

Marital Status Bias in Perceptions of Employees

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Three studies documented effects of marital status on perceptions of employees or prospective employees. In Experiment 1, participants rated a married female job applicant as less suitable for employment than a single counterpart. In Experiment 2, participants again perceived a female job applicant less favorably when she was married; in contrast, a male applicant was perceived more favorably when married. In Experiment 3, participants predicted that a recently married woman's job performance and dedication would decline, whereas a recently married man's dedication was predicted to rise; this difference made participants more willing to lay off the woman than the man.

Although more people than in the past are delaying marriage or choosing not to marry at all, marriage is still seen as a normative developmental milestone in American culture (DePaulo & Morris, 2005; Morris, Sinclair, & DePaulo, 2007). Single people, especially those who are not in a romantic relationship, are perceived as less responsible, less mature, and less well adjusted than married people (Etaugh & Birdoes, 1991; Morris, DePaulo, Hertel, & Taylor, 2008). Based on these stereotypes, single people might be expected to be seen as less committed to their jobs and less likely to succeed as employees compared to married people, and might thus be discriminated against in employment decisions. On the other hand, some anecdotal evidence suggests that people expect single individuals to be able and willing to work longer hours than married people, because the single people may have fewer obligations outside of work (DePaulo, 2006), and this might lead people to favor singles in employment decisions.

Which of these two views is correct: Are people generally biased in favor of, or against, single individuals (vs. married individuals) in perceptions related to employment decisions? Due to societal conventions concerning the wearing of a wedding ring, marital status

is a personal characteristic about which women and men in the American cultural context cannot avoid conveying information (whether accurate or inaccurate) in face-to-face meetings, such as job interviews. The question of marital status biases in person perception, vis-à-vis employment decisions, thus has strong practical relevance, beyond any historical and theoretical interest it may also carry for scholars. In this report, we argue and adduce evidence that the effect of marital status on perceptions of employees may depend on the employee's gender. Female employees or potential employees may be viewed as less suitable for employment when married than when single, whereas the reverse may be true for men.

GENDER ROLES IN MARRIAGE AND PERCEPTIONS OF EMPLOYEES

Traditional conceptions of marriage as entailing greater social responsibilities outside the workplace for women (e.g., Hoobler, Wayne, & Lemmon, 2009) may promote perceptions of married women as less suitable for employment compared to single women. In particular, expectations of motherhood may create bias against married women in perceptions of employability. Qualitative research suggests that employers discriminate against mothers (Blair-Loy, 2003; Crittendon, 2001), and surveys have found lower wages among mothers

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than comparable women without children (Anderson, Binder, & Krause, 2003; Budig & England, 2001), even in nations with generally high levels of gender equality such as Norway (Hardoy & Schone, 2008). Indeed, in a laboratory experiment, participants rated women with children as less competent and committed to their jobs than women without children, and in a second study, real employers were less likely to respond to applications from women with children than women without (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007). In the same study, parental status did not affect responses to men. Recent research has found that even when mothers show definitive evidence that they are highly competent and committed to their jobs, evaluators in an employment context still discriminate against them (Benard & Correll, 2010). The mere expectation of future childrearing responsibilities may also bias people against women; studies have found that people rate pregnant women as less competent than others (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004) and treat them with more hostility when they apply for jobs (Hebl, King, Glick, Kazama, & Singletary, 2007). Thus, to the extent that a woman's choice to be married is perceived as an indication of an intention to have children, some of the employment penalty applied to mothers may also attach to married women due merely to their marital status.

Assumptions about employees' motivations to earn money may also engender bias against married women. Traditionally, married men have been assigned a social role of earning money at work, whereas married women have been assigned a social role of fulfilling responsibilities at home (Eagly, 1987). Although gender roles within heterosexual marriage are rapidly evolving, with more than one third of married American women now out-earning their husbands (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010), these traditional conceptions of social roles may still influence people's expectations and perceptions. Due to the assumption that women are less likely to be relied upon as the primary breadwinner for a married couple, people might expect married female employees to be less dedicated to their jobs compared to their single counterparts (who must provide their own income), whereas people might expect male employees to be more motivated in their jobs if married.

A further reason to expect that people may discriminate against married women in employment decisions, in addition to expectations of greater family responsibility (e.g., childrearing) and less financial responsibility, involves the activation of gender stereotypes. Because traditional social roles in marriage cast women as caregivers more than breadwinners, married women may be seen as more prototypically feminine than other women, and prototypical examples within a category are likely to elicit stronger stereotypes (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Stereotypically feminine traits (e.g., nurturance, communality) do not match the attributes often considered conducive

to career advancement in many jobs in American culture (e.g., agency, dominance; Lewis, 2001; Liff & Ward, 2001). Therefore, being perceived through feminine stereotypes might lead married women to be seen less positively in ways that affect employment decisions. Research advancing the "lack-of-fit" model has shown that women tend to be evaluated poorly on professional dimensions to the degree that gender stereotypes are activated (Heilman, 1980, 1983, 2001; Heilman & Stopeck, 1985; Heilman & Welle, 2006).

PRIOR RESEARCH ON MARITAL STATUS AND PERCEPTIONS OF EMPLOYEES

Very limited prior research has investigated whether people show marital-status biases in perceptions related to employment decisions. Indeed, searches of the PsycINFO database using key terms such as *marital status*, *marriage*, *gender*, *perceptions*, *bias*, *discrimination*, *employment*, *work*, and *workplace* yielded only a handful of relevant results. Experiments from one research team found that marital status did not generally affect people's perceptions of women's professional competence (Etaugh & Malstrom, 1981; Etaugh & Petroski, 1985). However, the generalizability of these results is called into question by the use of a target person who was 41 years old. Decades ago, when the research was conducted, this was a very nonnormative age for a woman to have never been married, which may have biased some participants against the single woman. In addition, the target person in these studies was employed as a counseling psychologist. According to the lack-of-fit model of gender discrimination in employment decisions (Heilman, 1980), any extra perception of prototypical femininity accorded to a married woman might not have harmed perceptions of her employability at a job in which stereotypically feminine qualities might be seen as helpful, whereas the story may differ for jobs in which the stereotypically desirable qualities are gender neutral or more masculine.

THE PRESENT RESEARCH

To examine whether people show biases in their perceptions of employees or prospective employees based on marital status—especially for female employees—we conducted three survey experiments. In the first experiment, we asked participants to report their perceptions of a prospective female employee (e.g., her willingness to work long hours) whose purported marital status varied by condition. The second experiment looked at how perceptions of prospective employees varied by marital status for both women and men. Finally, in the third

experiment, we asked participants to predict how a male or female employee's suitability for his or her current job (e.g., dedication and work performance) would change following his or her recent marriage, and we examined whether these predictions affected participants' willingness to lay off the hypothetical employee.

EXPERIMENT 1

In this study, we investigated how perceptions of a female job applicant would differ according to her marital status. For the place of prospective employment, we chose an industry (strategy consulting) that is a popular career aspiration among our participant population of undergraduates at a highly selective university and that is generally seen as more gender neutral than comparably popular industries that can be entered into directly after graduation (e.g., investment banking). Based on the foregoing analysis of traditional gender roles in marriage, we predicted that participants would rate the target individual as less suitable for employment when she was married compared to when she was single.

Method

Twenty-nine undergraduates (18 women, 11 men) at a West Coast American university completed a survey as part of a mass questionnaire administration in exchange for course credit. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 22 years old ($M = 19.2$).

Participants reported their impressions of a female job applicant who was either single (single condition) or married (married condition). They first read a description of the task as follows:

You are a manager at an elite strategy consulting firm. You are reviewing applications for a consultant position, and after narrowing down your pool of applicants based on their résumés, cover letters, and interviews, you decide to look at applicants' Facebook pages to help make your final decision. Please examine the following page, and then answer the questions about your impressions of the applicant on the reverse side of this page.

Below these instructions was a printed copy of a fictional Facebook page created for the purposes of this study, featuring a small photo of a White woman and personal information about her, including her name (Taylor Brown), location (Silicon Valley, CA), sex (female),¹ birthday (October 20, 1984—making her 25 years old at the time of the study), hometown (Boulder,

CO), relationship status, political views (liberal), favorite quotations (one each from Annie Dillard and Henry Ford), and the undergraduate school (Stanford University, B.A. in Human Biology) and graduate school (Stanford University, M.A. in Psychology) she attended. All information was identical between the two conditions except for relationship status (single or married) and the photo (the applicant alone in the single condition; the applicant with her husband, a White man of the same age, in the married condition).

On the next page, participants used 7-point Likert scales, from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), to indicate their level of agreement with four statements related to the applicant's suitability for the consulting job. They rated the degree to which they thought "this applicant would be willing to work very long hours (up to 80 per week) for the firm"; "this applicant would work hard to rise in the firm's hierarchy, rather than leave after a year or two for other employment"; "this applicant's social life and obligations would interfere with the quality of her work" (reverse-scored); and "this applicant would succeed as a consultant at the firm."

Results and Discussion

The four-item scale measuring the applicant's suitability for the job showed adequate reliability ($\alpha = .70$). Averaging across the items, participants who viewed the single applicant rated her as more suitable for the job ($M = 5.23$, $SD = 0.69$) compared to participants who viewed the married applicant ($M = 4.56$, $SD = 0.89$), $t(27) = 2.19$, $p = .04$, $d = 0.84$. A two-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) revealed that this effect was not moderated by participant gender, $F(1, 25) = .01$, $p = .95$.

Consistent with the hypothesis, participants rated a female applicant to a strategy consulting firm as more suitable for the job (willing to work long hours, committed to advancing in the firm, undistracted by social responsibilities, likely to succeed at the job) when she was single than when she was married. However, it was unclear from this experiment whether a similar effect would obtain for a male applicant, or whether the penalizing effect of marriage is unique to women. It was also unclear whether the effect was limited to a single industry (consulting) or would generalize to other career paths popular among our participant sample, such as law.

EXPERIMENT 2

In this study, we sought to replicate our results from Experiment 1 using a different industry (law, where 47% of entry-level associates are women; Weiss, 2011), and we examined whether marital status would affect

¹At the time that these studies were conducted, Facebook profiles displayed a user's sex but not his or her gender.

perceptions of a male job applicant in the same way that it affected perceptions of a female job applicant. We hypothesized that because traditional gender roles dictate that married men must earn a steady income to support their families, people's employment-related perceptions might actually be biased *in favor* of married men compared to single men—the reverse of the pattern we found for women in Experiment 1.

Method

One hundred thirty-six students (81 women, 55 men; 48 White, 20 Black, 11 Latino, 42 Asian, 15 multiracial or other) at a West Coast American university completed a survey on the computer program MediaLab after completing an unrelated experiment in exchange for payment. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 30 years old ($M = 20.4$).

Participants reported their impressions of a job applicant who was either female or male and either single or married. There were thus two between-subjects factors—applicant gender and applicant marital status. Participants first read a description of the task that was identical to that in Experiment 1, except that the participant was now “a partner at a law firm” rather than a manager at a consulting firm and was reviewing applications for “an associate position” rather than a consultant position.

On the next screen was a copy of a fictional Facebook page created for the purposes of this study, featuring a small photo of a White woman or man alone in the single conditions or a photo of the woman and man together in the married conditions (the same photo was used in both conditions but was cropped in the single conditions) and personal information about the applicant, including his or her name, location, sex, birthday, hometown, relationship status, political views, favorite quotations, and the undergraduate and graduate schools he or she attended. Most of this information, including the gender-neutral name Taylor, was identical to that included in Experiment 1, except for age (now born in 1982, “Taylor” was 27 at the time of Experiment 2), photo (these were not the same individuals depicted in Experiment 1), undergraduate institution (University of Southern California instead of Stanford), and graduate degree earned (a J.D. in 2008 instead of an M.A.). This information was identical between the four conditions except for relationship status (single or married), sex (male or female), and the photo.

On the next page, participants used 7-point Likert scales to indicate their level of agreement with four statements related to the applicant's suitability for the law firm job. These statements were identical to those used in Experiment 1, except that “associate” was substituted for “consultant.”

Results and Discussion

The four-item scale measuring the applicant's suitability for the job showed adequate reliability ($\alpha = .73$). Using the average of the four job-suitability items as the dependent variable, a two-way ANOVA revealed that although there were no main effects for applicant gender and applicant marital status ($F_s < 0.20$, $p_s > .65$), there was a significant interaction between these factors, $F(1, 132) = 12.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = .09$ (see Table 1 for means and standard deviations). Replicating the results from Experiment 1, participants who viewed the single female applicant rated her as more suitable for the job compared to participants who viewed the married female applicant, $t(132) = 2.87$, $p = .005$, $d = 0.67$. Also as predicted, the opposite pattern held for men: Participants who viewed the single male applicant rated him as less suitable for the job compared to participants who viewed the married male applicant, $t(132) = 2.23$, $p = .03$, $d = 0.48$. A three-way ANOVA revealed that the interaction of applicant gender and marital status was not moderated by participant gender, $F(1, 128) = 0.55$, $p = .46$.

Consistent with the hypothesis, participants rated a female applicant to a law firm as more suitable for the job (willing to work long hours, committed to advancing in the firm, undistracted by social responsibilities, likely to succeed at the job) when she was single than when she was married. This marriage penalty did not hold for male job-seekers: A male applicant to the law firm was actually seen as more suitable for the job when he was married than when he was single. Although the primary focus in our research was the possible penalty attached to being a married female, the latter finding suggests the need for future research to examine a possible employment penalty attached to being a single male.

One question that remained unanswered by Experiments 1 and 2 was whether *marriage* per se is what drove the effects, or whether simply being coupled in a romantic relationship might fully have driven the effects. That is, are women penalized—and men benefited—when they get married to someone with whom they are already in a relationship, and thus notions of traditional gender roles in marriage may become activated and color people's perceptions of them, or is the essential difference in people's perceptions between being fully single and being in a relationship, whether married or unmarried? To address

TABLE 1
Perceptions of Applicant's Overall Suitability to Job (Experiment 2)

<i>Single Woman</i>	<i>Married Woman</i>	<i>Single Man</i>	<i>Married Man</i>
4.87 _a (0.94)	4.29 _b (0.54)	4.40 _b (0.91)	4.88 _a (0.85)

Note. Means not sharing subscripts differ significantly from each other by Fisher's Least Significant Difference test ($p < .05$).

this question, a third experiment examined directly how people perceived the continued job suitability (e.g., work performance, dedication) trajectory of a man or a woman who was recently married. This experiment's design was based on the assumption that people would generally perceive a recently married person as having already been in a romantic relationship with his or her spouse prior to the marriage itself.

EXPERIMENT 3

In this study, we asked participants to predict how a female or male employee's suitability for their job would change following marriage, and we asked the participants how likely they would be to lay off the recently married employee if layoffs needed to occur within the company. To examine the generalizability of the findings in Experiments 1 and 2, we included less specific information about the nature of the employee's job and about the employee (e.g., age, educational background) in this experiment. We also did not include photo stimuli, to rule out the possibility that the results in Experiments 1 and 2 were due to differences between the women's and men's photos other than gender, or were limited to perceptions of married individuals who post photos of themselves with their spouse (rather than alone) on Facebook (perhaps such individuals are seen as more enmeshed with their spouses than is typical).

We predicted that people would expect a female employee to decline in her job suitability following marriage, whereas this effect would not hold for a male employee, and, in fact, he may be perceived as more suited for employment following marriage. In addition, we predicted that this difference in perceptions of recently married employees, depending on the employee's gender, would lead participants to be more willing to lay off the female employee than the male employee.

Method

One hundred twenty-three students (73 women, 50 men; 68 White, 5 Black, 6 Latino, 18 Asian, 26 multiracial or other) at a West Coast American university completed a survey as part of a mass questionnaire administration in exchange for course credit. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 22 years old ($M = 19.4$).

Participants reported their impressions of a male or female employee who had recently gotten married. They first read a description of the employee as follows:

John [Jane] is an average employee. He [she] is slow to get work done, but he [she] gets it all done eventually. He [She] often stays out at lunch too long hanging out

with friends. John [Jane] recently got married and will be returning from his [her] honeymoon next week.

Participants then answered four questions about the employee. The first three questions concerned predicted changes in the employee following marriage. Using 7-point scales, participants indicated how the employee's "work performance [would] change now that he [she] is married" (1 = *get a lot worse*; 4 = *stay the same*; 7 = *get a lot better*), how the employee's "dedication to his job [would] change now that he [she] is married" (1 = *decrease a lot*; 4 = *stay the same*; 7 = *increase a lot*), and how the employee's "desire to remain employed [would] change now that he [she] is married" (1 = *decrease a lot*; 4 = *stay the same*; 7 = *increase a lot*). Finally, participants were asked how likely they would be to lay off the employee if they were executives in the employee's company and had to lay off some of their employees (1 = *very unlikely*; 7 = *very likely*).

Results and Discussion

The three-item scale measuring predicted changes in the employee's suitability to the job (following marriage) showed adequate reliability ($\alpha = .75$). Averaging across the items, participants predicted worse changes following marriage for the female employee ($M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.84$) than for the male employee ($M = 4.73$, $SD = 1.02$), $t(121) = 6.59$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.19$. As shown in Table 2, for each of the three items, one-sample t tests revealed that the female employee was predicted to become *less* suitable after her marriage (i.e., a mean score significantly below the midpoint of 4), whereas for two of these items, the male employee was predicted to become *more* suitable after his marriage (i.e., a mean score significantly above the midpoint of 4).

Participants also reported being more likely to lay off Jane ($M = 4.65$, $SD = 1.22$) than John ($M = 4.16$, $SD = 1.42$), $t(121) = 2.02$, $p < .05$, $d = 0.37$. When both employee gender and the predicted change in the employee following marriage (i.e., the average of the first three items) were entered into a linear regression model

TABLE 2
Predicted Changes in Employee's Suitability to Job Following Marriage (Experiment 3)

Job Suitability Metric	Woman (Jane)	Man (John)
Work performance	3.69** (0.98)	4.12 (1.25)
Dedication to job	3.50*** (1.00)	4.41* (1.21)
Desire to remain employed	3.66* (1.26)	5.65*** (1.18)

Note. Significance tests are one-sample t tests against a test value of 4, the scale midpoint. Values above 4 indicate a predicted improvement; values below 4 indicate a predicted decline.

* $p < .05$. ** $p = .01$. *** $p < .001$.

predicting the likelihood of laying off the employee, employee gender was no longer significant ($b = 0.14$, $SE b = 0.26$), $t(120) = 0.56$, $p = .58$, whereas predicted change in the employee's suitability to the job was a significant predictor of laying off the employee ($b = 0.57$, $SE b = 0.12$), $t(120) = 4.75$, $p < .001$. The Preacher and Hayes (2008) bootstrapping technique (with 10,000 iterations) produced a 95% confidence interval for the indirect effect that ranged from 0.35 to 0.99, which does not include zero. Thus, predicted changes in the employee following marriage significantly mediated the relationship between employee gender and the decision to lay off the employee. None of our effects for this experiment were moderated by participant gender ($F_s < 1$, $p_s > .5$).

Consistent with the hypothesis, participants rated a female employee as less likely to exhibit continued suitability for a job after her marriage compared to a male employee who was also recently married. A recently married woman was seen as likely to become worse performing and to become less dedicated to and desiring of her job after marriage, whereas a recently married man's job-suitability trajectory was expected to be the reverse after marriage. Furthermore, participants exhibited a greater willingness to lay off the average-performing, recently married woman compared to her male counterpart, and this difference in the decision to lay off was mediated by differences in predicted employee changes following marriage. Thus, even apart from any effect of simply being in a romantic relationship, the additional act of getting married may make perceptions of women's suitability for and commitment to their jobs more negative, and these changes in perceptions may have serious consequences for women's careers. This study suggests the need to examine biases related to women's relationship statuses at a fine-grained level, beyond the simple distinction between being single versus coupled.

GENERAL DISCUSSION

Although women are entering the workforce in a variety of fields more than ever before, their trajectories in the workplace continue to lag behind men's. They receive fewer promotions and ultimately make up only 6% of the highest ranking executive positions in United States companies (Catalyst, 2009). The three experiments reported here suggest one possible contributor to this phenomenon: People may perceive women as less suitable for employment following marriage, whereas people may perceive men as *more* suitable for employment following marriage. In Experiment 1, participants rated a prospective female employee as more suitable for and more likely to succeed in a role as a strategy consultant when she was single compared to when she was married. Experiment 2 replicated this effect for a woman who

applied for a job at a law firm and found a reverse pattern for a prospective male employee, who was seen as more suited for the job when married than when single. In Experiment 3, participants predicted that a woman's job performance and commitment would decline following marriage, whereas a man's commitment to his job was expected to increase following marriage; moreover, this difference in predicted employee changes following marriage mediated a greater willingness among participants to lay off the recently married woman than the recently married man. In all three experiments, the results did not differ by participant gender.

Four limitations of these studies point to important directions for future research on the effect of marital status on perceptions of employees. First, it is unclear how perceptions of employees might be affected by their status as divorced or widowed, or how such perceptions might be affected by marriage to a same-sex partner; people's expectations of traditional gender roles within marriage may be diminished in the latter case. Second, the degree to which marital status bias may be mediated by expectations of parenthood is unknown. Future research should include variations in both marital status and parental status within the same experimental design, to better integrate the present findings with the broader literature on the motherhood penalty (e.g., Correll et al., 2007). Varying target age may also yield important information; it is possible that the youth (mid-20s) of the target stimuli in Experiments 1 and 2 especially prompted expectations of future parenthood. Third, insofar as married women may be seen as more prototypically feminine in their gender roles than single women, the bias against married women employees may be diminished, or may even be reversed, for jobs that are gender typed as more feminine than the consulting and legal jobs specified in Experiments 1 and 2 (see Heilman's, 1980, lack-of-fit model). It is worth noting, however, that in Experiment 3, which did not specify a particular type of job, participants still expected a female employee's work performance and commitment to her job to decline following marriage. Fourth, participants in the present research were primarily college students, and it is possible that the effects of marital status on perceptions of employees may differ for individuals with more managerial experience or who are themselves married. We would expect that, if anything, the effects we documented would be magnified for actual employers, outside the highly progressive environment of the college campus on which we surveyed participants. However, it is an open question whether married individuals' perceptions of single versus married employees may differ from those of the predominantly single college students whom we surveyed.

The three experiments reported in this article suggest that people may be biased against married women, as well as single men, in perceptions related to employability

and that these perceptions may affect important decisions such as whether to lay off an employee. Although single women appear to be perceived as more employable than married women, being single may not be an altogether positive thing for working women, to the degree that this favoritism toward single women partly reflects expectations that they have fewer social responsibilities outside the workplace and therefore require less flexibility (see Casper & DePaulo, in press). Future research should examine the possibility that single women may be expected to work for longer hours and at less desirable tasks than married women, for no extra pay. For men, on the other hand, singleness may have multiple disadvantages in the workplace. The present research suggests that people perceive single men's employability less favorably than married men's, perhaps due to traditional expectations that men's financial responsibility increases after marriage, with a correspondent increase in their dedication to their jobs. At the same time that employers might expect married men to work harder while on the job, they may also be more accommodating if married men ask for flexibility due to family responsibilities. Indeed, married men (Hersch & Stratton, 2000; Western, Hewitt, & Baxter, 2005), and especially married men who are fathers (Hodges & Budig, 2010; Lundberg & Rose, 2000), are paid more by employers for the same work as their single counterparts, suggesting that employers may grant privileges to married men for their presumed family responsibilities.

In face-to-face encounters, such as in a job interview or at a current place of employment, there is no option of indicating nothing about marital status to employers, because when deciding whether or not to don a wedding ring (regardless of one's actual marital status), there is no marital status-neutral option equivalent to the personal titles of "Ms." and "Mr." Thus, employers may sometimes have the option of discriminating based on marital status even if it is illegal to ask directly about it. The studies reported here raise concerns that, equipped with information about employees' or prospective employees' marital status, employers' perceptions of married women and single men may be unfavorably biased. Further research into marital-status biases is especially urgent in light of recent evidence that people regard marital status discrimination as more morally acceptable than discrimination based on other visible characteristics such as race, age, and weight (Morris et al., 2007).

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