When Equal Isn’t Really Equal: The Masculine Dilemma of Seeking Work Flexibility

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Two studies explored gender-relevant expectations and consequences of seeking flexible work arrangements. Study 1 examined preferences and expectations of students nearing the job market. While men and women valued work flexibility and work–life balance equally, women reported greater intentions to seek flexibility in their careers. Intentions were predicted by projected perceptions on gender-relevant traits. In Study 2, participants evaluated hypothetical targets who sought a flexible work arrangement after the birth of a child. Flexibility seekers were given lower job evaluations than targets with traditional work arrangements; however, they were also seen as warmer and more moral. Men may be particularly penalized at the character level, as flexibility seekers were seen as less masculine and rated lower on masculine prescriptive traits and higher on feminine prescriptive traits. Together these studies suggest that while men value work flexibility they may be reluctant to seek it because of (potentially well-founded) fears of stigmatization.

The last quarter century has brought enormous gender-related changes to the American workforce. Women have entered the labor force at higher rates than ever. Today, more women go to college and earn advanced degrees than men (Freeman, 2005); consequently, women are increasingly becoming the household breadwinners (a quarter of wives now outearn their husbands; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2008). In addition, the recent economic recession disproportionately affects male workers, who account for around three quarters of job loss (Boushey, 2009). These shifting realities have brought with them changes in expectations where work and family intersect. Though not equal, men’s and women’s contributions to domestic work (Bianchi, Milkie, Sayer, & Robinson, 2000) and childcare

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(Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2003) have become more balanced. Workers increasingly desire a balance between work life and home life (Allen, 2008), and evidence suggests that work–family balance benefits one’s advancement in organizations (King, Botsford, & Huffman, 2009).

One response to these trends is for organizations to enact policies that allow for flexible work arrangements. Indeed, a recent survey finds that more than two thirds of private American companies offer flexible schedules, approximately half offer part-time work and job shares, and approximately one third offer compressed work weeks and telecommuting opportunities (Bond, Galinsky, Kim, & Brownfield, 2005). However, despite research showing the psychological and organizational benefits of work flexibility programs, these programs are still underutilized, particularly by men (Allen, 2001; Hill, Hawkins, Martinson, & Ferris, 2003; Kossek, Lautsch, & Eaton, 2006).

Here, we propose that organizational policy changes allowing greater work flexibility may be stymied by traditional gendered attitudes about work and family that are resistant to change. More specifically, men’s reluctance to seek work flexibility may stem in part from the perception that doing so will result in significant penalties. Powerful norms dictating complete devotion to work are deeply ingrained, and the structure of many organizations is built around the myth of an ideal worker who can work full-time with no family conflict (Blair-Loy, 2003; Weber, 1959; Williams, 1999). Because of these beliefs, workers may fear that seeking flexible arrangements sends a negative message about their commitment to work. Indeed, these fears may be justified. Cohen and Single (2001) found that male and female accountants who used flexible work arrangements were seen as less likely to advance and more likely to leave their jobs. Judiesch and Lyness (1999) found that male and female managers who took leaves of absence were promoted less and received fewer raises than those who did not. Rogier and Padgett (2004) found that people evaluated hypothetical women on flexible work schedules as having less career dedication and advancement potential than women on traditional schedules.

Of the studies that have looked at attitudes toward flexible work arrangements and evaluations of those with flexible arrangements, most have considered the issue from the perspective of women seeking flexibility. This is perhaps reflective of a systemic bias in conceptualizing the roles of men and women in the workplace. Gender theories suggest that both the meaning of work and the importance of employment to identity differ for men and women. Whereas the caretaker role is central to feminine identity, the breadwinner or provider role is central to masculine identity (Gilmore, 1990; Pleck, 1995; Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Thébaud, 2010).

Further, unlike womanhood, manhood is viewed as a tenuous state that can be lost, and must be constantly demonstrated (Bosson & Vandello, 2011; Gilmore, 1990; Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, & Weaver, 2008). Thus, failing to live up to masculine prescriptions as family provider may endanger one’s very status as
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a man (Michniewicz, Vandello, & Bosson, 2011). Given the centrality of work to normative masculinity, one might reasonably assume that the consequences of seeking work flexibility will be more negative for men than women.

The current research explored how cultural beliefs about manhood and womanhood impact men’s and women’s tendencies to seek flexible work arrangements. As mentioned above, very little research has focused on men’s expectations regarding work flexibility and how seeking work flexibility impacts men. Butler and Skateboo (2004) found that men, but not women, who were described as having a work–family conflict (causing them to miss work) received lower overall performance ratings and lower reward recommendations (quarterly bonuses) when compared with men who did not experience this conflict; women’s ratings were unaffected by a work–family conflict. Similarly, an experiment by Allen and Russell (1999) found that men who took a 6-month parental leave of absence were less likely to be recommended for organizational rewards than men who did not take leave. However, we know of no research that has directly compared the penalization of men and women who seek flexible work arrangements, and furthermore, past research has focused mostly on work-related penalties rather than interpersonal stigma and character judgments (for an exception, see Rudman & Mescher, 2013).

Evaluations of those seeking flexible work arrangements are likely shaped both by norms of work devotion and by gender ideologies that place importance on the provider role for men and the caretaker role for women. Thus we might expect that men will be reluctant to seek out flexible work arrangements, and evaluations of people who seek flexible work arrangements will depend on the target’s gender and the nature of the evaluation.

Our first study explored the career expectations of a sample of college students. We asked them to rank the importance of work–life balance and work flexibility relative to a number of other job characteristics. Consistent with past research (e.g., Kerpelman & Schvaneveldt, 1999), we expected both men and women to value work flexibility and work–life balance highly. We also asked participants to predict whether they would actually prioritize and seek out flexible work arrangements. Here we expected men to be more reluctant than women to seek such arrangements, for fear of gender-related penalties. We were further interested in men’s and women’s projections of how they would be perceived along various dimensions for taking advantage of flexible work arrangements, and how these projections were related to their stated intentions to prioritize and seek such arrangements. We predicted that men’s intentions to seek work flexibility would be predicted by their projected perceptions on normative masculine (but not normative feminine) traits. Conversely, women’s intentions to seek work flexibility should be predicted by their projected perceptions on normative feminine (but not masculine) traits.

Our second study tested whether fears of penalization for seeking work flexibility are justified. Specifically, we measured people’s perceptions of men and
women who seek one type of flexible work arrangement: reduced work hours after the birth of a child. We examined two potential sources of negative evaluations. In addition to examining potential career backlash, we explored interpersonal stigma associated with seeking work flexibility. It may be, and previous research certainly suggests, that those seeking reduced work hours are penalized in terms of job evaluations, but punishment may also take the form of negative or ambivalent character evaluations (see also Berdahl & Moon, 2013, on masculinity harassment and mistreatment of caregiving fathers).

**Study 1**

The goals of the first study were to explore the extent to which men and women value and prioritize work flexibility and work–life balance, as well as their intentions to seek out work flexibility in their own careers. In addition, uniquely we examined whether people’s expectations of stigmatization (negative impressions) influenced their stated intentions to seek work flexibility. We predicted that men would be less interested in taking advantage of flexible work policies to the extent they expected to be downgraded on valued masculine attributes if they did so.

**Method**

**Participants.** One hundred fifty psychology students (81 men and 69 women) completed an online survey in partial fulfillment of course requirements. On average, the survey took about 16 minutes to complete. We dropped from analyses twenty-eight participants who completed the survey in less than 5 minutes, or whose responses indicated insufficient attention to the survey. Thus, the final sample comprised 122 students (63 males and 59 females, $M_{age} = 20.2$; 56% White, 12% African American, 12% Asian, 13% Latino, 3% Arabic/Middle Eastern, 3% bi-racial, and 3% “other”). 54% of the sample was employed.

**Materials.** The first section of the survey asked participants to rank order 10 job features “in terms of their personal importance to you in choosing an employer.” Embedded within items such as “personal autonomy,” “compensation (salary),” and “opportunity for rapid advancement” were the two main items of interest: “opportunity for flexible work arrangements (e.g., temporary leave, part-time, flexi-time, flexi-place)” and “work/life balance (e.g., job accommodates/encourages a healthy balance between work life and home life).” An additional item measured the more specific “family support programs (e.g., on-site childcare).”

The second section asked five questions about participants’ specific intentions to seek flexible work arrangements (defined as “temporary leave, half-time, job-share, flexi-time or flexi-place, and other similar programs that seek to
accommodate work–life balance”) in their own post-graduate careers, using 5-point scales ranging from 1 (very unlikely) to 5 (very likely): How likely are you to intentionally seek out a career in which flexible work arrangements are an option? How likely are you to prioritize availability of flexible work programs when deciding among potential employers? How likely are you to mention a desire to utilize a flexible work program when interviewing for a position with a potential employer? How likely are you to enroll in half-time, job share, or otherwise reduced work schedule? How likely are you to take advantage of flexi-time (wherein you determine the days/times that you work, on a schedule that differs from the organization’s normal work hours) or flexi-place (telecommuting or otherwise working from home) programs? These five items were combined to form a composite measure of intentions to seek work flexibility ($\alpha = .74$).

Next, participants were asked to imagine that they had enrolled in a work flexibility program offered by a hypothetical future employer. They then predicted how supervisors and coworkers would perceive them: “If I sought a flexible work arrangement, I believe my supervisors/coworkers would view me as [more/less] — than if I did not seek such an arrangement.” Participants estimated others’ perceptions of them on 29 traits, using a scale that ranged from 1 (much less so) to 5 (much more so). We chose 15 traits a priori that fell broadly along a dimension of male prescriptions/proscriptions (i.e., traits viewed as desirable/undesirable for men) and 14 traits that fell along a dimension of female prescriptions/proscriptions (i.e., traits viewed as desirable/undesirable for women). For the masculine traits, from Rudman, Moss-Racusin, Phelan, and Nauts (2012), we selected five traits rated as male prescriptions (has business sense, high self-esteem, career oriented, has leadership ability, competitive) and five male proscriptions (insecure, gullible, uncertain, weak, indecisive; all reverse-scored). In addition, reflecting the centrality of competence to the male gender role, we added five traits assessing this dimension (capable, organized, competent, intelligent, skilled; see Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004, and Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2005). For the feminine traits, from Rudman et al. (2012), we selected five female prescriptive traits (humble, emotional, warm, interested in children, sensitive to others), and five female proscriptive traits (dominating, aggressive, controlling, demanding, intimidating; all reverse-scored). In addition, reflecting the centrality of warmth/communality to the female gender role, we added four traits assessing warmth or sociability (good-natured, sincere, likeable, friendly; note that “warm” is already included among the female prescriptions; see Cuddy et al., 2004, and Leach et al., 2005). The masculine and feminine composites both showed excellent reliability ($\alpha = .91$ and $\alpha = .84$, respectively). Finally, participants answered several demographic and employment-related questions.

Procedure. Participants were recruited through an online research participant pool system. Upon signing up for the study, participants were directed to an
Table 1. Male and Female Participants’ Rankings of Various Job Characteristics in Terms of Personal Importance

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<td>5.</td>
<td>Rapid advancement</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>Autonomy</td>
<td>Autonomy</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Stimulating tasks</td>
<td>Clear organizational structure</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>Clear organizational structure</td>
<td>Collaborative environment</td>
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<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Collaborative environment</td>
<td>Stimulating tasks</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Family support program</td>
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Note. The above job characteristics were briefly defined for participants.

Results

Ranking work flexibility and work–life balance. We first examined how men and women ranked work flexibility and work–life balance among the list of job characteristics. Table 1 shows men’s and women’s rankings. Two things stand out. First, work flexibility and work–life balance are highly valued by both men and women, with only compensation ranked higher (see also Kerpelman & Schvaneveldt, 1999). Second, there is a remarkable degree of consensus across genders: Men and women both ranked work–life balance and work flexibility in the second and third positions. There were in fact no significant gender differences in the average rankings of any of the 10 job characteristics (all ps > .15). The “family support programs” item was ranked as least important by both male and female participants; this probably reflects the fact that the vast majority of the sample (96.7%) did not have children, and thus daycare was not a salient concern.

Intentions to seek work flexibility. Despite valuing work flexibility equally, men and women differed in their anticipation of actually seeking such an arrangement upon entering the workforce, as expected. Using the aggregate work flexibility intentions measure, men reported significantly lower intentions to seek flexible work arrangements ($M = 3.45, SD = 0.81$) than women did ($M = 3.73, SD = 0.62, t(120) = 2.10, p < .05, d = .39$).
Correlates of intentions to seek work flexibility. To understand why men report a lower likelihood than women of seeking work flexibility, despite valuing it equally, we next explored several potential predictors of intentions to seek work flexibility. We suspected that men’s reluctance to prioritize work flexibility in their actual future plans stemmed from their perceptions of how others would view them in terms of normative masculinity. We hypothesized that for men, intentions to seek work flexibility would be predicted by projected perceptions on normative masculine traits, but not on normative feminine traits. Conversely, for women, projected perceptions on normative feminine traits—and not masculine traits—should predict intentions to seek work flexibility.

We entered the masculine and feminine trait composites into separate regression analyses predicting men’s and women’s intentions to seek work flexibility. For men, intentions to seek work flexibility were predicted by how they thought they would be perceived on masculine (prescriptive, reversed-proscriptive, and competence) traits, $\beta = .28, t(62) = 2.10, p < .05$; however, projected perceptions on feminine traits were not predictive of men’s intentions to seek work flexibility, $\beta = .07, t(62) = 0.53, p = .60$. In other words, men who believe they will be perceived as the least normatively masculine for seeking work flexibility are the least likely to express intentions to do so. The pattern was opposite for women: Intention to seek work flexibility was (marginally) predicted by how women thought they would be perceived on feminine (prescriptive, reversed-proscriptive, and warmth) traits, $\beta = .25, t(58) = 1.78, p = .08$; however, projected perceptions on masculine traits were not predictive of women’s intentions to seek work flexibility, $\beta = .14, t(58) = 1.00, p > .30$. In other words, women who believe that they will be perceived as more normatively feminine for seeking work flexibility are somewhat more likely to express intentions to do so.

Discussion

Women and men were in agreement in their valuing of work flexibility and work–life balance in their future employment, both of which were ranked higher than any other job characteristic except financial compensation. Overall, lifestyle considerations seem to be valued over other job characteristics such as advancement opportunities and autonomy. Of course, the list participants rated was not exhaustive—there are undoubtedly other valued characteristics of employment environments (see Konrad, Ritchie, Lieb, & Corrigall, 2000), but the list was at least extensive and wide-ranging. Despite highly valuing work flexibility in their anticipated careers, men were significantly less likely than women to report intentions to actually seek out such flexibility, suggesting a clash between men’s inner values and outward expectations. This may partly be explained by men’s projections regarding how they will be viewed on traits that are valued and expected for their gender. Men who believed that others would view them as lacking
in ideal masculinity were the least likely to report intentions to seek work flexibility. By contrast, women intended to seek work flexibility to the extent they thought others would perceive them as more feminine. These findings suggest the gendered connotations of a flexible work schedule, associated with women more than with men. As a result, men may believe that pursuing work–life balance may put their gender status at risk, and they may avoid work flexibility as a result. We next turned to an exploration of whether men’s expectations of being seen as insufficiently normatively masculine for seeking work flex arrangements are, in fact, accurate.

Study 2

Study 1 suggested that one impediment to men seeking work flexibility is the perception that they will be stigmatized in terms of their masculinity. In Study 2, we hypothesized that people would indeed stigmatize a target who sought a flexible work arrangement more than a target who worked a traditional schedule. Further, because the norm of work devotion is more strongly tied to the male than the female gender role (e.g., Prentice & Carranza, 2002; Thébaud, 2010), we predicted that men would be stigmatized more than women when seeking flexible work arrangements (in other words, we predicted an interaction of target gender by work arrangement).

Because past research has found stigmatization for targets seeking work/life balance using performance evaluations (e.g., Cohen & Single, 2001), we had participants evaluate hypothetical targets on job ratings. New to this research, we included interpersonal, trait-related dimensions—specifically, competence, warmth, and morality, which are considered core dimensions of personality and social behavior (e.g., Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007; Leach et al., 2005). For these ratings, we expected evaluations to be dependent upon the social dimension being evaluated. If seeking reduced work hours signals that one prioritizes family commitments, individuals who seek work flexibility may be seen as warmer than those who opt for traditional (full-time) work arrangements. However, seeking reduced work hours may call into question one’s competence as well. With respect to morality, we had no clear predictions. On the one hand, a commitment to family might be seen as a moral duty; however, if a man is seen as shirking his responsibilities as breadwinner, he may be seen as less moral.

Using the masculine prescriptions/proscriptions from Study 1, we also expected that targets (both male and female) who sought work flexibility would be denigrated specifically on masculine prescriptive traits, but they also would be rated more highly on male prescriptive traits (see Rudman & Mescher, 2013). Similarly, we expected that targets who sought work flexibility would be rated higher on feminine prescriptive and lower on feminine prescriptive traits as well. Further, we expected that targets seeking work flexibility would be rated as literally
less masculine and more feminine than those opting for full-time employment. In short, to the extent that seeking work flexibility is a greater violation of masculine than feminine norms, we predicted that people would punish those seeking work flexibility on the traits that are most valued as male prescriptions (masculinity, status, competence). As noted above, given that employment is more central to the male than female gender role, we were also interested in discovering whether the hypothesized effects would be moderated by target gender.

Past research has been somewhat equivocal on how rater sex might influence judgments of those seeking work/life balance, and thus we made no strong predictions with respect to participant sex. We might suspect that men will penalize male targets more harshly than women will, to the extent that masculine norms are more salient to men, but there is little direct evidence for this (but see Weaver, Vandello, Bosson, & Burnaford, 2010). Conversely, men and women may not differ in their evaluations of male flexibility-seeking targets, as suggested by past investigations of atypical men (for a review, Rudman & Phelan, 2008).

Participants read a description of a hypothetical employee who recently had a child and either sought reduced work hours or declined a reduced work arrangement in favor of a traditional, full-time schedule. Seeking reduced work hours may be a type of flexible work arrangement that is especially rife with gendered meaning. For instance, Eagly and Steffen (1986) found that people see part-time workers (both male and female) as less agentic than full-time workers. However, lacking information about the reason(s) for part-time employment, people assume that women work part time because they are more committed to domestic duties, whereas male part-time workers are assumed to have difficulty finding full-time work (Eagly & Steffen, 1986). In the current investigation, we examined the judgments people make of male and female workers who intentionally select a part-time schedule in order to take care of an infant.

**Method**

**Participants.** One hundred fifty-four students (68 men and 86 women) completed an online survey in partial fulfillment of psychology course requirements. We dropped six participants because of missing or incomplete data, leaving a final sample of 148 students (66 men and 82 women, $M_{age} = 22$; 57% employed; 63% White, 16% African American, 3% Asian, 12% Latino, 1% Arabic/Middle Eastern, 1% bi-racial, and 3% “other”). Participants were randomly assigned to read one of four versions of the survey, crossing two variables: sex of the target character and whether the target chose a flexible work option or declined a flexible work option.

**Materials.** The questionnaire first presented participants with a brief description of a female (Kathy) or male (Alan) employee (modified from similar
materials by Cuddy et al., 2004). The employee was described as a 32-year-old associate consultant working for a prestigious Manhattan consulting firm. The job was well-paid and desirable. After some information about gender-neutral hobbies (e.g., running, listening to music), the description noted that the target and his or her spouse recently had their first baby. Participants then learned that the consulting firm offered a program that allowed employees the option of working part-time (20–25 hours per week) to accommodate personal circumstances. Half of the participants learned that the target decided to enroll in the program and currently takes afternoons off to help care for the child at home, while half read that the target decided not to enroll in the program and works in the office 5 days, 40 hours a week. All other details remained the same across conditions.

**Trait ratings.** Following the description, participants rated the target on thirty-six traits. In addition to the twenty-nine traits we used in Study 1 comprising dimensions of male prescriptions (α = .81), male proscriptions (α = .88), female prescriptions (α = .76), female proscriptions (α = .81), competence (α = .87), and warmth (α = .89), we added five traits measuring morality (see Leach et al., 2005): honest, good person, moral, corrupt (reverse scored), and selfish (reverse scored), (α = .86). Finally, we added the traits feminine and masculine to assess global perceptions of masculinity and femininity. All traits were rated using a 1 (not at all) to 7 (extremely) response scale. In the analyses in Study 2, rather than collapsing the above traits dimensions into broad “masculine” and “feminine” composites, we instead looked at the narrower composites (e.g., competence, warmth, morality) because we were interested in more nuanced impressions, and because it was not clear whether the trait dimension of morality was gendered.

**Job evaluation.** Next, participants were asked to imagine themselves as an executive of the company and to evaluate the target by answering or evaluating (on scales of 1 = not at all to 5 = extremely) 10 questions and statements: “How committed is this employee to her(his) job?”; “How dependable is this employee?”; “How dedicated is this employee?”; “How valuable is this employee to her(his) company?”; “How comfortable would you be giving Kathy(Alan) an important assignment?”; “Kathy(Alan) is a team player”; “Kathy(Alan) is someone I would like to work with”; “Kathy(Alan) is persistent in completing job tasks”; “Kathy(Alan) is an efficient worker”; and “How likely would you be to recommend Kathy(Alan) for a promotion?” We combined the items to form an overall job evaluation index (α = .95). In addition, participants were asked to give the employee a raise ranging from 0% to 8%. To minimize the possibility that lower raises would be assigned to flexibility seekers simply because they worked fewer hours, we specifically phrased the recommendation as an “hourly raise.” Finally, participants answered several demographic questions.
Procedure. Participants were recruited through an online research participant pool system, and in an Introductory Psychology course. Participants were directed to a link on the SurveyGizmo website, and completed the survey at a time and place of their choosing.

Results

Job evaluations. We submitted the 10-item job evaluation index to a 2 (target sex) by 2 (participant sex) by 2 (work arrangement: part-time vs. full-time) ANOVA, to test the hypothesis that those seeking flexible work arrangements would face job penalties. We found the expected main effect such that targets who sought reduced hours were rated more negatively ($M = 3.77, SD = 0.61$) than targets who worked traditional hours ($M = 4.18, SD = 0.68, F(1, 140) = 17.54, p < .001, d = .70$). We also found an unexpected main effect for target sex, such that across levels of work arrangement, Kathy ($M = 3.92, SD = 0.68$) was evaluated more favorably than Alan ($M = 3.66, SD = 0.54, F(1, 140) = 7.72, p < .01, d = .46$). Neither the main effect for participant sex nor any of the interactions were significant. Thus, while all flexibility seekers were penalized relative to their nonflexibility seeking same-sex counterparts, the degree of this penalty was no greater for male than for female targets, and no greater for male than female participants.

We next examined the percentage raise assigned to the target. Flexibility seekers were given lower raises (4.72%, $SD = 1.64$) than targets who worked traditional hours (5.69%, $SD = 1.63, F(1, 138) = 13.14, p < .001, d = .63$). Neither the main effect of target sex, participant sex, nor any of the interactions were significant, $Fs < 1$.

Trait ratings. Looking first at the single item measures of masculine and feminine, as one might expect, Alan ($M = 5.43, SD = 1.12$) was rated as much more masculine than Kathy ($M = 2.52, SD = 1.44, F(1, 140) = 194.54, p < .001, d = 2.26$). Importantly, however, targets of either sex who sought work flexibility were rated as less masculine ($M = 3.92, SD = 1.94$) than targets who worked traditional hours ($M = 4.51, SD = 1.86, F(1, 140) = 9.16, p < .01, d = .51$). There was no main effect for participant sex and there were no significant interactions. Similarly, Kathy ($M = 5.67, SD = 1.10$) was rated as much more feminine than Alan ($M = 2.12, SD = 1.32, F(1, 140) = 286.20, p < .001, d = 2.85$), and targets who sought flexible work hours were rated as marginally more feminine ($M = 3.75, SD = 2.22$) than targets who worked traditional hours ($M = 3.41, SD = 2.07, F(1, 140) = 3.67, p = .057, d = .16$). There was no main effect for participant sex and there were no significant interactions.

Turning to the composite trait dimensions, we next looked at the composite of male prescriptive traits. As expected, flexibility seekers were rated lower on male
prescriptions ($M = 5.27, SD = 0.96$) than targets who worked traditional hours ($M = 5.89, SD = 0.89$, $F(1, 140) = 16.56, p < .001, d = .70$). In addition, and unexpectedly, Kathy ($M = 5.86, SD = 0.95$) was rated higher on male prescriptions than Alan was ($M = 5.45, SD = 0.96$, $F(1, 140) = 8.84, p < .01, d = .51$), regardless of work arrangements. No other effects were significant. For the male prescriptions composite variable, there were no significant main effects or interactions ($ps > .05$).

As expected, flexibility seekers were rated higher on female prescriptions ($M = 5.34, SD = 0.70$) than targets who worked traditional hours ($M = 4.40, SD = 0.98$, $F(1, 140) = 40.05, p < .001, d = 1.06$). No other significant effects emerged. Also as expected, flexibility seekers were rated lower on female prescriptions ($M = 2.70, SD = 1.02$) than targets who worked traditional hours ($M = 3.85, SD = 1.16$, $F(1, 140) = 37.62, p < .001, d = 1.03$), and no other effects emerged.

Targets who sought work flexibility were seen as warmer ($M = 5.67, SD = 0.82$) than targets who worked traditional hours ($M = 5.16, SD = 0.92$, $F(1, 140) = 11.95, p < .01, d = .55$). Flexibility-seekers were also seen as more moral ($M = 6.04, SD = 0.87$) than targets who worked traditional hours ($M = 5.42, SD = 0.93$, $F(1, 140) = 14.48, p < .001, d = .63$). No other main effects or interactions were significant for these two composites. For the competence composite variable, the only significant effect that emerged was an unexpected main effect for target sex, such that Kathy ($M = 6.02, SD = 0.85$) was rated as more competent than Alan ($M = 5.67, SD = 0.91$, $F(1, 140) = 8.84, p < .01, d = .51$).

**Discussion**

Participants penalized a target, male or female, who sought reduced hours after the birth of a child by evaluating him or her more negatively on job characteristics and recommending a smaller raise. Seeking a flexible work arrangement affected character evaluations as well. Targets who sought work flexibility (regardless of their sex) were seen as warmer and more moral than those who worked traditional hours, but they were also rated lower on masculine prescriptive traits, and were seen as less masculine and more feminine than people who worked traditional hours. Thus, although we did not find that men were penalized more than women for seeking work flexibility using job ratings, they nevertheless faced harsher character judgments than women, because targets who sought flexible work arrangements were derogated specifically on valued masculine prescriptive traits. Moreover, targets of both genders were rated as less masculine and more feminine on global ratings when they sought work flexibility, compared with traditional hours. Therefore, even if a man who seeks a flexible work arrangement is given the exact same trait attributions as a woman who does so (for example, being seen as warmer, but having less leadership ability than a full-time worker), the
man has in effect suffered more by it, because the woman is seen as conforming to feminine prescriptions whereas a man is seen as a gender deviant.

We also found some unexpected main effects for target gender, such that the female target was given higher job evaluations and was rated higher on prescriptive masculine traits than the male target, regardless of work arrangements. This likely reflects a contrast effect (Biernat, 2005) by which a woman’s performance in a masculine work domain is regarded as exceptional and especially masculine because it violates traditional expectations.

**General Discussion**

One implication of the steady migration of women into the workforce over recent decades is an increasing awareness of the ways in which work and family overlap. This is evident in research, which has brought attention to the ways in which wage gaps (Stanley & Jarrell, 1998), glass ceilings (Daniels, 1998), “mommy tracks” (Schwartz, 1989) and maternal walls (Biernat, Crosby, & Williams, 2004) impede women’s advancement. More recently, research has focused on work–family conflict and integration, but again the bulk of research has examined the experiences of women. Less attention has been given to the ways in which work attitudes and policies affect men.

The present research aimed to shed light on the gendered aspects of flexible work arrangements, and particularly, their implications for men. Past research suggested reluctance among men to utilize flexible work arrangements when offered, and an ambivalence (among men who have flexible work arrangements and among their coworkers and supervisors) when taken. Pleck (1993), for instance, found that when men do take advantage of policies such as flexible hours, they often do so to accommodate family commitments. However, employers and coworkers often assume men use flextime out of personal preference rather than for family reasons, and men are reluctant to advertise family reasons. As a result, as Brescoll, Glass, and Sedlovskaya (2013) show, managers are most likely to grant flextime to men who seek flexible arrangements specifically for the purpose of advancing their careers (as opposed to child caregiving). This not only reflects, but reinforces, men’s fears of stigmatization.

This ambivalence about work flexibility is reflected in the responses of men in our first study. Among a group of college students soon to be embarking on careers, participants ranked as highly important a balance between work and family and the opportunity for flexible work arrangements. Moreover, men and women did not differ in the extent to which they valued these qualities. However, when asked if they intended to seek flexible work arrangements in their own careers, men expressed less interest than women did. This reluctance is mirrored in data from organizations showing that men are less likely than women to take advantage of work flexibility policies. For example, a longitudinal study in the years following
the passage of the Family Medical Leave Act in 1993 (that provides employees 12 weeks of job-protected unpaid leave following a family illness or birth of a child) found that while the law had some effect on women’s leave-taking, men were no more likely to take leave following its passage (Han & Waldfogel, 2003).

The results of Study 1 also suggested that men’s reluctance to seek work flexibility may be driven in part by fears of gender-related stigmatization. Those men who believed that seeking work flexibility would lead to the most derogation on masculine prescriptive traits were the least likely to report intentions to seek work flexibility in their own future careers. Conversely, women who believed that seeking work flexibility would increase attributions of feminine prescriptive traits were the most likely to report intentions to seek flexibility in their careers.

Study 2 provided evidence that men’s fears of gender-related stigmatization may be grounded in reality. Hypothetical targets who sought reduced work hours after the birth of a child received worse job evaluations and lower hourly raises, by both men and women, than identical targets who worked traditional hours. Both male and female flexibility-seeking targets received lower job evaluations, suggesting that people did not distinguish between men and women in their performance evaluations. However, an examination of the trait evaluations suggests that men may be penalized more than women. On the one hand, targets who sought flexible work arrangements were rated as warmer and more moral than targets who worked traditional hours (and no less competent). On the other hand, flexibility-seekers (male and female) were seen as less masculine and were rated lower on precisely those traits that past research (Rudman et al., 2011) has shown are expected of and valued in men. In contrast, flexibility-seeking targets were rated as higher on traits expected of and valued in women. Thus, despite male and female flexibility-seekers receiving similar trait evaluations, men may in fact be derogated more in terms of character evaluations, as core aspects of their masculinity are called into question. Given the centrality of employment and the breadwinner role to men’s self-concept (Gilmore, 1990; Pleck, 1995), and given the tenuous nature with which manhood is held (Vandello et al., 2008), such character criticisms may be enough to discourage men from seeking flexible policies that they value and from which they would benefit. Consistent with this view, men in Study 1 were less likely to pursue flexible work arrangements to the extent they expected to be downgraded on ideal masculine attributes.

Although our research was conducted with undergraduate students considering hypothetical scenarios, the results are consistent with anecdotal evidence in real work environments about suspicion or hostility toward men who seek flexible work arrangements. Pleck (1993) argues that despite formal policies for paternal leave, many organizations have unwritten norms against men taking such leave. Employers and coworkers have negative attitudes toward paternity leave, viewing men who take advantage of such policies as unmasculine. Ultimately, these attitudes may in fact hinder the career advancement of men who reduce hours or
interrupt work for family reasons (see Coltrane et al., 2013, on reduced earnings for fathers who seek reduced work hours). We should note that such hostility toward paternal leave may be much greater in the United States than in some European countries, where policies have been in place, and used, for years (Moss & Deven, 1999).

We recognize that these data may seem discouraging to readers who are seeking solutions. After all, if the norm of work devotion is central to the American worker, and especially central to male workers, and if seeking flexible arrangements decreases perceptions of masculinity, this would seem to leave men little recourse. We cannot offer any easy solutions, but can only observe that integrating flexible work policies (and getting men to take advantage of these policies) will require changes in societal norms about men, work, and family. As the increase of women in positions of occupational influence has shown over the past generation, norms can be changed. We remain hopeful that the association of work with masculinity will be weakened as women continue to make advancements in the workplace. Similarly, the increase in family-friendly work policies will elevate the importance of caretaking and work–life balance as valued aspirations for both women and men.

Both studies used college student samples with little or no organizational experience, though it should be noted that slightly more than half of the participants in both studies were currently employed at least part time. The conclusions drawn from the present studies would be strengthened with data from employees and managers with more job experience. The data are consistent, however, with past research (Cohen & Single, 2001; Judiesch & Lyness, 1999) using real employees, suggesting real job penalties for those seeking work–life balance and flexible arrangements. Note also that college student samples are ideal for inquiring about people’s expectations as they approach career entry, as we did in Study 1.

In addition, the use of hypothetical scenarios in Study 2 is of course an oversimplification of the complexity and nuance of evaluations of real people in real job contexts. While we have some confidence that participants’ responses are similar to how employees would be evaluated in real job contexts, without such data, we can only speculate (note similar past research using hypothetical scenarios: Cohen & Single, 2001; Cuddy et al., 2004). While asking undergraduates to provide job evaluations may be an unfamiliar task for most, the trait evaluations likely mirror the types of judgments people make on a daily basis.

Another limitation of the second study was our focus on a single type of work flexibility: reduced work hours after the birth of a child. Rudman and Mescher (2013) investigated reactions to male targets who requested a family leave (e.g., to care for a sick child) and found that such men are penalized with both poor worker ratings and a femininity stigma. Although both negatively predicted targets’ rewards, only the latter uniquely accounted for their worst outcomes (e.g., termination recommendations). However, family-related issues may lead to
different evaluations than nonfamily-related reasons for seeking work flexibility. For instance, a man seeking a flexible work arrangement to train for a marathon or to seek training opportunities that will increase productivity may be less stigmatized to the extent that the justifications are consistent with masculine gender stereotypes. Future studies would benefit from expanding the range of reasons for seeking flexibility and the types of flexibility sought (e.g., flex-place vs. flex-time).

With increasing acknowledgment of the overlap between work and family roles, men and women express both increased job-related stress and a desire for work flexibility (see Allen, 2008; Kerpelman & Schvaneveldt, 1999). The present studies suggest the importance of understanding how pressures on employees to conform to gender roles may hinder organizations from effectively implementing family-supportive policies that can benefit men, partly by discouraging men from taking advantage of flexible work policies even when available. As discussed above, to the extent that norms and expectations about masculinity and work are deeply entrenched in American culture, the present results might suggest pessimism about the likelihood of change. While the increase in family-supportive work policies is something to celebrate, as long as assumptions about men who are in flexible work arrangements place their masculinity under suspicion, such policies will likely be underutilized and ineffective. However, there is evidence that a change in norms is possible: In Europe, parental leave policies are the norm and paid paternity leave is becoming more popular. Sweden, for instance, has one of the most progressive paternal leave policies in the world. After it instituted a policy in 1995 penalizing families’ subsidies if men did not take leave after the birth of a child, over 80% of men took advantage of the policy (Bennhold, 2010). The policy shift may have been a catalyst to redefining masculinity. As European affairs minister Birgitta Ohlsson put it, “Now men can have it all — a successful career and being a responsible daddy. It’s a new kind of manly.”

References


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