



Professional parents' loyalty to employer: The role of workplace social support

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ABSTRACT

Professional mothers are more likely than professional fathers to leave workplaces—a phenomenon referred to as opting out. Previous research asserts that work–family challenges, including lack of access to supportive workplaces, are among the main reasons for this pattern. Despite revived interest in the study of opting out, little is known about factors shaping the loyalty to employer of those currently employed. Using data from the 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce ($N = 160$ professional mothers; 114 professional fathers) we explore how three important forms of workplace social support – coworker support, supervisor support, and supportive workplace culture – are associated with professional mothers' and fathers' loyalty to their employees. Including fathers allows us to determine if gender dynamics are present in these patterns. The results suggest gendered patterns where supportive workplace culture relates to professional fathers' employer loyalty and supervisor support relates to professional mothers' employer loyalty.

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1. Introduction

Statistics in the US showing that professional mothers are more likely to leave the workplace than professional fathers sparks debate about why mothers leave (Leber Herr & Wolfram, 2012; Stone, 2007). Prominent media coverage posits that women freely choose to leave the fast-paced world of work to focus on the joys of raising children, but qualitative social science research questions the extent to which professional women choose to leave work (Belkin, 2003; Kuperberg & Stone, 2008; Stone, 2007). Indeed, Pamela Stone's path-breaking book, *Opting Out?*

(2007), demonstrates that professional mothers do not opt out; rather, they are largely pushed out by unsupportive workplaces that make it difficult to navigate demanding professional careers and family life.

The challenges of professional workplaces are well-documented, which are often portrayed as relentless in requiring workers to put in extensive face time to demonstrate commitment (Kelly, Ammons, Chermack, & Moen, 2010; Moen, Lam, Ammons, & Kelly, 2013). Indeed, some scholars characterize high-status jobs, such as those held by professional workers, as being marked by the “stress of higher-status” (Schieman, Whitestone, & Van Gundy, 2006). Long work hours, intense pressure, and high levels of work-to-family conflict are often identified with professional jobs (Hill et al., 2006; Schieman, 2013; Schieman et al., 2006). In the face of such challenges, and the demands associated with motherhood, some professional mothers leave the workplace. Learning why parents remain loyal to their employers can help us understand opting out. We

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pinpoint experiences that may contribute to feelings of loyalty and disloyalty, and we define loyalty as the employee's overall level of commitment to stay with their current employer. We argue that mothers and fathers with high levels of employer loyalty are less likely to leave the workplace, and that identifying factors that detract from loyalty will help explain why some professional parents opt out.

This study contributes to the literature by examining how workplace social support shapes professional parents' loyalty to their employers. In cases where professional mothers and fathers exhibit lower levels of loyalty to their employers, is it because of unsupportive workplace environments? This study includes professional fathers to reveal gender issues that may be relevant because previous scholarship has usually considered opting out a woman's issue without exploring whether the patterns exhibited by women differ from men. We use data from the 2002 National Study of the Changing Workforce ($N=160$ professional mothers; 114 professional fathers) to examine how coworker support, supervisor support, and supportive workplace culture relate to professional parents' loyalty to their employers.

2. Theoretical framework

This study adopts role theory to understand professional parents' experiences. Role theory's basic premise is that people occupy more than one role, and roles are sometimes incompatible because individuals can only put so much energy into each role. Essentially, the more roles an individual holds, the more conflict that individual faces (Barnett & Gareis, 2006). Managing multiple roles is also associated with negative organizational outcomes, such as burnout and turnover intentions (Barnett & Gareis, 2006). Conversely, some scholars embrace an enhancement perspective that calls attention to how participation in multiple roles may improve outcomes (Ahrens & Ryff, 2006). According to this perspective, multiple roles are beneficial because they can increase energy and resources, thereby enhancing various forms of well-being (Barnett & Gareis, 2006; Marks, 1977). While multiple roles have benefits, parents working in high-pressure, professional jobs may be more likely to encounter difficulties due to highly entrenched workplace time norms that encourage long work hours coupled with high demands (Epstein, 2004; Stone, 2007). Thus, negotiating multiple roles may have an impact on professional parents' loyalty to their employers.

Working parents' decisions are influenced by cultural gender norms and expectations in their workplaces. Though gender-role attitudes have become less traditional as women have entered the paid labor force, an underlying assumption remains that women should be caretakers and men should be breadwinners (Barnett & Gareis, 2006; Chafetz, 1988, 1999; Duxbury & Higgins, 1991, 1994). Families often adopt neo-traditional parenting arrangements in which mothers are more dedicated to the family sphere and fathers more dedicated to the work role, even when both parents are employed. For professional parents, however, the separation between work and family is particularly fuzzy, as technological innovations allow workers to complete work tasks at any time from multiple locations. At

the same time, parenting expectations in contemporary society, especially for those in upper-middle class contexts, have become intensive and all-encompassing (Cha, 2010; Hays, 1996; Lareau, 2003). Given this situation, professional parents, especially mothers, often feel pulled in many directions by family and work obligations (Blair-Loy, 2003a; Stone, 2007), creating challenges that may impact their loyalty to employers.

In a corporate culture where face time is regarded as a source of loyalty (Bailyn, 1993; Barnett & Gareis, 2006; Blair-Loy, 2003b), professional parents must also deal with family responsibilities. Environments that support the work and family activities of employees ease the challenges faced by professional workers, and professional parents' loyalty to their workplaces may increase as a result. Furthermore, workplace social support may be especially important to professional mothers who also must contend with gender norms that stipulate they are primarily responsible for caretaking responsibilities. Indeed, workplace social support's ability to enrich a variety of employee outcomes has been repeatedly emphasized by previous scholars (Kossek, Pichler, Bodner, & Hammer, 2011; Thompson, Beauvais, & Lyness, 1999).

3. Previous literature and hypotheses

3.1. Coworker support and loyalty to employer

Coworkers can provide their peers with support that contributes to positive workplace experiences by giving both instrumental and expressive social support. Instrumental social support might take the form of offering concrete help on a project. Expressive social support may take the form of an empathetic listener. Coworkers who offer one or both forms of support can help ease the challenges faced by professional workers filling paid work and family roles. These positive experiences may lead employees to have greater organizational commitment (Rousseau & Aubé, 2010). Indeed, previous research of workers in general, including insurance company employees, teachers, and lawyers, shows a positive relationship between coworker support and organizational commitment (Mottaz, 1988; Mueller, Finley, Iverson, & Price, 1999; Schaubroeck & Fink, 1998; Wallace, 1995). Based on this previous research, we propose the following hypothesis:

H₁. Coworker support is positively related to professional mothers' and fathers' loyalty to their employers.

3.2. Supervisor support and loyalty to employer

Supervisor support can also help ease the challenges faced by professional workers enacting multiple roles. Supervisor support is defined in this study as the worker's perception of how much the supervisor cares about their work-family well-being by helping resolve work-family conflicts (Hammer, Kossek, Yragui, Bodner, & Hanson, 2009). Not only are supervisors often important gatekeepers to official family-friendly policies, but they also help set the tone of the immediate workplace environment (Friedman & Johnson, 1997). Beyond that, they

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