

Study: Working moms multitask more and have worse time doing so than dads

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Not only are working mothers multitasking more frequently than working fathers, but their multitasking experience is more negative as well, according to a new study in the December issue of the *American Sociological Review*.

"[Gender differences](#) in multitasking are not only a matter of quantity but, more importantly, quality," said Shira Offer, the lead author of the study and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and [Anthropology](#) at Bar-Ilan University in Israel. "Our findings provide support for the popular notion that women are the ultimate multitaskers and suggest that the [emotional experience](#) of multitasking is very different for mothers and fathers."

In terms of quantity, the study found that [working mothers](#) spend about 10 more hours per week multitasking than do working fathers, 48.3 hours per week for moms compared to 38.9 for [dads](#).

"This suggests that working mothers are doing two activities at once more than two-fifths of the time they are awake, while working fathers are multitasking more than a third of their [waking hours](#)," said study coauthor Barbara Schneider, the John A. Hannah Chair and University Distinguished Professor in the College of Education and Department of Sociology at Michigan State University.

But the authors said an even bigger issue than the time [discrepancy](#) is the difference in the way multitasking makes working mothers and fathers

feel. "There is a considerable [disparity](#) in the quality of the multitasking experience for working moms and dads," Offer said. "For mothers, multitasking is—on the whole—a negative experience, whereas it is not for fathers. Only mothers report negative emotions and feeling stressed and conflicted when they multitask at home and in public settings. By contrast, multitasking in these contexts is a positive experience for fathers."

The Offer-Schneider study relies on data from the 500 Family Study, a multi-method investigation of how middle-class families balance family and work experiences. The 500 Family Study collected comprehensive information from 1999 to 2000 on families living in eight urban and suburban communities across the United States. Most parents in the 500 Family Study are highly educated, employed in professional occupations, and work, on average, longer hours and report higher earnings than do middle-class families in other nationally representative samples. Although the 500 Family Study is not a representative sample of families in the United States, it reflects one of the most time pressured segments of the population. The Offer-Schneider study uses a subsample of 368 mothers and 241 fathers in dual-earner families from the 500 Family Study.

According to Offer and Schneider, their study shows that at least some of the difference in the way multitasking makes working mothers and fathers feel is related to the types of activities they perform.

"When they multitask at home, for example, mothers are more likely than fathers to engage in housework or childcare activities, which are usually labor intensive efforts," Offer said. "Fathers, by contrast, tend to engage in other types of activities when they multitask at home, such as talking to a third person or engaging in self-care. These are less burdensome experiences."

The study found that among working mothers, 52.7 percent of all multitasking episodes at home involve housework, compared to 42.2 percent among working fathers. Additionally, 35.5 percent of all multitasking episodes at home involve childcare for mothers versus 27.9 for fathers.

The authors also believe that multitasking—particularly at home and in public—is a more negative experience for working mothers than for fathers because mothers' activities are more susceptible to outside scrutiny.

"At home and in public are the environments in which most household- and childcare-related tasks take place, and mothers' activities in these settings are highly visible to other people," Schneider said. "Therefore, their ability to fulfill their role as good mothers can be easily judged and criticized when they multitask in these contexts, making it a more stressful and negative experience for them than for fathers."

Working fathers don't typically face these types of pressures, the authors said. "Although they are also expected to be involved in their children's lives and do household chores, fathers are still considered to be the family's major provider," Offer said. "As a result, fathers face less normative pressures and are under less scrutiny when they perform and multitask at home and in public."

So, what can be done to improve the situation for mothers? It's pretty simple—fathers need to step up.

"The key to mothers' emotional well-being is to be found in the behavior of fathers," Offer said. "I think that in order to reduce mothers' likelihood of multitasking and to make their experience of [multitasking](#) less negative, fathers' share of housework and childcare has to further increase."

Policymakers and employers can help facilitate this, the authors said. "Policymakers and employers should think about how to alter current workplace cultures, which constitute serious obstacles when it comes to getting fathers more involved in their families and homes," Offer said.

"For example, I think that fathers should have more opportunities to leave work early or start work late, so they can participate in important family routines; to take time off for family events; and to limit the amount of work they bring home, so they can pay undivided attention to their children and spouse during the evening hours and on weekends. The goal is to initiate a process that will alter fathers' personal preferences and priorities and eventually lead to more egalitarian norms regarding mothers' and fathers' parenting roles."

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