

# Bosses exaggerate women's family-work conflict

November 18 2009

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(PhysOrg.com) -- Decades into the era of two-earner households, the virtues of family-friendly policies are all but universally assumed in the corporate world. But now new research suggests serious potential pitfalls for women in those policies, hazards stemming from persistent misconceptions about women's susceptibility to conflicts between their family commitments and workplace responsibilities.

A study in the current issue of *The Academy of Management Journal* reveals that bosses generally perceive women workers to have more family-work conflict than men, even though this isn't the case. And this belief, mistaken though it is, leads supervisors to take a negative view of women employees' suitability for promotion.

"Managers have a tendency to categorize women as experiencing greater family-work conflict, even after controlling for family responsibilities and women's own perceptions of family-work conflict," conclude the study's authors, Jenny M. Hoobler, Sandy J. Wayne, and Grace Lemmon of the University of Illinois at Chicago. "Even though female employees actually reported slightly less family-work conflict than their male counterparts, their managers still perceived them as having greater family-work conflict, a perception that had significant implications for women's organizational advancement."

Surprisingly, "these perceptual biases held for both male and female managers," both of whom are prone to give credence to "stereotypical attributes ascribed to women...as responsible for family, which may be

seen as incompatible with leadership/managerial positions."

The study's findings, the authors continue, "raise concerns about company-sponsored programs that assist employees with managing family-work conflict...[E]mployees who participate in these programs may signal to their managers that they have family demands and need assistance in balancing home and work domains. Participation in these company-sponsored programs may reduce the likelihood that their managers view them as fitting with the job and organization, consequently reducing their promotion opportunities."

Comments Prof. Hoobler: "It isn't that these family-friendly programs don't have value. But I believe that they need to be seen in the context of what we found in this research -- namely, a tendency of managers not only to view women as the principal beneficiaries of family-friendly policies but to see those benefits as the flip side of some special susceptibility to family-work conflict. As long as managers buy into that stereotype, women who take advantage of programs like on-site child care or flextime or paid time-off for parenting are only undermining their prospects for advancement in their companies. What we're talking about here, I expect, is one of the subtle, entrenched forms of discrimination that make up the glass ceiling."

What to do then? "Like many stereotypes that affect workplace decisions, managers may not be aware of their own biases," the professors write. "Thus, the most important practical recommendation is also the most obvious: in order to reduce or eliminate the impact of sex on managers' perceptions of family-work conflict, perceptions of fit, work performance, and promotion decisions, managers must be made aware of their potential to stereotype...[C]ompanies must also bear responsibility for insuring that biased perceptions of care-giving roles do not affect promotion decisions."

The study's findings derive from surveys of 178 employees -- 52 managers and 126 subordinates -- of a large transportation company, a high-volume, goods-handling organization. In sum, responses of 126 supervisor-subordinate pairs were analyzed. Subordinates were questioned about their family status; demographics; family-work conflict; and whether or not they had been nominated for promotions. Managers provided information on demographics; their perceptions of subordinates' family-work conflict; subordinates' in-role performance; and their job fit, company fit, and promotability (e.g., "If I had to select a successor for my position, it would be this subordinate" -- agree or disagree). Among the managers, 84.1% were male and the average age was 40.2 years, whereas 65.9% of the subordinates were male and their average age was 35.6 years. About 24% of the managers and 27% of the subordinates had no children, and on average the managers had 2.4 children, compared to 1.4 children for the subordinates.

Subordinates and their bosses were probed on two aspects of family-work conflict -- to what extent stress stemming from family life negatively affected the subordinates' work and to what extent family responsibilities affected the amount of time subordinates devoted to work responsibilities and activities.

The professors found that, in general, the more children a worker had, the more family-work conflict bosses perceived. Bosses also associated responsibility for elder or dependent care with family-work conflict, but saw no problem in this regard with workers who had children under 12. "Interestingly, when subordinates reported they had a child under 12, their manager rated them higher in person-job fit and higher in promotability," the professors note, surmising that this reflects the idea "that when workers have children, they become better organized and better at multitasking, out of necessity." But, they add, "having more children probably connotes more distractions away from work, and is associated with managers' questioning the degree to which the

subordinate is aligned with the organization."

The professors also found little or no relationship "between subordinate (self-reported) family-work conflict and manager perceptions of subordinate family-work conflict." In addition, "female subordinates' reports of their own family-work conflict were not significantly different than male subordinates' and were, in fact, slightly lower."

Finally, though, whatever subordinates' family situation happened to be and however workers viewed its relationship to their jobs, the mere fact that one was a woman significantly increased the degree of family-work conflict that one's boss perceived. And that negative perception, the professors found, significantly affected how bosses assessed workers' suitability for their jobs and for employment in the company and ultimately whether they deserved to be promoted.

This leads the professors to observe in conclusion that "the women's movement of the 60s and 70s in the United States brought revolutionary change in terms of women's upward progress in organizations, but the biases supporting the glass ceiling today are much more subtle, multifaceted, and deeply embedded than they were then. Today women encounter biases so rooted in systems that they may not even be noticed until they are eradicated. In this study, we believe we have identified one such bias."

The new study, entitled "Bosses' Perceptions of Family-Work Conflict and Women's Promotability: Glass Ceiling Effects," is in the October/November issue of the *The Academy of [Management](#) Journal*.

Provided by Academy of Management

Citation: Bosses exaggerate women's family-work conflict (2009, November 18) retrieved 10 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2009-11-bosses-exaggerate-women-family-work-conflict.html>

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