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ARE PARENTS BETTER LEADERS? THE EFFECTS OF PARENTHOOD AND GENDER ON FOLLOWERS' RATINGS OF LMX QUALITY

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INTRODUCTION

Although women are equally or even better skilled than men (see Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003), they are still underrepresented in most supervisory positions, and they earn less in comparable positions (e.g., Joshi, Son, & Roh, 2015). The arrival of children further accentuates this gap between women and men in management (Hardoy, Schone, & Ostbakken, 2017). Role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) suggests that the role of being a leader is more closely linked to the male gender role than to the female gender role. Motherhood further increases this gap in the perceptions of leaders and women (see also Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004). This then results in less favorable evaluations of mothers in leadership positions, but also of working mothers, in general. However, research on work-family enrichment suggests that employees can benefit from positive experiences in their roles as parents (e.g., Greenhaus & Powell, 2006). While such positive spillover processes from family to work and vice versa are well researched (e.g., Carlson, Kacmar, Wayne, & Grzywacz, 2006), not much attention has been paid to spillover effects into supervisory roles (for a recent exception see Dumas & Stanko, 2017). That is, we do not yet know whether educating and spending time with children at home transfers to parents' leadership skills in the sense that they receive higher leadership ratings compared to their childless colleagues.

Investigating such effects is an important endeavor for at least three reasons. Firstly, the relationship quality between supervisors and subordinates not only affects the respective employees (such as their well-being and job satisfaction, e.g., Volmer, Niessen, Spurk, Linz, & Abele, 2011) and supervisors (e.g., Bernerth, & Hirschfeld, 2016) but transfers to group performance (Schyns & Wolfram, 2008) and organizational performance (Martin, Guillaume, Thomas, Lee, & Epitropaki, 2016). It is therefore important to investigate whether parenthood provides those employees in supervisory positions with additional skills that make them better leaders and help increase performance. Secondly, stereotypes about employees suggest that ideal employees should fully commit their energy and time to their work role without allowing any distractions from other domains outside of the workplace (e.g., Reid, 2011). These ideal employee stereotypes seem to be stricter for supervisors compared to subordinates (Nesbit & Seeger, 2007). Therefore, it is important to research whether such assumptions contain a "kernel of truth" (e.g., Triandis, 1971). Lastly, investigating whether the underrepresentation of mothers in supervisory positions is justified or whether it, in fact, lacks ground, represents a crucial antecedent of interventions towards more gender equality. More precisely, it is important to examine whether interventions should focus on strengthening mothers' leadership skills or whether they should focus on reducing negative stereotypes.

HOW PARENTING RELATES TO THE LEADER-FOLLOWER RELATIONSHIP

Parenting and leadership behavior have much in common (e.g., Zacharatos, Barling, & Kelloway, 2000). For instance, Popper and Mayselless (2003) argued that "leaders, like

parents, are figures whose role includes guiding, directing, taking charge, and taking care of others less powerful than they and whose fate is highly dependent on them” (p. 42). Successful parenting positively affects children’s development just as good leadership positively affects subordinates’ striving and health. While parenting is about the reciprocal influence of parents and children (Kuczynski, 2003), LMX theory focuses on the dyadic relationship between supervisors and subordinates (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). Researchers assume that managers develop relationships of different qualities with different employees. The level of mutual influence, contribution to the relationship, showing professional respect, and liking each other characterize the quality of these relationships (Liden & Maslyn, 1998). While low-quality LMX is limited to exchange that is primarily regulated in the working contract and to supervisors’ influence based on the power provided by their position, supervisors and subordinates invest substantially more into high-quality LMX relationships. Managers provide these employees with more autonomy, and they support them to a greater extent. In turn, their subordinates are more loyal and committed and they show more extra-role behavior (e.g., Martin et al., 2016). Such high-quality relationships are mirrored in good parenting behavior. Good parents develop caring and loving relationships with their children. They supervise them, provide support, communicate openly, and set firm limits (e.g., Dornbusch, Ritter, & Leideman, 1987). Because of these similarities, we found it most appropriate to focus our research on the effects of supervisors’ parental status on follower-rated LMX.

Spillover Processes From The Parental To The Supervisory Role

Greenhaus and Powell (2006) proposed that parenting experiences transfer to the workplace and vice versa. They termed this positive side of managing work and family lives as *work-family enrichment*. Greenhaus and Powell assumed that such spillover processes can be affective, resulting in transferring (positive or negative) emotions, or they can be instrumental. Instrumental spillover means that beneficial skills learned in the family domain, such as being a patient and authentic parent, can positively affect workplace behavior.

McNall et al. (2010) meta-analytically confirmed that work-family enrichment is positively associated with job, family, and life satisfaction, affective commitment and well-being but unrelated to turnover intentions. Even though these findings point to the positive consequences of being an employee and a parent, the beneficial correlates of parenthood for supervising employees have rarely been researched. Ruderman, Ohlott, Panzer, and King (2002) reported positive effects of female managers’ parental role. In a similar vein, Dumas and Stanko (2017) recently demonstrated that the more individuals identified with their family role, the more positive spillover from their family to their work role they experienced. More spillover, in turn, related to more positive evaluations of their leadership abilities by their supervisors. Therefore, we propose that:

Hypothesis 1: Parenthood positively affects subordinate-rated LMX quality:
Supervisors with children receive higher LMX ratings than childless supervisors.

Interaction Effects Of Leaders’ Parental Status And Gender

While researchers found that men and women are equally likely to experience work-family enrichment (e.g., Wayne, Randel, & Stevens, 2006), women often face negative consequences at the workplace because of being mothers (Correll et al., 2007; Heilman & Okimoto, 2008). We assume that the existing negative views of working mothers are even more prominent if these women occupy a supervisory position. According to role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002), individuals automatically compare perceptions of typical

women and men with images of typical leaders. Whereas men are seen as agentic, (e.g., competitive, aggressive), women are seen as communal (e.g., warm, caring). Agency is stronger related to images of typical leaders so that women are typically perceived as less typical leaders. The label “being a mother” results in higher ratings of warmth and lower ratings of agency (e.g., Cuddy et al., 2004). Consequently, being a mother increases the gap between being a woman and being a (good) leader. To summarize, we assume that:

Hypothesis 2: Participants’ parental status and gender interact in predicting LMX in the sense that men benefit from being fathers to a greater extent than women.

We tested these assumptions in two studies.

STUDY 1

A total of 219 individuals participated in Study 1, yet only 135 correctly answered the manipulation check items and were included in the analyses. The majority of these 135 were women (71.9%) and participants were, on average, 23.65 years old ($SD = 8.65$). Most of the respondents were enrolled as psychology students at a university located in Germany (77%), 13.3% were employees, 6.7% were pupils and one person was unemployed.

We approached potential participants via Email lists and various groups in social networks including Facebook. Respondents filled in an online questionnaire, asking them to adopt the view of a team member who rated their supervisor as a part of the yearly performance appraisal in their organization. This supervisor was 39 years old, either female or male (IV1) and was either a parent of a 5-year old child or childless (IV2). After this manipulation, respondents described their *ideal* leader using the 31-item scale by Van Quaquebeke and Brodbeck (2008) on a scale from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *to a great extent* and how much the *target* supervisor represented these leadership attributes. Thereafter, they evaluated the relationship quality with the target supervisor answering the 12-item scale developed by Liden and Maslyn (1998; German translation by Paul & Schyns, 2014). This scale operationalizes the four subcomponents of LMX, namely affect, loyalty, professional respect, and perceived contribution, as well as allows assessing the overall LMX quality. Cronbach’s Alpha was .88 for the overall scale and .80 and above for the subscales in the present study. Participants finally answered our manipulation checks and were then debriefed.

Analysis And Results

To test the assumption that parents would receive more positive evaluations compared to nonparents (Hypothesis 1) and that this would be especially true for men (Hypothesis 2), we conducted ANCOVAs in which we entered supervisor gender and parental status at the same time to predict the overall relationship quality and its four subdimensions (affect, loyalty, professional respect, and perceived contribution). We controlled for participants’ gender and age. Respondents indicated that their overall relationship quality with a parent as supervisor would be as good as with a childless supervisor ($F[1,129] = 1.88, p > .05, \eta^2 = .01$). Supervisors’ parental role significantly predicted the affective LMX-component ($F[1,129] = 6.86, p = .01, \eta^2 = .05$): The supervisor was evaluated more positively ($M = 5.16, SE = .12$) compared to the childless supervisor ($M = 4.69, SE = .13$). Managers with and without children did not differ in the other three LMX-subcomponents ($F[1,129] = 1.35$ for loyalty; $F[1,129] = .00$ for professional respect; $F[1,129] = .08$ for perceived contribution, all $p > .05, \eta^2 = .00-.01$). We did not find any evidence for the proposed interaction of supervisor gender and supervisor parental role (all $p > .05$).

Discussion Of Study 1

A general positive spillover effect of supervisors' parental role into the work domain was partially supported (Hypothesis 1) but we could not find any evidence for the proposed interaction effect between leader gender and leader parental status (Hypothesis 2). We therefore aimed to retest our assumptions in a sample of employees.

STUDY 2

The sample in Study 2 comprised 443 respondents, thereof 63% women. Respondents' average age was 38.46 years ($SD = 10.19$), they had been working in a range of sectors and with their current supervisor for 3.18 years ($SD = 3.55$). The majority did not have leadership responsibilities in their current job role (88%). Two-hundred-and-four respondents had a female line manager, and 348 respondents had a line manager with at least one child.

The research group contacted HR departments, asking them to distribute information about the research project among employees. A total of 554 employees volunteered to participate in the study. Four-hundred-and-forty-three respondents provided answers to all relevant questions and were included in the present analyses.

Respondents first provided information about work-related and demographic variables including their supervisor's gender and parental status. After that, participants evaluated the relationship quality with their line manager using the 12-item LMX scale that was also used in Study 1 (Liden & Maslyn, 1998; German translation by Paul & Schyns, 2014). The reliability was .91 for the overall scale and .88, .86, .91 and .64, respectively, for the subscales affect, loyalty, professional respect, and contribution. Due to the comparatively low reliability of the contribution-subscale, we needed to be cautious with potential effects involving this variable.

Analysis And Results

As in Study 1, we analyzed our data using ANCOVAs entering supervisor gender and supervisor parental status as fixed factors, controlling for respondents' gender and age. These analyses were run separately for LMX-overall and for the four LMX subscales as dependent variables. We could not confirm Hypothesis 1 as we did not find a significant main effect of parental status on subordinate-rated LMX ($p > .05$). However, the interaction for supervisor gender x supervisor parental status was significant for LMX-overall ($F[1,414] = 5.24, p = .02, \eta^2 = .01$) and for loyalty ($F[1,412] = 6.22, p = .01, \eta^2 = .02$). Against our assumption, having children had a positive effect on respondents' overall LMX-ratings for female supervisors (with children: $M = 5.32, SE = .09$ vs. without children: $M = 4.98, SE = .12, p = .03$), but not for male supervisors (with children: $M = 5.24, SE = .07$ vs. without children: $M = 5.48, SE = .20, p = .25$). Furthermore, respondents reported a lower relationship quality with female supervisors than with male supervisors if these supervisors had no children ($p = .03$) but there was no gender difference in relationship quality when supervisors had children ($p = .49$).

The interaction effect for supervisor gender x supervisor parental status for participants' loyalty ratings was similar. That is, participants did not differ in their loyalty ratings towards female and male supervisors with children (female supervisors: $M = 5.34, SE = .11$ vs. male supervisors: $M = 5.22, SE = .09, p = .42$) but they were significantly less loyal to female supervisors without children than for male supervisors without children (female supervisors: $M = 4.99, SE = .15$ vs. male supervisors: $M = 5.66, SE = .24, p = .02$).

Unexpectedly, respondents reported more professional respect for male line managers ($M = 5.88, SE = .12$) than for female line managers ($M = 5.49, SE = .09$).

Discussion Of Study 2

While we found a main effect of parenthood on affective liking in Study 1, supervisor gender affected professional respect and the interaction effect of supervisor gender x supervisor parental status was significant for the overall relationship quality as well as for loyalty in Study 2. Women benefitted from having children, whereas men did not. This finding is in contrast to the predictions of role congruity theory (Eagly & Karau, 2002) and to our assumptions. However, there is also research evidence supporting these findings on which we will focus in our overall discussion.

Taking the inconsistent findings from Studies 1 and 2 into account, it seems reasonable that the relationship between positive parenting experiences and leadership is more complex. Effective support in managing work and family lives might be one mechanism through which parents have advantages in supervisory roles compared to childless managers. Supervisors who are also parents may remember their own experiences in managing work and family lives and thus find it easier to adopt their subordinates' perspectives in this regard. Perspective taking, in general, is an important predictor of empathy and helping behavior (e.g., Parker & Axtell, 2001). Consequently, supervisors with children may provide more support in balancing work and family lives. Supervisor support, in turn, predicts employees' successful attempts to balance work and family lives (e.g., Ryan & Sagas, 2011). Therefore, we propose:

Hypothesis 3: The relationship between supervisors' parental status and follower-rated leader-member exchange quality is mediated by supervisors' supportive behavior in balancing work and family lives.

We tested this mechanism in a third study.

STUDY 3

We invited employees with children to participate in an online survey. The link to the questionnaire was distributed via several professional networks. A total of 363 individuals clicked on the link to our survey, 154 started the questionnaire and 94 participants finished the questionnaire. Of these 94, 88 (thereof 79 women) answered all questions relevant for the present analyses and were included in this study. Participants were, on average, 40.74 years old ($SD = 6.13$) and were parents of 1.87 children (range from 1 to more than 5, $SD = .81$). Nearly a third of the participants (27.3%) had supervisory responsibilities. A third of the participants' direct supervisors were women and 76.1% of supervisors had children.

Participants indicated their supervisor's gender ($0 = male, 1 = female$) and whether their supervisor had children ($0 = no, 1 = yes$). They then answered how well their supervisor supported them in balancing work and family lives on a scale from $1 = very badly$ to $5 = very good$. Finally, they answered the 7-item scale developed by Graen and Uhl-Bien (1995; German version by Schyns, 2002) to operationalize LMX. Cronbach's Alpha for this scale was .90.

Analysis And Results

We used the SPSS-macro PROCESS (Hayes, 2018) to test our mediator hypothesis. We mean-centered all variables and controlled for participants' and supervisors' gender as well as for participants' age. We used bootstrapping with $N = 5000$ samples to obtain bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals. Our results confirm Hypothesis 3. Parents provided more work-family related supportive behavior which, in turn, positively affected the leader-member exchange quality rated by their followers (indirect effect = .33; 95% CI [.10;.65]).

OVERALL DISCUSSION

With these three studies, we aimed at examining how supervisors' parental status and the interaction between parental status and gender predicted follower-rated LMX quality. Overall, we found mixed evidence for our propositions.

From our point of view, the findings of these three studies have at least three theoretical implications. Firstly and although researchers consistently reported and hypothesized disadvantages for women at the workplace because of being mothers (e.g., Correll et al., 2007) or because of becoming mothers in the future (Gatrell, Cooper, & Kossek, 2017), we could not find such effects for mothers' compared to fathers' leadership skills in the present studies. Our results might indicate that people's negative stereotypes about mothers have recently changed so that mothers are no longer associated with less competence (e.g., Cuddy et al., 2004). Yet, the results may also show that these stereotypes have not changed, *per se*, but that imagining a mother in a supervisory position activates a sub-stereotype ("momleader") compared to a mother who is described as a working mother. As social role theory (Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000) suggests, the supervisory role might automatically activate underlying skills to manage this role, such as better time management skills and more delegating behavior.

Secondly, we investigated one potential mechanism why parents might be better leaders, at least for those who are parents themselves, in Study 3. In our research, we used spillover theory (Greenhaus & Powell, 2006) as the central theoretical background. Yet, we did not explicitly investigate this underlying mechanism, nor did we assess how much time the respective leaders spent in their parental role. Including experiences of work-family enrichment and time spent with their children might have resulted in different findings. Dumas and Stanko (2017) provided evidence for this assumption in a recent study. Similarly, van Steenbergen, Ellemers, and Mooijaart (2007) showed that women were more likely than men to experience work–non-work facilitation and that such experiences were more relevant to women's job satisfaction and performance. This spillover process may be facilitated by women's higher tendency to integrate life domains (e.g., Andrews & Bailyn, 1993).

Thirdly, our research adds to the potential benefits of having multiple live roles irrespective of the individual's subjective experiences of benefitting from such multiple roles. In a similar vein, Dumas and Perry Smith (in press) recently demonstrated that married employees and employees with children were more absorbed at work compared to single childless employees and that having domestic duties after work explained this relation. Therefore, we encourage researchers to investigate such general benefits of being parents. Opposing the "kernel of truth"-assumption (LeVine & Campbell, 1972) inherent in stereotypes against parents and especially against mothers in leadership positions would be an important (first) step to establishing more positive views on multiple live role commitments.

To conclude, although our findings were mixed, we could consistently show that mothers in supervisory positions were not devalued because of their motherhood status in comparison to women without children and to men with and without children. The reasons for this effect need to be addressed in future research. Moreover, we found that parents provided more effective support in balancing work and family lives, which made them better leaders. We hope that our findings promote further research on parents in supervisory positions and the underlying mechanisms, which make them more or less effective leaders.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM THE AUTHOR(S)