

Early Career Leadership Advancement: Evidence of Incongruity Penalties toward Young, Single Women Professionals



Jennifer Merluzzi

George Washington University, School of Business
jmerluzz@gwu.edu

Damon J. Phillips

University of Pennsylvania, Wharton School
dp2588@columbia.edu

Background:

Careers/Identity, Labor Markets, Inequality

Jennifer Merluzzi

Associate Professor of Strategic Management & Public Policy



School of Business

Specialist and Generalist Career Identities & Outcomes

- Specialist discount
- Social networks across cultures

Labor Market Inequality in the Professions

- Gender inequality [entrepreneurs, management consultants, MBAs, patent examiners]
- Referral-hiring, outcomes of minorities; trial employment

Gender Incongruence/Identity

- Incongruity penalties for single women, masculine talents; women founders – masculine industries
- Hiring w/in women; Covid & fatherhood penalty
- Devaluation by association - use of force, awards in law enforcement

Today's Talk

A red arrow originates from the text 'Today's Talk' and points diagonally down and to the left, ending at the 'Gender Incongruence/Identity' section header.

Leadership & Commitment as a Dominant Mechanism

There is substantial research on barriers to advancement for professional women (*“glass ceiling”*):

- Many explanations: (*sex segregation; different evaluations; access to power*)
- Across occupations: (*physicians; academics, lawyers; professional managers; professional sports; film; politics*)

A dominant thread: women's (actual/perceived/anticipated) **lower commitment** to work

- Women choose fewer work hours, ‘female friendly’ jobs
- Firms reward less - “motherhood penalty”

Implication:

Normative, societal *expectation* of women who work - must also balance work with family demands – **makes less committed employee**

...even independent of their own actions/intentions

Challenges Faced by Working Mothers



“Why aren’t more women in the upper ranks of corporate America? Cue the broken record: Women rein in career plans to spend more time caring for family.”

The Upshot
(Wall Street Journal, 2019)

GENDER DIVIDE

The Motherhood Penalty vs. the Fatherhood Bonus

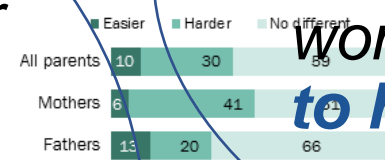
By Claire Cain Miller

Sept. 6, 2014

One of the worst career moves a woman can make is to have children. Mothers are less likely to be hired for jobs, to be perceived as competent at work or to be paid as much as their male colleagues with the same qualifications.

Moms More Likely to Say Parenting Interferes with Career Advancement

% who say being a working parent has made career advancement ...



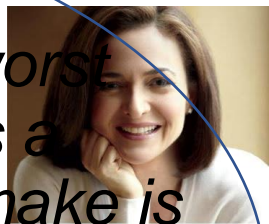
Note: Based on all full- or part-time working parents (n=1,411). Voluntary responses of “Depends” and “Don’t know/Refused” not shown.

Source: Pew Research Center survey of parents with children under 18, Sept. 15-Oct. 13, 2015

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

“One of the worst career moves a woman can make is to have children.”

(New York Times, 2014)



LEAN IN

WOMEN, WORK, AND THE WILL TO LEAD

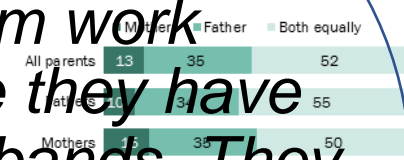
SHERYL SANDBERG

#1 NATIONAL BEST SELLER

“Women don’t step back from work because they have rich husbands. They have rich husbands because they step back from work.”

About Three Times as Many Say Dad Prioritizes His Career as Say Mom Does

% of working parents in dual-income households saying ____ is more focused on their job or career



Note: Based on respondents who are employed part-time or full time and are married to or living with a partner who is employed full time or part-time. Excludes those who are not married or living with a partner. Respondent's children under 18 are not shown.

Source: Pew Research Center survey of parents with children under 18, Sept. 15-Oct. 13, 2015

PEW RESEARCH CENTER

Q95

(New York Times, 2019)

An Implication for Single (childless) Women

Given such strong obstacles, what options remain for women wishing to succeed in the business world?

Option: Remain **single** - delay marriage & motherhood – prevalent in professions (Diprete & Buchmann 2013; Fuller 2008; Gorman 2005)

US Census:

- Median age marriage rising (20 to 27.5)
- 'Never marry' rising (19% to 30%)
- ...especially among professionals, higher-educated (Pew Research 2018)

Similar statistics reported outside the U.S. (UN 2019)

PHOENIX — When Larissa Faw interviews young women for stories on Forbes.com, she mostly focuses on their lives in the workplace.

She writes about how **women in the millennial generation are devoted to their careers**, working 12-hour days, giving up serious relationships and even pets in exchange for the freedom "to hustle and make money and be independent and strong and do it for themselves."

But We Know Little About Single (childless) Women

*With respect to **single women professionals**, we have little theory and evidence...*

In the past 20 years:

63 academic articles 'women', 'leadership', and 'glass ceiling'

- 41 cite **commitment** as mechanism
- Only 1 mentions '**single women**' (Mainero and Sullivan 2005, AME)

Extend to 'work-family conflict', single women were mentioned:

- 4 articles
- 1 book chapter

An Implication for Single (childless) Women

*What would we expect for **single women's advancement** into organizational **leadership** roles?*

Possibility: ***lack of commitment*** continues to be the expectation (driving mechanism) – even among single women

- Future risk of marriage and motherhood: “***might have kids someday***” (Turco 2010: 902)
- Class-advantaged women – negative stereotypes on their commitment, anticipate them to **drop out** (Rivera & Tilcsik 2016).
- **Publically attest** to career preferences consistent with ‘marriage material’ – no difference privately (Burzstyn et al. 2017)
- Strategy to ‘**marry up**’ and **allocate work** (Pew Research 2018; Yavorsky et al. 2019)

But We Know Little About Single (childless) Women

Other Possibility: *Single Women encounter **other obstacles** that negatively impact their consideration for leadership roles*

Beliefs about what is “appropriately feminine” – career dedication – not good for women [*communal v. agentic leadership*]

-- especially a woman not conforming with societal expectations (Hamilton 2006)

*“Never-married women without children are often stereotyped as being **too masculine, insufficiently career-driven, competitive, and aloof**, and they have no mate or offspring to validate their attractiveness, desirability, or compassionate nature. Therefore these women often struggle to achieve balance between **being perceived as serious professionals and maintaining their femininity**.”*
(DePaulo & Morris 2005: 57-58)
(Hamilton 2006: 395)
(Hamilton 2006: 397-98)

**“failure to exemplify the
‘Ideology of Marriage & Family’”**

(Morris, Sinclair & DePaulo 2007)

Family Status of Past & Current Women CEOs



Ginni Rometty
IBM
Married, No Children



Meg Whitman
eBay
Married, 2 Children



Ursula Burns
Xerox
Married, 2 Children



Marillyn Hewson
Lockheed Martin
Married, 2 Children



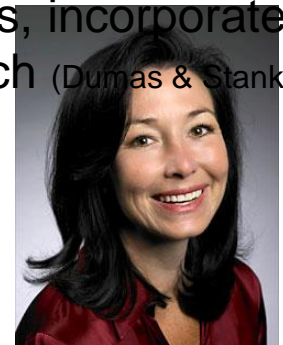
Indra Nooyi
PepsiCo
Married, 2 Children



Lynn Good
Duke Energy
Married, 2 Children



Mary Barra
GM
Married, 2 Children



Safra Catz
Oracle
Married, 2 Children

In fact, when we think of women leader, it is a **married mother...**

Successful women executives rated negatively unless informed exec was a married mother – “as a **superwoman**” (Eby 2004; Hellman & Okimoto 2007; Thatcher 2005)

Leadership advantages associated with motherhood and ability to enact **communal style of leadership** – empower employees, incorporate alternative viewpoints, and utilize a **relational** leadership approach (Dumas & Stankov 2017; Hesse-Biber 2011)

(Of the 24 Women CEOs of S&P 500 in 2019 – all but 1 is married – the 1 is divorced – and 17 publically confirm being mothers)
Today: 37 women CEOs, 30 married, 27 mothers, 7 no info

Our Central Thesis (Role Incongruity)

With respect to leadership roles, single women present a series of incongruities as leaders.



Single women are **too agentic** for prioritizing career & behaving like men

Single women are **insufficiently communal** for prioritizing career over marriage and motherhood (unlike married women)

*Negative signal of 'being single' on leadership – more penalizing when stand out as 'insufficiently communal' in other ways (e.g., **masculine talent**)*

Predictions – Promotions (Leadership)

Single Woman < Married Woman < Single Man < Married Man



Alexandra
Ocasio-Cortez
U.S. Rep, NY



Jennifer
Hyman, Rent
the Runway



Jack Dorsey,
Square



Eric Poirier,
Addepar

Single Woman w/ Gender Inconsistencies

< Single Woman < Married Woman < Single Man < Married Man



Michelle
Richmond,
Director IET

Alexandra
,Ocasio-Cortez
U.S. Rep, NY

Jennifer
Hyman, Rent
the Runway

Jack Dorsey,
Square

Eric Poirier,
Addepar

Empirical Strategy: Experiment + Archival Analysis

STUDY 1: Vignette experiment with random assignment

- Do single women face a promotion penalty?
- Is the penalty associated with incongruence with leadership for single women?

STUDY 2: Analysis of two cohorts of MBA graduates

- Is a single woman promotion penalty observable in the early career paths of business professionals?
- Does having gender inconsistency at work amplify this penalty?

Study 1 Design (Vignette of Single Woman, no children)

(316 participants; n=301 in full models)

61% Graduate – ExecMBA, FTMBA (95%) and 39% senior und & 5th year Masters (92%)

ABC Bank, a large investment-banking firm, needs to hire for three positions. They are considering this candidate who is currently employed at ABC Bank.

Candidate

Background Information

Three years ago, Ann graduated in the top of her class with an MBA from a prestigious business program. Before this, Ann worked at a well-known firm in their corporate finance department. The company was impressed with her analytic skills and offered her a job after her MBA, even agreeing to pay for her tuition. Ann instead accepted a *Senior Associate* position at ABC Bank, a coveted job among her classmates. Since starting at ABC Bank, Ann has worked on a number of projects, clocking over 110-hour weeks. She is known in her firm for her sharp analytical skills, attention to detail and commitment to projects. In her free time, Ann enjoys traveling with her friends, exercising, and going to the theatre.

Significant promotion to leadership (VP)

Promotion (AVP)

Lateral Move (SA)

*****provided detailed description of each***

In her free time, Ann enjoys traveling with her husband and children,

In his free time, Tim enjoys traveling with his friends,

In his free time, Tim enjoys traveling with his wife and children,

STUDY 1 Summary

Respondents in the single woman condition penalized the candidate.

- Single women candidates rated **least suitable for promotion** to leadership position compared to identically described other candidates (MW, MM, SM)
- Participants in SW condition: more likely to explain negative assessment due to the candidate's analytical ability, a lack of social aptitude, and lack of leadership skills

STUDY 1: Evidence for Role Incongruity Using Participant Explanations

Q3: “Please describe why you selected this ranking for this candidate?”

*“Based on the description, Ann focuses more on detailed work. I believe she is good at dealing with projects, handling daily operations. Since she is known for her analytical skills and also 110-hour workload makes me believe she is a hard-working person. However, **I do not think she has enough leadership skills.**”*

Single Woman Condition

Rated VP position “1: not suitable, do not consider this candidate”

*“He has shown that he is a hard worker and has **stellar analytical skills**, but we were not told about his leadership skills yet. Many times **hard workers do turn out to be good leaders**...An MBA may give him more of an edge to be considered.”*

Married Man Condition

Rated VP position “4: some potential, consider this candidate”

STUDY 1 Summary

Respondents in the single woman condition penalized the candidate.

- Single women candidates rated **least suitable for promotion** to leadership position compared to identically described other candidates (MW, MM, SM)
- Participants in SW condition: more likely to explain negative assessment due to the candidate's analytical ability, a lack of social aptitude, and lack of leadership skills

No evidence of other explanations:

- ✗ Less likeable
- ✗ Younger age (i.e., less qualified/experienced)
- ✗ Married Men & Women (without kids) rated more suitable
- ✗ Lower commitment SW – “riskier”/MW as exceptional “superwoman”

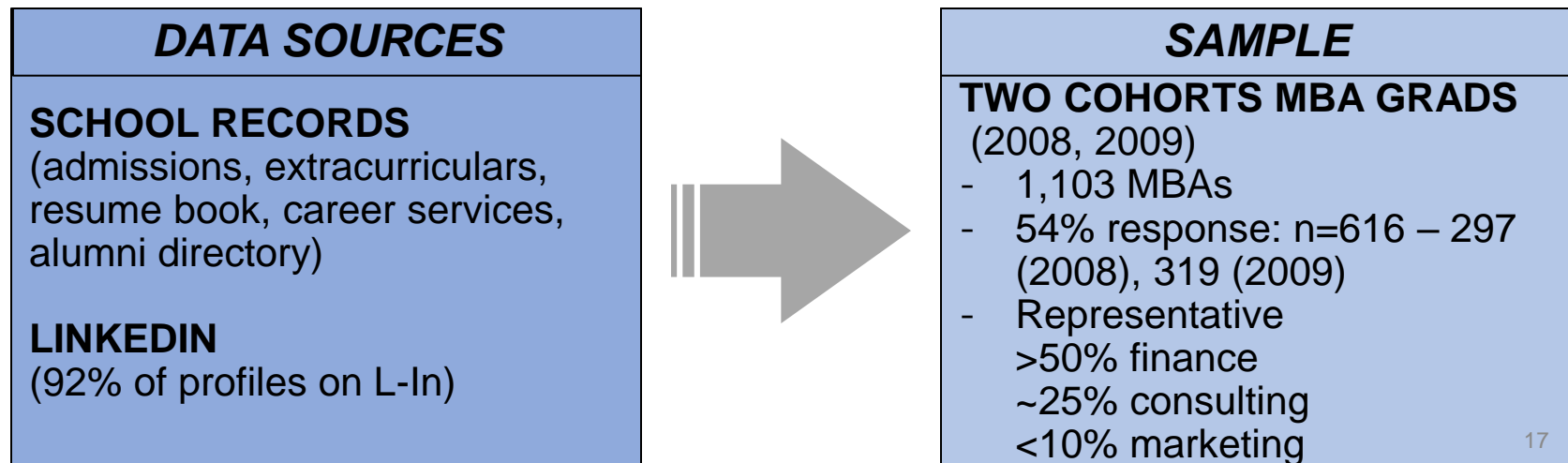
STUDY 2 Data & Design

Archival data on early career promotions of MBAs

Goal 1: Provide External Validity

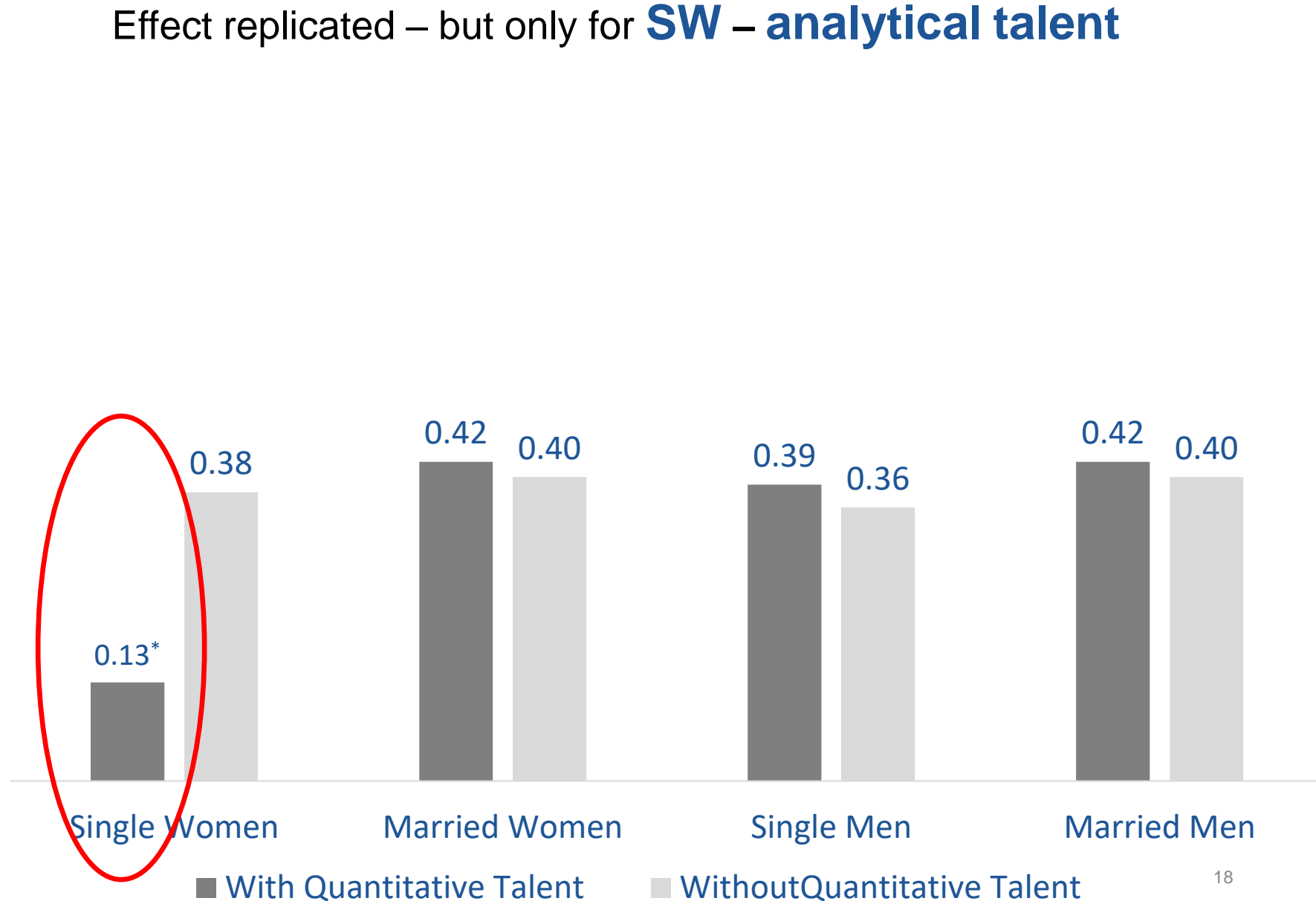
Goal 2: Investigate whether leadership penalty is stronger for SW with gender inconsistencies

...especially because this emerged in text explanations for SW



STUDY 2: Probability of Promotion at the First Employer for I-Banking MBAs

Effect replicated – but only for **SW** – analytical talent



Concluding Thoughts

Single & married professional women face *different* penalties.

- MW – insufficiently committed (competent) – inferior to hire
- SW – insufficiently communal & too agentic – inferior to promote

Did not see evidence in gender inconsistent field – more linked to person than organization

We need to better understand women in other economic levels, family statuses, races.

Role congruity is a useful conceptual tool for taking a more expansive approach.

Next Steps: Reducing Inequality & Other Settings

Organizational-level moderators

- Organizational culture
- Women-led employers
- Stronger tied to identity

Individual-level moderators

- Past team/communal experiences
- Why some single women reach success (e.g., Oprah)

Other Settings

- Military/Law Enforcement
- Entrepreneurship
- Politics
- Sports

Thank you!



jmerluzz@gwu.edu

Appendix

Then Participants Assess the Candidate

Position Title and Career Track Information	Position Description
<i>Vice President</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Considered a <u>significant promotion</u> ○ Typical hire: candidates certain to have long-term leadership potential 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsibilities include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Mentor and develop staff ○ Work on a variety of transactions, e.g., client pitches ○ Communicate regulatory, financial information ○ Market to internal partners and external clients
<i>Assistant Vice President</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Considered a <u>promotion</u> ○ Typical hire: candidates believed to have long-term leadership potential 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsibilities include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Market the firm's investment strategy to potential clients ○ Perform industry, company and financial due diligence and research ○ Construct detailed financial models and analyses
<i>Senior Associate</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Considered neither a promotion or demotion; <u>but a lateral move</u> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsibilities include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ High level of responsibility; access to senior management, clients ○ Involved in transactions including financings ○ Handle daily activities & oversee analyst work

Significant promotion to leadership (VP)

Promotion (AVP)

Lateral Move (SA)

Participant Explanation: Single Man Condition

“Tim is already a Senior Associate so this is not a good position for him. The VP position requires mentoring and marketing, skills that require more experience. The AVP position requires modeling and analysis, which are Tim’s strengths and he can build the skills needed for the VP position.”

Single Man Condition

Rated VP position “4: some potential, consider this candidate”

Participant Explanation: Married Woman Condition

“Ann seems to have potential, but most of her experience is from an analytical standpoint. The move to VP would require much more external interaction with clients and partners. While it seems as though Ann is over-qualified (has grown out of) her current position, she is not yet prepared to be a representative of the bank. The position of AVP will give her hands-on leadership experience and will expand her potential.”

Married Woman Condition

Rated VP position “2: *low potential, only consider if no other candidate*”

Could Lower Commitment Explain the Single Woman Penalty?

Single Women as Riskier - (eventual, future) low commitment (Turco 2010)

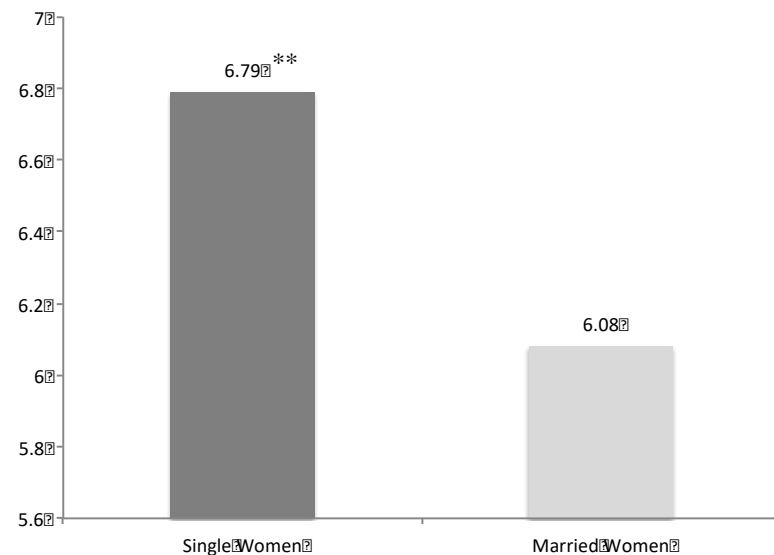
Married Women as ‘exceptional’ - more ***reliable***, committed when they return to work (Dumas & Perry-Smith 2018; Killewald & Gough 2013; Lynness & Judiesch 2001)

<u>Participants:</u>	Business school students: (193 surveyed - (87%) – grad, undergrad (Junior +, manipulation check on marital status – 112 participants)
<u>Design:</u>	Vignette: same but clear <i>leadership</i> position only Added: <i>perceived org commitment</i> ; assessment of skills Online: Qualtrics survey
<u>Conditions:</u>	(1) Single woman (w/o children); (2) Married woman (w/o children); (3) Married woman (w/ children)
<u>Key Questions:</u>	Perceived <i>organizational commitment</i> questions (Galperin et al. 2016): How committed to firm? If <i>asked to work extra hours</i> how likely? Promoted/Not Promoted – <i>Years Remain</i>

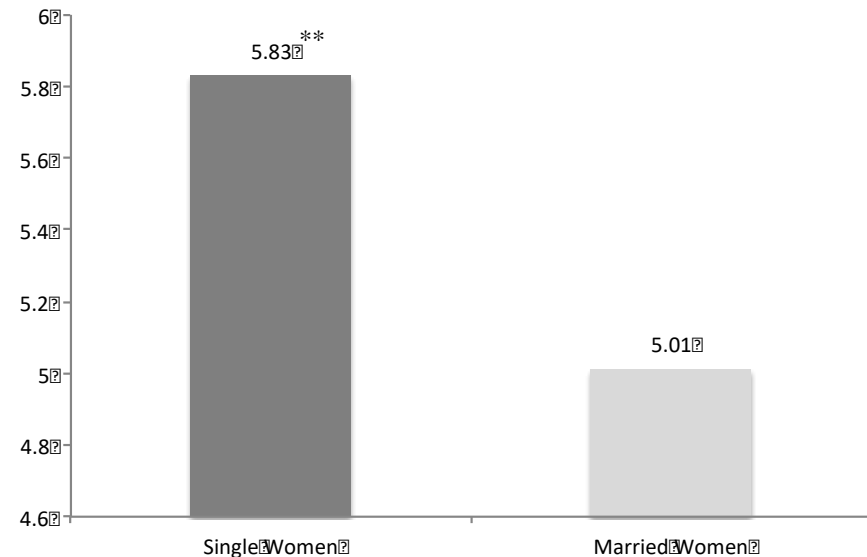
Single Women are perceived as more committed than Married Women

Perceived *organizational commitment* questions (Galperin et al. 2016 – based on Van Dyne et al. 1994) using Likert Scale 7-point scale: How committed to firm? If *asked to work extra hours* how likely? Promoted/Not Promoted – *Years Remain*

Willingness to Work Extra Hours



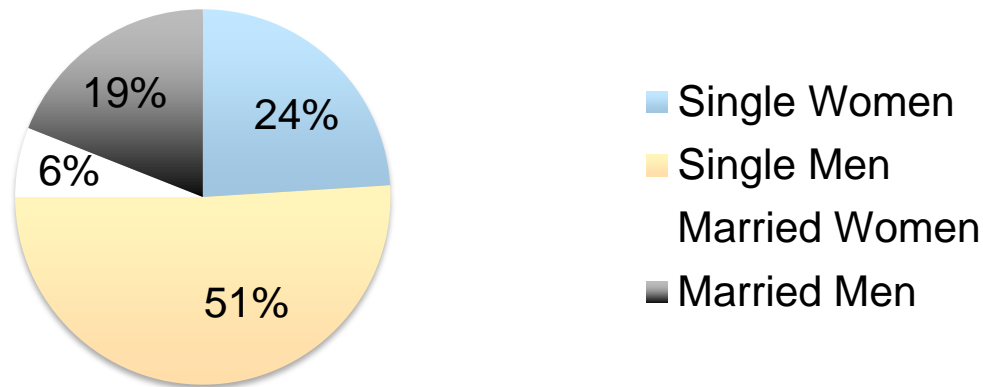
Years Expected to Stay at Firm, If Promoted



Single Woman Penalty – Study 2

Dependent Variable: Internal (Within Firm) Promotions

- Gender by Marital Status



- Quantitative Skills
- Based on GMAT – Quantitative Score (95th percentile or higher)
- Interaction with gender, marital status

Many Control Variables

- Demographics, Human capital, Matriculation-related experience, Internship & prior job experience, The Offer/Permanent

Study 2 - Context and Sample

Year	2008		2009	
Total Students	297		319	
Female	89	(30%)	100	(31%)
US Citizen	212	(71%)	210	(66%)
Non-White	142	(48%)	162	(51%)
Corporate Finance	16	(5%)	58	(18%)
Inv Banking	118	(40%)	72	(23%)
Consulting	67	(23%)	72	(22%)
Marketing	22	(7%)	29	(9%)
Other	74	(25%)	88	(28%)

Study 2 – Control Variables for Main Analysis

Individual Characteristics:

- Married woman, single man, married man, **non-white (-)**, matriculation age

Pre-MBA and Matriculation Experience:

- prior # of firms worked at, top-20 undergrad institution, additional graduate degrees earned, GPA not reported, verbal talent (GMAT verbal $\geq 95^{\text{th}}$ percentile), membership in charity club

Job Offer Characteristics:

- Job function (**investment banking (-)**, marketing), involved in **an entrepreneurial venture (-)**, 2008 cohort year, accepted top-paying job, sourced job by employer invitation, sourced job on own.

Does it have to be a gender inconsistent talent?

- **Analyzed series of other interactions (all n/s):**
 - SW * cumulative work experience
 - SW * high GPA
 - SW * job functions
 - SW * job offers
 - SW * top undergrad

Are single women with quantitative talent immobile in general?

- **Changed the DV to other types of mobility (all n/s with SW-high quant, except SW-high quant had lower survival – retention - rates):**
 - ✗ Likelihood to stay at first employer, same job
 - ✗ Likelihood to move within employer laterally
 - ✗ Likelihood to move across employers – promotion, lateral, demotion, new job function
 - ✗ # of organizations post-graduation
 - ✓ Did have lower survival rates in first job ($p < 0.10$)

Do single women with quantitative talent lack social skills?

Does not explain Study 1. Identically described – but perceived SW as lacking “social ability”.

Study 2 – allowed us to account for differences, but, we could not find any “social deficiency” tied to single women:

- GPA, top20, verbal, job experience, club memberships, club leaders, # of offers, negotiation skills, # of LinkedIn contacts, sourced job on own.
- Penalty to SW-QT remained.

Single Woman Penalty – Robustness Checks (Study 2)

Other tests that did not include (inconsistent reporting in Linked in) but, performed t-tests comparing SW-Quant with other groups (all N/S differences):

- ✓ **Number of post-grad employment breaks (>1 month)** – to account for individuals who may have experienced more than average number of career interruptions, such as to raise children or, account for quality differences in job match
- ✓ **Number of org changes** – to account for individuals who may have traded off money for change in title (Bidwell & Mollick 2015)
- ✓ **Number of job functional changes** – to account for moving across function that may have interfered with a promotion.