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Racial variation in the effect of motherhood on women's employment: Temporary or enduring effect?

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ABSTRACT

Part of the motherhood wage penalty results from mothers' loss of work experience, yet little research has investigated whether this loss is temporary or accumulates over time. Using growth curve models and data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (1979), I examine the extent to which motherhood reduces work experience over the life course among White, Black, and Hispanic women. Results indicate that motherhood slows the accretion of experience in full-time work for all racial-ethnic groups, having an enduring effect on women's employment. The effect is stronger among Whites and mothers with two or more children, remaining sizeable as women approach retirement age. By age 50, White and Hispanic mothers with two or more children exhibit between two to seven fewer years of experience in full-time employment. Among Blacks, only mothers with three or more children experience a significant reduction, averaging five fewer years of experience in full-time work.

1. Introduction

A vast literature has shown that parenthood carries a penalty for women's labor market outcomes, reducing women's wages, occupational status, and employment opportunities. Large part of this penalty is due to the loss of work experience when a new child is added to the family (Aisenbrey et al., 2009; Budig and England, 2001; England et al., 2016; Killewald and García-Manglano, 2016). Nonetheless, little research has treated work experience as the main focus of study. Most studies investigating the motherhood penalty control for the number of prior years worked, parceling out the enduring part of the motherhood effect that operates through the reduction of work experience. But whether mothers recoup the loss of work experience over the life course, and whether this pattern differs across racial-ethnic groups have remained open questions. This study assesses the long-term impact of motherhood on employment, investigating the extent to which children reduce the growth rate of work experience over the life course by race-ethnicity and number of children.

Although some scholars have investigated the impact of motherhood on women's employment, it remains unclear whether motherhood has a temporary or an enduring effect on work experience. Most researchers agree that preschool-age children have a significant negative short-term effect on women's employment, increasing mothers' likelihood of exiting full-time employment and reducing their work experience by 7 weeks per year (Budig, 2003; England et al., 2004; Looze, 2017; Taniguchi and Rosenfeld, 2002). However, the long-term effects have remained ambiguous, as studies report seemingly conflicting results. Studies have found that each older child *increases* mothers' probability of full-time employment (Budig, 2003; Looze, 2017), but *reduces* work experience by 2 weeks per year relative to non-mothers (England et al., 2004). Some scholars have argued that the effect of motherhood on employment is temporary, mostly restricted to the prime childbearing years, showing that the effect decreases and even reverses as

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women reach their 40s and children grow up (Budig, 2003; Kahn et al., 2014; Taniguchi and Rosenfeld, 2002). But other scholars conclude that the effect of children persists as women age (Abendroth et al., 2014; Damaske and Frech, 2016; García-Manglano, 2015; Miller, 2011; Moen, 1991).

This apparent contradiction partly derives from the use of different measures of employment and period of observation. Most studies have measured employment using current labor force participation, primarily focusing on the early childbearing years (Budig, 2003; Desai and Waite, 1991; García-Manglano, 2015; Hynes and Clarkberg, 2005; Kahn et al., 2014; Taniguchi and Rosenfeld, 2002). However, labor force participation is a volatile measure of employment. Women's work trajectories are characterized by a flux into and out of paid labor, and by substantial movement between full-time and part-time employment when they have children (Aisenbrey et al., 2009; Damaske and Frech, 2016; Hynes and Clarkberg, 2005; Klerman and Leibowitz, 1999). Yet, few studies have distinguished between full-time and part-time work, and even fewer have evaluated the racial-ethnic variation in these outcomes. Studies assessing employment using worked hours per week, or weeks per year, conclude that motherhood reduces women's worked time (Damaske and Frech, 2016; England et al., 2004; Killewald and García-Manglano, 2016; Miller, 2011); however, it is uncertain whether this effect dissipates or accumulates over the life course.

Using a novel application of growth curve models, this research integrates the intersectionality and life course frameworks to assess the long-term effects of motherhood on employment, examining the variation in growth rates of work experience of White, Hispanic, and Black women from ages 17 to 57, and further disaggregating work experience into years of full-time and part-time employment. I argue that investigating the long-term impact of motherhood on employment requires a cumulative outcome, such as work experience, measured over the life course, and the consideration to variations by number of children and race-ethnicity. Cumulative work experience summarizes individuals' level of involvement in paid labor over time, thus, it represents a suitable outcome to assess employment in the long run.

2. Background

Studies consistently show that motherhood depresses women's wages, labor force participation, and occupational status (Abendroth et al., 2014; Budig and England, 2001; England et al., 2016; Kahn et al., 2014; Killewald and García-Manglano, 2016). A substantial part of this effect results from the breaks in employment at the time of childbearing, which reduce women's work experience and cause job skills depreciation (Aisenbrey et al., 2009; Desai and Waite, 1991; England et al., 2016; Killewald and García-Manglano, 2016; Klerman and Leibowitz, 1999). Employers often use work experience to assess individuals' potential productivity, assign wages, and grant promotions (Aisenbrey et al., 2009; Staff and Mortimer, 2012). Although some studies have investigated the impact of motherhood on women's employment, whether the resulting loss in work experience is temporary or accumulates over time has remained an open question. Moreover, even though prior research has revealed substantial heterogeneity in mothers' employment along racial-ethnic lines, most studies have provided average racial differences, with little attention to how these differences evolve over the life course.

2.1. Intersectionality: motherhood and Women's employment across race-ethnicity

Feminist scholars have argued that inequality is the product of the dynamic interaction of multiple forms of privilege and disadvantage (Browne and Misra, 2003; Choo and Ferree, 2010). The theory of intersectionality poses that race, class, gender, and other facets of inequality interact with each other, resulting in a compound impact that exceeds their merely independent, additive effects (Baca Zinn and Dill, 1996; Choo and Ferree, 2010; McCall, 2005). The salience of these interactive forces has been theorized as fluid and changing over time (Browne and Misra, 2003), yet, few studies have conducted empirical research using a dynamic approach. The historical trends in female labor force participation evidence the changing dynamics of gender, race, and class. For most of U.S. history, Black and low-income women have been laborers, having higher employment rates than White and better-off women (Branch, 2011; Collins, 1990; Roos, 2010). However, as human and social capital became important assets in the labor market, these trends reversed. In recent decades studies have shown that White and more advantaged women have surpassed Black and disadvantaged women in employment rates (England et al., 2004; Taniguchi and Rosenfeld, 2002). Nonetheless, among mothers, Black women continue to have a lead, working at higher rates than White mothers (Florian, 2017; Roos, 2010).

Gender scholars have explained this phenomenon arguing that parenthood evokes different employment expectations for individuals by gender, race, and class. Parenthood strengthens labor market attachment among men, but weakens it among women (Jacobs and Gerson, 2004; Killewald and García-Manglano, 2016). Traditional gender stereotypes portray mothers as primary care takers (Hays, 1998; Lareau, 2003). Presuming that employment conflicts with motherhood, this ideology exhorts mothers to favor their time with children (Blair-Loy, 2003; Damaske, 2011; Parrott, 2014; Roos, 2010).

Prior research has shown that Whites, Hispanics, and middle-class women are more strongly pressured to conform to this ideology by their peers, family, and coworkers (Blair-Loy, 2003; Lareau, 2003; Roos, 2010). Some studies have found evidence indicating that White and Hispanic mothers are perceived as secondary earners in the labor market because employers presume that they have a male economic provider (Browne and Kennelly, 1999; Browne and Misra, 2003). Middle-class mothers are expected to show devotion to their children by reducing their work hours, while mothers who remain fully-employed feel compelled to justify their work decisions (Blair-Loy, 2003; Damaske, 2011). Recent studies have shown that women's time spent in housework significantly increases with each child they have, with White women experiencing the largest increase (Killewald and García-Manglano, 2016; Parrott, 2014). In recent decades, an *intensive motherhood* ideology has emerged, further raising the expectations that mothers will devote enormous amounts of time to childrearing, particularly among the middle class (Blair-Loy, 2003; Hays, 1998; Jacobs and Gerson,

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