: nonworking, working with no job success information, or working with clear job success information. The first two conditions were identical to those used in Studies 1 and 2. However, in the third *job success* condition, the sentence describing the target's job included additional information stating that she recently received an award from the company CEO for her excellent track record. A single item manipulation check asked participants, "How successful do you think this person has been in his/her career? (1 = not at all successful, 7 = very successful). Participants in the success condition ($M = 6.32$, $SD = 0.78$) indicated that the target was significantly more successful than participants in the no success information condition ($M = 5.71$, $SD = 1.12$), $t(166) = 4.09$, $p < .001$, although all targets were rated as fairly successful. Note that in Studies 3 and 4, the measure of *interpersonal appeal* was expanded to eight items, including: "How much do you think you would like this person?" (1 = not at all, 7 = very much), "Would you want to get to know this person better?" (1 = not at all, 7 = very much), "How good of a friend do you think this person is?" (1 = very bad, 7 = very good), and a 7-point bipolar adjective "not likeable-likeable." See Table 1 for reliability statistics and inter-scale correlations.

Table 4. Study 3: Means and Standard Deviations by Condition for Each Dependent Measure Scale

	Nonworking mother	Working mother without success info	Working mother with success info
Family commitment	6.26 (0.80)$_a$	5.17 (1.38)$_b$	4.65 (1.41)$_c$
Communality	5.63 (0.89)$_a$	5.08 (1.16)$_b$	4.66 (1.12)$_c$
Parental evaluations	5.82 (0.99)$_a$	5.19 (1.39)$_b$	4.61 (1.40)$_c$
Interpersonal appeal	5.45 (0.98)$_a$	5.09 (1.08)$_b$	4.59 (1.17)$_c$

Note. Standard deviations appear in parentheses. Cell means that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$.

Results and Discussion

Preliminary analysis indicated no effects of participant gender on any of the ratings. There was, however, a significant main effect of participant parental status on interpersonal appeal, $F(1,246) = 4.83$, $p < .05$ ($\eta^2 = .019$). Regardless of condition, participants with children rated targets more favorably than participants without children. There was also a significant interaction between participant parental status and the manipulations on parental evaluations, $F(2,246) = 3.11$, $p < .05$ ($\eta^2 = .025$). Similar to Study 1, the effects of the manipulations appeared to be stronger when participants were parents themselves. Nonetheless, the overall pattern was similar, and including participant parental status as a covariate did not change the results of the analysis; thus, participant responses were combined for all subsequent analyses.

The data analysis scheme comparing mothers was the same as in the previous two studies. Cell means, standard deviations, and inter-cell comparisons are presented in Table 4. Analyses of variance indicated a significant effect of condition for each dependent variable: parental evaluations, $F(2,253) = 20.82$, $p < .001$ ($\eta^2 = .14$), interpersonal appeal, $F(2,253) = 5.29$, $p < .001$ ($\eta^2 = .10$), perceived communality, $F(2,253) = 7.41$, $p < .001$ ($\eta^2 = .13$), and family commitment, $F(2,253) = 39.21$, $p < .001$ ($\eta^2 = .24$). For all measures, all three conditions were significantly different from one another. Successful working mothers were evaluated less favorably than working mothers for whom no additional success information was provided, and both working mothers were evaluated less favorably than nonworking mothers.

Mediation analyses. For the bootstrapping analysis, we used a stepwise coding scheme examining the effect of employment and, separately, the effect of job success information. Analysis indicated that perceived communality was partially responsible for the lower parental evaluations and interpersonal appeal of working mothers, even when controlling for family commitment. There was a

significant negative indirect effect of employment on parental evaluations, through family commitment, $B = -1.00$, $SE = .12$ (95%CI = −.793 to −1.285), and through communality, $B = -.22$, $SE = .06$ (95%CI = −.117 to −.338). Similarly, there was a significant negative indirect effect of employment on interpersonal appeal, through family commitment, $B = -.58$, $SE = .08$ (95%CI = −.433 to −.772), and communality, $B = -.30$, $SE = .07$ (95%CI = −.169 to −.436). Communality was also partially responsible for the negative effects of job success information, even when controlling for family commitment. There was a significant negative indirect effect of success information on parental evaluations, through family commitment, $B = -.20$, $SE = .08$ (95%CI = −.036 to −.367), and through communality, $B = -.06$, $SE = .06$ (95%CI = −.012 to −.123). Similarly, there was a significant negative indirect effect of success information on interpersonal appeal, through family commitment, $B = -.12$, $SE = .05$ (95%CI = −.012 to −.224), and communality, $B = -.08$, $SE = .04$ (95%CI = −.007 to −.158).

These results again replicated the basic findings of the earlier studies, while also demonstrating that providing information of clear job success amplified the effects. A mother's employment in a male sex-typed occupation again led to the bad parent assumption and lower interpersonal appeal, and this effect was exacerbated by additional information underscoring employment success. These findings were partly due to the greater time and attention needed to achieve work success. However, even when controlling for these commitment ratings, the additional decrements instigated by employment success could be accounted for by further decreases in perceptions of communality. Thus, these findings provided further support for our theoretical arguments, illustrating how variations in perceived lack of fit, in this case sparked by clarity of success in a male sex-typed role, can influence reactions to working mothers. At the same time, these results highlighted the more general trade-off between perceptions of likeability and perceptions of competence often faced by working women (see Rudman & Glick, 2008).

Study 4

Study 4 expanded on the previous studies by examining whether or not the "bad parent" assumption is reduced when a working mother is believed to be working out of necessity rather than choice. The belief that a mother's employment is indicative of a stereotype-inconsistent disposition that implies parental ineffectiveness is likely to be contingent on observers making an internal attribution (Weiner, 1995), crediting her employment in male sex-typed work to her true character. Ambiguity about the cause of a mother's employment provides her with an excuse, facilitating a process of "attributional rationalization" that allows observers to ignore evidence that is incongruent with gender stereotypes (Heilman & Haynes, 2005). Indeed, research has shown that information suggesting external causes of stereotype-incongruent behavior can elicit perceptions that a target is

more stereotype-congruent (e.g., Deaux & Emswiller, 1974; Heilman & Haynes, 2005; Swim & Sanna, 1996). In other words, information suggesting external constraints on employment should help to mitigate the poor parental evaluations of working mothers because it reduces the perceived lack of fit between the traits implied by employment and those required to be a good mother. This prediction is consistent with past research showing that mothers described as working out of choice are less liked than mothers working out of financial necessity (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2005; Bridges & Etaugh, 1995); however, it remains unclear whether or not this negativity was due, as we propose, to assumptions about a working mother's lack of communal characteristics believed so critical to being a good mother.

We experimentally varied women's employment preferences in a 3-cell between-subjects design: nonworking, working full-time because of financial need, or working full-time by choice. The nonworking condition was similar to the previous studies, indicating that, "when she became pregnant she decided to put her career on hold to stay home and raise her children." The employment information provided in both working conditions was identical to the previous studies (no success info, male sex-typed job held constant). However, in the *choice* condition, this information was accompanied by the additional statement: "when she became pregnant she decided that she wanted to continue working full-time." In contrast, in the *need* condition, it was accompanied by the additional statement: "she had planned to put her career on hold to stay home and raise her children, but when she became pregnant her family's financial situation required that she continue to work full-time."

In the subsequent questionnaire, when asked, "Was this person in this occupation by choice?" (1 = not at all, 4 = completely), participants in the choice condition ($M = 3.33$, $SD = 0.80$) provided significantly higher ratings than participants in the need condition ($M = 2.17$, $SD = 0.78$), $t(127) = 8.33$, $p < .001$. Similarly, when asked, "How career oriented do you think this person is?" (1 = not at all, 7 = very much), participants in the choice condition ($M = 5.72$, $SD = 0.94$) viewed the target as significantly more career oriented than participants in the need condition ($M = 5.02$, $SD = 1.25$), $t(129) = 3.66$, $p < .001$.

Results and Discussion

Preliminary analysis indicated no participant gender differences on any of the rating scales. There were also no effects of participant parental status, although a nonsignificant trend suggested that the observed effects were stronger for participants with children. Thus, as with the previous studies, participant responses were combined for all subsequent analyses.

The analytic approach was the same as in the previous studies. Cell means, standard deviations, and inter-cell comparisons are presented in Table 5. Analyses

Table 5. Study 4: Means and Standard Deviations by Condition for Each Dependent Measure Scale

	Nonworking mother	Mother working because of necessity	Mother working because of choice
Family commitment	$6.22\ (0.85)_a$	$5.62\ (1.15)_b$	$5.01\ (1.12)_c$
Communality	$5.68\ (0.95)_a$	$5.41\ (0.99)_a$	$4.90\ (1.10)_b$
Parental evaluations	$5.81\ (1.09)_a$	$5.58\ (1.09)_a$	$4.92\ (1.02)_b$
Interpersonal appeal	$5.48\ (0.95)_a$	$5.41\ (0.96)_a$	$4.84\ (0.99)_b$

Note. Standard deviations appear in parentheses. Cell means that do not share subscripts differ at $p < .05$.

of variance indicated a significant effect of condition for each dependent variable: parental evaluations, $F(2,193) = 12.03$, $p < .001$ ($\eta^2 = .11$), interpersonal appeal, $F(2,193) = 8.43$, $p < .001$ ($\eta^2 = .08$), perceived communality, $F(2,193) = 9.82$, $p < .001$ ($\eta^2 = .09$), and family commitment, $F(2,193) = 21.88$, $p < .001$ ($\eta^2 = .19$). Working mothers were rated as worse parents, having less interpersonal appeal, and being less communal than nonworking mothers, but only when their employment was described as a personal choice; mothers working because of need were rated similarly to nonworking mothers and more favorably than mothers working by choice. In contrast, both types of working mothers were rated as less committed than nonworking mothers, and the commitment ratings of all three mothers were significantly different from one another.

Mediation analyses. For the bootstrapping analysis, conditions were dummy-coded to reflect nonworking mothers in the constant. Consistent with the earlier ANOVAs, the parental evaluations and interpersonal appeal of mothers working out of necessity were not different than nonworking mothers. However, analysis indicated that communality was partially responsible for the lower parental evaluations and interpersonal appeal of mothers working because of personal choice, even when controlling for family commitment. There was a significant negative indirect effect of choice on parental evaluations, through family commitment, $B = -.78$, $SE = .13$ (95%CI $= -.544$ to -1.067), and through communality, $B = -.23$, $SE = .07$ (95%CI $= -.123$ to $-.399$). Similarly, there was a significant negative indirect effect of work choice, through family commitment, $B = -.45$, $SE = .10$ (95%CI $= -.285$ to $-.671$), and communality, $B = -.36$, $SE = .09$ (95%CI $= -.181$ to $-.544$).

These results showed that when a working mother's career, and the assumed lack of communality suggested by its pursuit, could be attributed to an external cause (in this case financial need) they did not suffer the negative parental and interpersonal evaluations typically ascribed to mothers who elect to work. This

pattern of findings supported the view that intent ambiguity leads to the attributional rationalization of stereotype-inconsistent information (Heilman & Haynes, 2005), while also illustrating that such rationalization can reduce the perceived lack of fit between the characteristics implied by employment in male sex-typed work and the communality that is believed to be necessary for success as a mother.

General Discussion

Taken together, this series of studies indicated that people assume that mothers working in male sex-typed occupations are worse parents than nonworking mothers. This basic finding is not surprising, and past research has already documented the existence of this "bad parent" assumption. However, in contrast to past research suggesting that perceptions of reduced family commitment underlies the harsher parental evaluations of working mothers (Etaugh & Nekolny, 1990), the current research provided consistent and converging evidence that these evaluations are *also* driven by a perceived deficiency in communality that is implied by success in male sex-typed jobs, communality that cultural beliefs dictate to be essential for success as a mother.

In addition to consistent evidence of mediation, the results of all four studies helped to elucidate the process underlying the bad parent assumption. Supporting the notion that this effect is particularly relevant for mothers because it is grounded in female gender stereotypes, Study 1 showed that employment information had a negative effect for mothers but not fathers. We then demonstrated three different corroborating patterns of moderation aimed at increasing or decreasing the perceived lack of fit between the attributes associated with employment and the attributes associated with mothers, conditions that reduced or exacerbated assumptions about working mothers' lack of communality and their ineffectiveness as parents. In Study 2, the bad parent assumption was particularly apparent for mothers working in male sex-typed occupations. In Study 3, the unequivocal achievement of success in a male sex-typed job exacerbated the bad parent assumption. Finally, in Study 4, when provided with evidence suggesting an external determinant of their decision to work full-time, working mothers were "excused for their careers" and were seen as no less effective as parents than nonworking mothers.

Although the primary intent of the current research was to provide evidence of the processes underlying the "bad parent" assumption faced by working mothers, we also documented similar patterns of results for ratings of interpersonal appeal, indices meant to capture participants' willingness or desire to interact with the targets. Although these additional ratings should be cautiously interpreted because of their reliance on self-reported behavioral intentions, they offer preliminary evidence that employment in male sex-typed occupations may have social costs for working mothers. Further research is still needed to determine whether the

attitudes reported here translate into behavior, and whether these interactional biases are yet an additional source of stress on the emotional well-being of working mothers.

Despite the clarity of our results, caution should be exercised in their interpretation. Our methods of investigation were designed to allow for controlled and systematic experimentation, but like any method of investigation, they also put limits on the implications that we can draw from the data. Participants were provided with very little information about the targets, and their reactions might have been very different had they known more about them. Therefore, it is important to test the current ideas in more natural settings with actual parents as targets. Although such research would not allow for the control offered by this set of studies, it would test the validity of our findings and may also suggest other critical moderators of our effects.

It is also important to note some possible limitations in the generalizability of the current research. Although perceptions of communality may underlie standards of motherhood regardless of culture (Cuddy et al., 2008), it is possible that findings derived from our U.S. sample may differ from countries in which governments provide more ample support for working parents or in which working mothers have served as head of state. Widespread legitimization of working mothers may weaken their perceived communal deficit, affecting the degree to which their role at work is seen as inconsistent with their role as a mother. Also, the current research examines only nonworking and full-time working parents. People may respond to mothers with alternative work arrangements (e.g., flextime, part-time) differently than to full-time working mothers (see Hall, Lee, Kossek, & Las Heras, 2012; Vinkenburg, Van Engen, Coffeng, & Dikkers, 2012). To the extent their employment goals are seen differently than women who work full-time, mothers with alternative work arrangements may be less vulnerable to the bad parent assumption. Additional research is necessary to address these questions and to obtain more information about the full scope of the bad parent assumption and its consequences.

These issues aside, the potential implications of this research are disheartening for working women in traditionally male fields. Our findings indicate yet another problem for women who strive for career success, contributing to their well-documented angst concerning the balance between work and family. Even if they feel that they can successfully manage both sets of obligations, our results suggest that third parties may assume otherwise and further disparage mothers for fully engaging in male sex-typed career pursuits. This assumed ineffectiveness as parents puts working mothers in a very difficult position, particularly in light of parallel assumptions about their incompetence at work (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008).

In conclusion, this research highlights the need to recognize that the distress experienced by working parents stems from issues other than just time constraints

and commitment trade-offs. Gender stereotypes and reactions to stereotype-inconsistent behavior can impact not only how working mothers are viewed as workers but also how they are viewed as parents, adding the burden of having to combat assumptions about their personal life as well as their work life. Failing to attend to this added stressor may hinder the success of work/family programs, particularly for working mothers, and may partly underlie the mixed findings about the effectiveness of these programs to significantly impact women's career advancement or alleviate the family–life demands that drive mothers from the workplace. Our findings suggest the need for work/family programs that acknowledge these problems and provide ways for working mothers to validate their effectiveness in both career and family domains, possibly by building a sense of community or work/family culture that recognizes and provides support in the face of assumptions about work or parental ineptitude. Only by helping working mothers understand and cope with these negative impressions can such programs have a significant and positive impact. The data reported here leave little doubt that, to achieve maximum sustainability, work/family programs must aid working mothers in impression management as well as time management, while focusing on stressors arising from family as well as work domains.

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