The Effects of Sex and Marital/Parental Status on Performance Evaluations and Attributions

Joyce E. A. Russell and Michael C. Rush
The University of Tennessee

One hundred sixty female and 160 male undergraduates provided performance evaluations and attributions for a poor-performing stimulus employee depicted as male or female, and as either single or married with three preschool-aged children. No significant differences were detected for ratings given by male and female evaluators. The results did however, reveal a significant interaction of employee sex by marital/parental status conveying that of the four employee groups, married mothers were evaluated the most favorably, while single females were the least favorably evaluated. The differential performance evaluations were interpreted by attributional responses indicating that raters perceived external, uncontrollable factors as causes of the married mother's poor performance, while internal, controllable factors were seen as primary reasons for the poor performance of the other employees, particularly the single female's. Implications of the findings were presented.

Over the years, the dramatic increase in the number of women entering the work force has been primarily attributed to the influx of married women (30.5% in 1960 to 51.8% in 1983) and, specifically, married mothers with preschool-aged children (18.6% in 1960 to 49.9% in 1983; Waldman, 1983). As a result of these trends and the rising social issues surrounding the women's movement in general, considerable research has been generated to explore some of the issues and potential problems concerning women's employment.

1Portions of this paper were presented at the 43rd annual meeting of the Academy of Management, Dallas, Texas, August 1983.

2To whom all correspondence should be addressed at 417 Stokely Management Center, The University of Tennessee, Knoxville, Tennessee 37996.
One issue of concern deals with determining the reactions and perceptions others have for an employed woman, particularly her competence. In efforts to gain insight into these perceptions, Etaugh and associates (Etaugh & Kasley, 1981; Etaugh & Malstrom, 1981; Etaugh & Petroski, 1985) have explored how factors such as a woman's employment, marital, or parental status might influence perceptions males and females have regarding her personality and professional competence. In concert, their findings consistently suggested that employed women were perceived more favorably than unemployed women, and married women were ascribed more favorable personality traits than were single women. Less consistent trends were detected for the effects of parental status on evaluations, although some evidence suggested that working mothers were less favorably evaluated than childless women.

The researchers interpreted their findings in terms of societal values that individuals hold with respect to employment and marital status. That is, being employed is positively evaluated because it is perceived as a factor contributing to an individual's sense of life satisfaction and positive mental health. Likewise, married individuals may be viewed more favorably than singles because marriage is often seen as a highly valued or desired characteristic, as well as a necessary state for an individual's development (Johnston & Eklund, 1984). Considerable research, in fact, suggest a pervasive negative stereotype for singles; i.e., they are perceived as irresponsible, immature (Edwards, 1977), less adjusted, unstable, and incomplete (Johnston & Eklund, 1984).

Etaugh and associates indicated that the less favorable evaluations ascribed to single working women or working mothers may have important implications that should be further investigated. One area where the implications of differential perceptions might have serious consequences would be in evaluations of job performance. If factors such as marital and parental status, which are generally salient individual features, differentially influence performance evaluations, then the employees may suffer career consequences. Performance appraisal research documenting the influence of other salient features of an employee such as sex, race, and age on evaluations made for their performance implies that these characteristics may often evoke certain preconceived stereotypic expectations for the supervisor that influence the evaluations given for the employee (cf. Landy & Farr, 1983). Such decisions may have rather serious consequences for employees, particularly if their performance is poor and the supervisor is making judgments about a future course of action for them, such as discipline.

The present study was designed to examine the effects of an employee's sex and marital/parental status on performance evaluations in order to extend the previous research by Etaugh and associates. Specifically, we were