

# Study shows people not only judge mothers based on work status, but also judge their kids

February 18 2010

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Although a woman's role in the home varies, a recent study shows that people favor not only a mother, but also her child and their relationship when she is not employed outside the home full time.

A Kansas State University study evaluated the perceptions people have of women and their children based on the woman's work status. The findings showed that people value, and do not differentiate between, mothers who stay in the home full time and mothers who find a compromise between working and at-home motherhood after they have a child. People also devalue mothers employed full time outside the home, relative to their non-employed counterparts, and perceive their children to be troubled and their relationships to be problematic.

"The most interesting, and potentially dangerous, finding is the view that if a child has a working mother, people don't like that child as much," said Jennifer Livengood, a K-State [graduate student](#) in psychology from Sweet Springs, Mo. "People really devalue a mom who works full time outside the home in comparison to a mom who doesn't. People like mothers who fulfill traditional stereotypes, like staying at home. That's just not a reality and not a preference for women as much as it used to be."

Livengood did the study for her master's thesis and collaborated with K-State's Mark Barnett, professor of psychology. The research was

presented by Tammy Sonnentag, [doctoral student](#) in psychology from Edgar, Wis., at the Society for Personality and [Social Psychology](#) conference in January.

Previous research has shown that people rate stay-at-home moms as more likeable than mothers employed outside the home. While studies have shown that many women now would like more of a compromise between staying home full time and working outside the home full time, Livengood said there is little research on the perceptions of mothers who pursue this middle ground.

"I've always been interested in how women are viewed based on their choice to work outside the home, or not, after they have a child," Livengood said.

The researchers did a study involving undergraduate students, all of whom were single, and 99 percent of the sample had no children. Each participant first listened to one of three interviews that reflected a working mother, a stay-at-home mother and what the researchers called a middle mother.

The working mother said in the interview that she went back to work two weeks after giving birth and worked more than 40 hours per week. The stay-at-home mother reported having stopped working outside of the home after giving birth. The middle mother described taking 18 months away from work after giving birth and then going back to work part time and gradually increasing her work hours.

"As a cover story, the participants were led to believe that there were many mother-child pairs being evaluated to see if people could tell if there were problems in the relationship," Livengood said.

Then, each participant watched the same video of a mother and her

4-year-old son completing a puzzle and playing a game together. Because of the audiotape, the participants either thought she was a working mother, a stay-at-home mother or a middle mother.

The participants then filled out a questionnaire that evaluated their [perception](#) of the mother. They rated statements like, "She does a good job as a mom." They also filled out a questionnaire about their perceptions of the child and responded to statements like, "This child is well-adjusted." The last questionnaire regarded their perception of the mother-child relationship, such as if they thought the pair worked well together.

The findings showed that the participants didn't differentiate between the stay-at-home mother and middle mother, but they did devalue the working mother in comparison. Livengood said the similar ratings for the two mothers might indicate that individuals understand women need a compromise. Findings also showed that not only did the participants devalue the mother who worked outside the home full time, but they also extended that negative perception to the child and their relationship.

"By just telling them the mother's work status -- by just manipulating that one variable -- it was strong enough for participants to discriminate between the children of working mothers and the other two mothers, as well as between their relationships," Livengood said.

She said these findings might indicate that people perceive the child of a working mother to have a higher incidence of behavioral and adjustment problems and their relationship to be relatively cold and troubled.

She said this perception might be specific to the sample of undergraduate students. If not, it could mean that people treat children of working mothers differently and have negative expectations, which could initiate a self-fulfilling prophecy with the child.

"Women are going to continue working, and they're going to continue having children," Livengood said. "Knowing how their decisions in these arenas are perceived by others may help us understand the foundations of these potential biases and identify ways to support mothers in their work-family decisions."

Provided by Kansas State University

Citation: Study shows people not only judge mothers based on work status, but also judge their kids (2010, February 18) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-02-people-mothers-based-status-kids.html>

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