

# **UNPACKING AMERICANS' VIEWS OF THE EMPLOYMENT OF MOTHERS AND FATHERS USING NATIONAL VIGNETTE SURVEY DATA:**

## ***SWS Presidential Address***

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*Drawing on findings from an original national survey experiment, we unpack Americans' views on the employment of mothers and fathers with young children. This study provides a fuller account of contemporary attitudes than is available from surveys such as the General Social Survey. After seeing vignettes that vary the circumstances in which married mothers, single mothers, and married fathers make decisions about paid work and caregiving, the respondents' views swing from strong support to deep skepticism about a parent's work participation, depending on the parent's specific job conditions and family circumstances. When a mother, whether married or single, is satisfied with her job and her family depends on her income, respondents overwhelmingly support the option to work. Conversely, when a father is dissatisfied with his job and the family does not depend on his income, respondents generally support the option to stay home. These findings provide insight regarding the "gender stall" thesis by showing that Americans' views depend heavily on the circumstances they believe parents are facing. This more nuanced view highlights the importance of social context in the allocation of paid work and caregiving for both mothers and fathers.*

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Although the overwhelming majority of American mothers now work for pay, including more than two-thirds of women with children under the age of one (U.S. Census Bureau 2009), their actions face a persistent and contentious public debate (Belkin 2003; Percheski 2008; Stone 2007). Popular media coverage and national surveys stressing the difficulties and drawbacks associated with the rise of mothers' employment show the extent of this anxiety (Kling and Vanneman 2010). Although Americans increasingly accept women in the workplace, it appears that a sizable minority continues to hold mixed views about the desirability, and even the morality, of employment for mothers with preschool children (Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2011).

One consequence of the ambivalence surrounding mothers' employment is the rise of an intensifying conflict between the norm of "intensive mothering," especially among the middle class, and the pressure on women to bring in income and build strong workplace ties (Gerson 2011; Hays 1996; Kuperberg and Stone 2008). The contradiction between these norms leaves modern mothers contending with a "damned if you do and damned if you don't" set of options. Indeed, these contradictions are evident in U.S. social policy, where the 1996 welfare reform required poor, single mothers to take paid jobs even though a paucity of child care and incomplete paid parental leave legislation leave most of them without the caregiving supports they need to integrate jobs and parenting (Gilens 1999; Shaw et al. 2006).

How can we make sense of these apparently conflicting views about women and work? More broadly, now that mothers provide the sole or primary support in 40 percent of the households with children under the age of 18 (Wang, Parker, and Taylor 2013), how do Americans evaluate the employment of mothers and fathers with young children? Answering this question not only helps illuminate if, how, and why cultural norms may be changing; it also provides clues about how to construct work and family policies that can garner broad social support. Surprisingly, while quantitative and qualitative studies have produced a wealth of information on changing views toward women's paid work, we know little about what drives the continuing public controversy and ambivalence toward working mothers.

Here, we endeavor to probe more deeply into Americans' views on mothers' and fathers' employment decisions. We examine not only when and how this ambivalence is deepest, but also whether it is mainly an artifact of earlier surveys' failure to investigate the large variation that now exists in parents' work and family situations. Prevailing measures

rarely explore attitudinal responses to the circumstances surrounding mothers' employment strategies, including whether they like their jobs, whether they are satisfied with their child care arrangements, or whether their income is important for their families. In addition, existing opinion questions seldom specify a mother's marital status or compare mothers to fathers, who may face similar circumstances. Digging deeper, we find that the ambivalence about mothers' employment captured by general attitudinal measures declines substantially when we ask people to consider these contextual factors. The disparities in views about appropriate choices for married mothers, single mothers, and fathers narrow considerably when we present their job and family circumstances in a similar way. People's beliefs about parents' work decisions vary fundamentally depending on the set of options parents face.

### **RESEARCH ON ATTITUDES TOWARD WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT**

A wealth of research has been conducted on changing views about women and employment over the last several decades, including studies investigating trends in attitudes toward women's labor force participation (see Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman 2011 for a review of this literature). These studies generally report growing acceptance of women's employment, but also enduring skepticism about whether mothers with young children should work at paid jobs.

The General Social Survey (GSS) has been gathering information on this topic since its inception in the early 1970s. Despite growing acceptance, especially from the 1970s through the early 1990s, the GSS findings suggest that a considerable minority remains either ambivalent or hostile to women's labor force participation, particularly in the case of mothers with young children, a view that Cotter, Hermsen, and Vanneman (2011) argue has been generally stable for most of the 1990s and 2000s. In 2012, for example, 28.7 percent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement that "a working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children." This measure thus indicates that one-quarter to one-third of respondents currently support a gender-divided arrangement of labor in the household or express concerns about the employment of mothers of young children.

While the GSS provides important information about changes over time, it is difficult to interpret the current meaning of answers to decades-old questions whose wording ignores more recent gender and family

changes. Not only may the wording of the questions skew answers toward less support for women's employment, but the questions do not take account of the varied circumstances in which parents make employment decisions. This variation occurs on at least four dimensions: First, the GSS does not specify whether the subject of the questions is a married or single mother, and it also lacks parallel questions about fathers. Second, the questions offer no information about a subject's work and family situation, including the quality of one's job, child care, or financial circumstances. Third, the GSS does not ask about how employment decisions affect other members of a subject's family, including a partner and children along with the subject herself. Finally, the GSS offers only two options, whether to work or not work, without considering other possible adjustments, such as changing one's job or child care arrangements.

The stability in the wording of the GSS questions helps to chart trends, but prevents exploring whether alternative framings might have changed the answers. Principally posed in terms of the acceptance or rejection of mid-twentieth-century notions of traditional gender arrangements, the GSS has never directly asked whether respondents support the value of equality in marriage. Yet employing a method similar to the one we use in this study, Pedulla and Thébaud (2015) find considerable support for egalitarian relationships when adequate social supports are available.

The decades-old wording of GSS questions may tilt respondents toward a traditional answer to questions about the household division of labor. Two questions require the respondent to disagree in order to express a more progressive view; none of the questions mention possible advantages of mothers' employment or fathers' caregiving; and none offer gender equality as an appropriate standard. To assess the possibility that question wording influences people's answers as well as the comparability of GSS findings with our results, we asked the GSS questions to one sample group while providing an alternative and more balanced phrasing of questions to another sample group.

Now that single mothers head more than 25 percent of U.S. households with children under age 18 (Livingston 2013), we also need to know if, and how, a mother's marital status influences people's views on her employment decision. Qualitative research suggests that perceptions about a mother's marital status affect opinions about whether or not she should hold a paid job, with public sentiment favoring employment among single mothers even when the preference for married mothers may tilt more toward full-time caregiving (Hays 2003; Edin and Kefalas 2005; Hertz 2006). These sentiments no doubt reflect the American belief that

all families should and can be economically self-sustaining, however remote this goal may be for many. Yet viewing appropriate mothering through a class lens has paradoxical and counterproductive implications. Middle-class married mothers face criticism if they take an opportunity for satisfying, well-remunerated employment, while social policies push poor single mothers into jobs despite limited child care and severely constricted labor market options. Clearly, single mothers face different constraints than do married mothers, potentially including less financial support and more conflicts between family and working time. Such differences are likely to affect public perceptions about how women should balance paid and unpaid work.

National opinion surveys have also been slow to investigate public views on fathers' employment and the trade-offs they face between paid work and caregiving. The implicit assumption—that the employment of fathers retains near universal support, along with a parallel distaste for dads who stay home—remains untested. The meaning of fatherhood is changing, with single dads and stay-at-home fathers more common than ever, and fathers in general spending more time in child care than did previous generations. (e.g., Bianchi, Robinson, and Milkie 2006; Craig 2006; Doucet 2006). Surveys also indicate that men are now more likely than women to experience work–family conflict and that many would like to reduce the number of hours they spend on the job (Aumann, Galinsky, and Matos 2011; Jacobs and Gerson 2004). While scholars have paid more attention to the changing commitments of fathers (Bianchi et al. 2012; Gerson 1993; Sullivan and Coltrane 2010; Wall and Arnold 2007; see England 2010 for a somewhat different view), few studies have systematically examined public views on fathers who pull back from work to care for children or systematically compared these views with those about mothers.

We also do not know what types of jobs and family situations respondents have in mind when they respond to general questions about women's employment. In the absence of specifics, some respondents may presume unsatisfying employment while others may presume the jobs are appealing. Respondents may well support a woman's employment if the job is presented as appealing and satisfying, while they may support leaving the workplace if the job is described as dissatisfying. Providing respondents with information about job quality might reveal respondents' underlying assumptions.

To address these complexities, we expanded on this research tradition in several ways. Instead of asking about all women and only women, we

asked about three groups: married mothers, single mothers, and married fathers. For each group, we then varied the hypothetical circumstances surrounding a parent's work decision. By designing vignettes that alter the specific features surrounding a mother's or father's employment decision in different combinations, we are able to ascertain the conditions under which people support or disapprove of women's labor force participation and men's participation in domestic care work.

By comparing mothers and fathers, these vignettes allow us to go beyond assuming that only mothers face work–family conflicts. By distinguishing between single and married women, they allow us to avoid assuming uniformity among women. And they begin, albeit indirectly, to probe the significance of social class by specifying whether a household needs the parent's economic contributions as well as whether the parent has access to a satisfying job. This approach addresses questions of diversity in gendered situations rather than assuming a universal gender norm. While this framing covers a wide range of issues, it is nonetheless only a first step since it cannot capture many other important aspects of jobs, households, and personal circumstances, including diversity in race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation.

In designing the vignettes, we were mindful that the debate about mothers' employment has focused increasingly on children's well-being. Even though decades of research have shown that children of working mothers face virtually no harm—and a range of benefits—each new report on the link between child care and children's well-being sparks a new round of media attention and handwringing (Holcomb 2000). Yet the research shows that circumstantial factors such as a mother's satisfaction, the quality of child care arrangements, and the support of fathers and other caregivers have far more influence on a child's emotional well-being and cognitive development than whether or not she holds a paid job (Barnett and Rivers 1996; Hoffman, Wladis, and Youngblade 1999). Hsin and Felfe (2014) point out that it is particularly difficult for less-educated women (high school graduates) to balance work and child care, but this still does not harm their children.

Despite the research, the public discussion continues to express worry that a mother's desire to seek employment is at odds with her child's well-being, positing a conflict of interest between mothers and children. When, for example, a recent study found that quality of care matters more than the amount of time mothers spend with their children, the press showed enough skepticism that the authors were prompted to respond in detail (Milkie, Nomaguchi, and Denny 2015a). To address this debate, we

constructed the vignettes so that young children would be included in all the family situations.

We also explored views on the costs and benefits of a parent's employment for other family members, including the spouse as well as the child. The GSS questions do not distinguish among the consequences for women, men, and children.<sup>1</sup> If some respondents see a mother's employment as potentially deleterious for her children, they might nonetheless see benefits for her. Similarly, some respondents might view a married mother's employment as desirable for her but detrimental to the marriage. To unpack these distinctions, we explore views on how a parent's employment decision affects other members of the household. We specifically tap whether, given the circumstances, a mother's or father's employment is best for her or him, for her or his child, and (in the case of married couples) for her or his marriage.

Finally, our questions offer a wider array of work and parenting options from which to choose. Most survey questions, including the GSS items, assume that the only options are "working" and "not working." Yet qualitative research has shown that mothers, along with fathers, pursue a variety of work and parenting strategies that may change over time. These can include staying at a full-time job, changing to a different full-time job, working part time, staying home with a child, or re-entering the workforce (Boeckmann 2015; Damaske 2011; Gerson 2011; Stone 2007). If the only options presented are between working and not working, respondents are not being asked to consider the actual range of options. Adding the options to work part time or find another job to the mix is likely to change the overall distribution of responses. In our research design, we asked one sample to provide answers given the limited choice between working and not working, but also asked a second sample the same questions, worded in the same way, with additional choices such as finding another job or another child care arrangement. Broadening the questions in this way allows us to deepen our understanding of how Americans are formulating their views on work and parenting in light of the complex realities facing today's families.

## METHODS

To implement this approach, we draw on the experimental features offered by Time Sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences (TESS). Our findings are based on a nationally representative online survey administered

by Knowledge Networks. A total of 2,452 respondents answered our questionnaire in January 2012, representing a 64.5 percent response rate. Our approach utilized a two-by-two-by-two factorial design, with respondents randomly assigned to each of these treatments. These respondents received different versions of the vignettes so that responses to each form a separate subpanel. We assigned samples of 1,692 respondents randomly to each of the eight conditions so that each scenario received at least 200 responses.

First, we compare answers to the original GSS questions with revised wording that takes a more neutral position with respect to gender and employment issues. Comparing reworded and original questions allows us to see whether alternative wording and a more balanced set of response categories affects the findings. Next, we use vignettes that systematically vary a worker's job and family circumstances to ascertain if, and how, contextual factors influence people's views. Specifically, we varied the target subject's satisfaction with her or his job and her or his child care arrangements as well as the family's dependence on her or his income. In this way, we seek to ascertain if and how the social contexts facing workers and their families influence respondents' judgments.

We began by describing three hypothetical workers and then randomly assigned respondents to vignettes that varied their job and family conditions. The vignettes were introduced by stating, "We'd like to describe three different family situations and then ask you a short set of questions about each of them." Vignette 1 told respondents that "the first family consists of a married mother with a pre-school child who is employed full-time." Vignette 2 said that "the next situation consists of a single mother with a pre-school child who is employed full-time." Finally, Vignette 3 informed respondents that "the final situation consists of a married father who is employed full-time."

After this setup, we systematically varied the work and family circumstances of the worker in question. We specified whether (1) the worker was satisfied or not satisfied with her or his job; (2) the worker was satisfied or not satisfied with her or his child care arrangements; and (3) the family depends or does not depend on her or his income. These three factors only begin to tap the variations in parents' circumstances, but they nonetheless trigger a remarkable degree of variation in respondents' views. Although our sample size limited the ways we could vary each vignette, subsequent research can and should explore many additional important dimensions of diversity—including race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and more detailed measures of educational and class inequality.<sup>2</sup>

Respondents were given a set of questions about these vignettes. Specifically, after each vignette, we asked: (1) All things considered, is it

better for her (him) if she (he) stays at her (his) job, cuts back to part time, or stays home? (2) All things considered, is it better for the child if she (he) stays at her (his) job, cuts back to part time, or stays home? (3) All things considered, is it better for the marriage if she (he) stays at her (his) job, cuts back to part time, or stays home? and (4) All things considered, what do you think she (he) should do—should she (he) stay at her (his) job, cut back to part time, or stay home?<sup>3</sup>

The final experiment expanded the options. When the subject of the vignette is not satisfied with her or his job or not satisfied with her or his child care arrangements, we offer alternative solutions to these challenges. A working parent might opt to cut back to part time or leave the labor force, but she or he might also consider switching jobs or seeking alternative child care arrangements. To better understand respondents' views, we provided a broader and more realistic set of alternative possibilities, including options that would allow the parent in question to continue working.<sup>4</sup> A sample of 850 respondents received this expanded choice set, as we explain more fully below.

To provide a baseline for comparing our results with those of the GSS, we asked the identically worded GSS items (see Table 1) to a randomly selected subsample of the TESS respondents. Compared to 2012 GSS responses, the TESS responses were just more than 3 percentage points more likely to “strongly agree” that “the child will suffer” but 4 percentage points less likely to say “agree,” and the differences between the two samples are not statistically significant. The TESS results for the “man the achiever” item lean in a conservative direction. About 14 percentage points more of our respondents agree or strongly agree, with a corresponding 14 percent fewer who disagree. In this case, the difference between the TESS sample and the GSS sample is statistically significant,  $p < .01$ . In sum, our results are close to the GSS when the question wording is exactly the same: statistically indistinguishable in one case, and statistically distinguishable but not substantively different in a second case. We can thus conclude that any nontraditional or pro-egalitarian responses that emerge from the TESS vignette questions occur despite the slightly more conservative tilt of our sample.

### Alternative Wording of GSS Questions

We then compared responses to some of the GSS questions with answers to our slightly revised, more neutral versions. For the GSS question on “whether a child is likely to suffer,” half the sample was given the original question, while the other half was asked whether a child is likely “to suffer or benefit” from having an employed mother. Among those

**TABLE 1: Comparison of TESS 2012 and GSS 2012 Results**

|   |           | Strongly Agree   | Agree                        | Disagree      | Strongly Disagree |
|---|-----------|--|------------------------------|---------------|-------------------|
| 1A. A preschool child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works? (GSS Acronym: FEPRESCH)<br>Alternative wording  | GSS 2012  | 6.4%   | 28.8%                        | 50.3%         | 14.5%             |
|   | TESS 2012 | 9.5%   | 23.9%                        | 51.4%         | 15.4%             |
| 1B. Is a preschool child likely to suffer or benefit if his or her mother works outside the home?   |           | Likely to suffer   | Likely to benefit            | No difference |                   |
|   | TESS 2012 | 40.9%  | 17.2%                        | 41.1%         | Strongly disagree |
| 2A. It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family? (GSS Acronym FEFAM)<br>Alternative wording | GSS 2012  | 6.5%   | 25.2%                        | 28.3%         | 20.0%             |
|   | TESS 2012 | 12.5%  | 33.3%                        | 39.4%         | 15.5%             |
| 2B. It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family, or is it better if they share equally?     |           | Better if the man is the achiever and the woman takes care of the home | Better if they share equally | No difference |                   |
|   | TESS 2012 | 9.6%   | 56.2%                        | 23.1%         |                   |

Note: TESS = Time Sharing Experiments for the Social Sciences; GSS = General Social Survey.

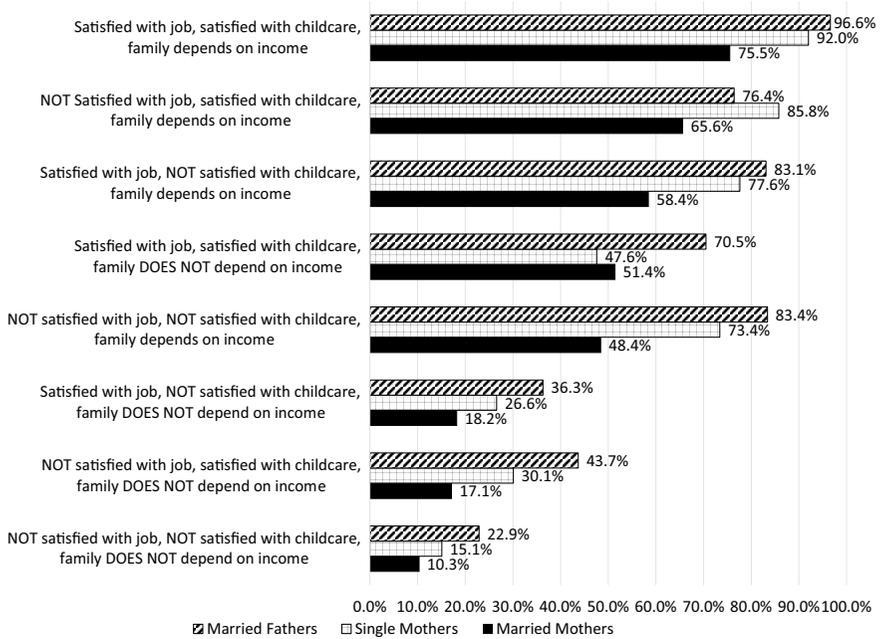
given the revised question, a minority of respondents did select the positive outcome, but a larger minority chose the negative assessment (with the share of respondents replying that a child would suffer at 41 percent). Although the proportion who said a child would benefit was notably smaller (18 percent), the proportion who averred that there was no impact on children equaled the proportion who said a child would suffer (also 41 percent). Given the opportunity, a substantial group of respondents choose an option that does not presume a simple relationship between a mother's work status and a child's well-being, providing a hint that people's views may depend on knowing more about the contextual conditions.

We reworded the "man the achiever" question by expanding the answer categories. In addition to asking whether it is better if "the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family," we added the option to say it is better if they share equally," while also allowing respondents to say there is "no difference." In this case, the egalitarian option was the most popular, with 56 percent indicating it is better to share equally and an additional 23 percent saying it makes no difference. When "share equally" is an option, less than 10 percent supported the more traditional "man the achiever" maxim, or roughly the same size as the group who "strongly agreed" with the GSS item. These results indicate that, when given the option, a majority endorse gender equality while only a small minority opposes it. While the meaning of the "no difference" responses is ambiguous, it suggests that people may be reluctant to offer a judgment in the absence of more information.

All in all, simply revising the wording of the GSS questions does little to clarify our understanding of public views. It is valuable to know that a majority actively support egalitarian marriages, rather than simply rejecting more traditional gender arrangements. Yet views on mothers' commitments to paid work remain opaque, even when an option to see a mother's employment as a benefit is added to the original GSS question. Equally important, the large proportion choosing the "no difference" option suggests that respondents may be resisting highly generalized questions that lump all mothers into a single category and draw stark distinctions between women and men. The vignette approach, to which we now turn, adds insight into the meaning respondents impute when attempting to answer such generalized questions.

### **Varying Job and Family Attributes: Vignette Experiment Results**

Do opinions vary depending on how a worker's circumstances are described, and if so, how? Subgroups of respondents were presented with



**FIGURE 1: Percentage of respondents who think parents of preschool children should stay at a full-time job**

vignettes that varied three conditions facing a hypothetical worker: satisfied (or not) with the job; satisfied (or not) with the child care arrangements; and the family depends (or not) on the worker's income. Respondents were then asked their opinion about whether the worker should stay at a job full time, cut back to part time, or stay at home. Figure 1 presents results for each of the eight combinations, with findings when the subject is a married mother, a single mother, and a married father presented together to facilitate comparisons.

The results show that respondents' assessments vary considerably depending on the worker's job and family circumstances. When told that a married mother with a preschooler is satisfied with her job and her child care and that her family depends on her income, 75.5 percent agree that she should stay at a full-time job. In the face of family financial need and no obvious impediments to work, a substantial majority endorse a mother's employment, even in a full-time job.

For those asked to consider a less ideal set of conditions, however, the supportive percentage declines as more negative conditions are added to the vignette. Among respondents asked to consider a married mother in the least

favorable scenario—that is, a mother dissatisfied with her job and child care arrangements and in a family that does not depend on her income—only 10.3 percent believe she should stay at her job. Vignettes in which child care arrangements are described as unsatisfactory evoke lower than average levels of support for mothers' employment, suggesting that satisfaction with child care remains important in influencing people's views.

These findings are particularly interesting when the vignette poses a conflict between the need to care for a child and the need to provide an income. What is a mother to do when the family needs her earnings but she is dissatisfied with the child care arrangements? Presented with such a difficult conflict, it is not surprising that respondents are divided, though it is perhaps more surprising that a modest majority (58.4 percent) still endorse the mother's full-time employment.

Another interesting case arises when the mother is portrayed as satisfied with her job and child care arrangements, but the family does not depend on her income. This circumstance offers more discretion—perhaps consistent with an image of a mother in a more affluent, two-parent household. This vignette again sharply divides respondents, with just more than half (51.4 percent) endorsing the mother's full-time employment.

These results clearly show that respondents' views about a married mother's employment vary substantially depending on her job and family circumstances. Indeed, the variation extends from 75.5 percent support for full-time employment under the most favorable circumstances to only 10.3 percent when circumstances converge to make employment appear least attractive.

Equally telling, a similar pattern emerges when the mother in question is portrayed as single. In this case, support for employment varies from a high of 92.0 when the vignette presents ideal conditions to a low of 15.1 percent when conditions are the least conducive. In seven of the eight scenarios, support for a single mother's employment falls between the higher support for a married father's employment and the lower support for a married mother's (and the single exception is not statistically significant). It is not surprising that most people believe a single mother should work when her family depends on the income, yet nearly half of respondents (47.6 percent) believe a single mother should work when she is satisfied with her job and her child care even if her family does not depend on the income (perhaps reflecting support for what Karen Christopher [2012] calls "extensive mothering"). For single women in particular, the cultural mandate appears to have shifted, with most believing that paid work is a morally worthy and socially acceptable activity in and of itself and not just for financial reasons.

These findings might seem to represent only conditional support for mothers' employment, since the level of support declines sharply as the scenario departs from the ideal case. Yet the results take on a different significance when they are compared with the similar results for married fathers. It turns out that views regarding the appropriateness of fathers' paid work also change when the vignettes vary a man's job and family circumstances. The similar contours of the findings for fathers and mothers undermine the implicit—and often explicit—assumption that people believe fathers should work at a paid job under any and all circumstances while mothers should do so only if the household needs her income.

Support for men's employment ranges from a high of 96.6 percent under ideal conditions to a low of 22.9 percent when the conditions are most conducive to pulling back from full-time work. While support for a married father's employment is consistently higher than it is for a married mother, with a 20.9 percentage point difference averaged across these eight scenarios, this support is clearly as contingent for men as it is for women. When married fathers are compared with single mothers, the gap narrows to just 8.1 percentage points. Although a gender gap persists, it is much smaller than the large variation found among men—as well as women—when people consider the specific circumstances they are facing. Indeed, the striking degree of variability in views about the appropriate choices for fathers with young children is a remarkable and noteworthy finding.

It is not surprising that more than four in five respondents (83.4 percent) recommend that a married father should stay at a full-time job if his family depends on his earnings, even if he is dissatisfied with his job and child care arrangements. Yet slightly less than one quarter (22.9 percent) believe a father should continue to work at a full-time job if, in addition to being dissatisfied with his job and child care, his family does not depend on his income. Despite the long history of what Bernard (1981) termed “the good provider” ethic, more varied and nuanced views on men and fatherhood appear to be replacing a single criterion (Coltrane 2004; Connell 1995; Hobson 2002; Kimmel 2008; Sullivan and Coltrane 2010). Rather than imposing a single standard on men, respondents view fathers' choices, like those of mothers, as contingent on the circumstances they confront.

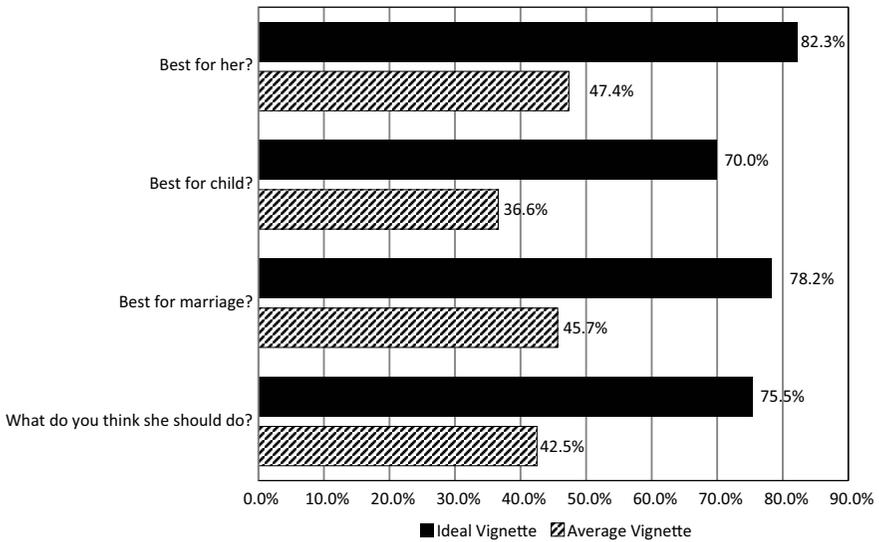
By including the option of part-time work, support increases for the employment of all parents. In the most favorable scenario, 91.2 percent of respondents support full-time or part-time work for married mothers, 98.4 percent do so for single mothers, and 97.6 percent do so for married fathers. In the least favorable scenario, 37.0 percent support the full-time

or part-time employment of married mothers, 44.1 do so for single mothers, and 59.9 percent do so for married fathers.

Taken as a whole, the differences in views about married women, single women, and married fathers show that gender and marital status continue to shape how Americans view parental employment. Yet it is also clear that these differences are modest compared with the large variation found within each of these groups when parents' job satisfaction and family circumstances are more clearly specified. Whether the worker is a married mother, a single mother, or a married father, respondents' knowledge about her or his job satisfaction, child care supports, and financial need shapes their views far more than does knowing a person's gender or marital status. Gender continues to matter, of course, but parents' job and family life circumstances matter as well. Support for mothers' employment depends on the circumstances they face, and the same is true for fathers.

We have so far emphasized the range of responses, focusing on how three contextual factors influence respondents' views. Among these factors, the one that makes the largest difference is whether the family needs a parent's income. Averaging across all of the vignettes, when the family does not need a parent's income, support for married mothers' employment drops by 38.0 percentage points, for married fathers by 41.5 percentage points, and for single mothers by 52.4 percentage points. Child care arrangements are the next most important factor, with unsatisfactory arrangements reducing support for full-time employment for a married mother by 18.3 percentage points, for single mothers by 15.7 percentage points, and for married fathers by 15.4 percentage points. The parent's own satisfaction with her or his job matters the least, with lack of job satisfaction reducing support for full-time employment by 15.3 percentage points for married mothers, 9.9 percent for single mothers and 13.5 percent for married fathers. In considering the relative importance of financial support, unpaid caregiving, and personal satisfaction, most believe (not surprisingly) that providing economic and caretaking support to others should come first.

*Perceptions of costs and benefits of parents' employment.* Much of the debate about women's employment has focused on whether their children will suffer. But do Americans actually think that the interests of women are at odds with those of children or other family members? Does the majority believe that working may be good for a mother but not for her children or family? To answer these questions, we asked respondents to consider how a parent's decision about work affected



**FIGURE 2: Who benefits from mother's employment? Percentage indicating full-time employment is the best option**

other family members. In the case of married mothers, after presenting a vignette, we asked respondents to tell us what they considered best for the mother, the child, and the marriage, as well as what they believed a mother should do.

Figure 2 presents respondents' answers when presented with an "ideal" vignette—that is, a mother who is satisfied with her job, is satisfied with her child care, and provides needed income to the family—along with their average answers across all eight vignette combinations. These comparisons show statistically significant yet substantively modest differences in who is perceived to benefit. Making distinctions about who benefits from a mother's employment, for example, evinces far less variation than making distinctions about the mix of job and family circumstances facing her. More than four in five respondents (82.3 percent) say that it is best for a married mother to stay at a full-time job under ideal conditions, while 70.0 percent say it is best for her child, and 78.2 percent say it is best for the marriage. The overall assessment, "What do you think she should do?" falls in the middle of this set of responses at 75.5 percent who say she should keep working. Even though respondents generally see a mother's employment as best for her and worst for her child, only 12 percentage points separate these two poles.

A similar pattern emerges when averaging the answers to all vignette combinations. While the support for mothers' employment drops as circumstances progressively depart from the ideal, the pattern of results remains largely the same. Just as in the ideal case, respondents are just over 10 percentage points more likely to see a mother's employment as favorable to her than to her child (with 47.4 saying that continued full-time employment is best for the mother, compared with 36.6 indicating that it is best for her child). Perceptions about what is best for the marriage, as well as respondents' overall recommendation of what she should do, fall between these levels.

A similar pattern appears for single mothers and married fathers (results not shown graphically). In the case of single mothers, the disparity between working full time being best for the mother and best for the child is slightly larger, with a spread of nearly 14 percentage points (58.4 vs. 44.6). (The question regarding what is best for the marriage was omitted for single mothers.) The case of married fathers shows similar results, with a gap of less than 9 percentage points (69.0 vs. 60.3) between those who said working full-time is best for the father and best for the child.

These findings point to some persisting ambivalence about the potential conflicts between parental employment and young children's welfare. Taken as a whole, however, the more consistent implication is that Americans today do not believe women's employment is strongly at odds with either their children's wellbeing or the health of their marriages, especially when the contextual conditions are propitious. Indeed, whether considering the choices of a married mother, a single mother, or a married father, the range of responses regarding who benefits and who suffers is considerably narrower than the range of responses to varying job and family circumstances. To be sure, respondents distinguish between potential benefits to the parents and potential costs to the child, but these differentials are quite modest.

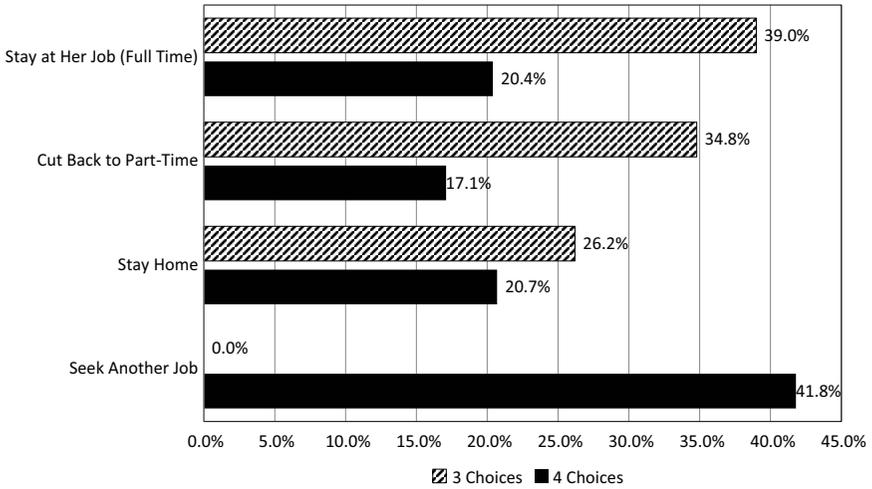
*Providing respondents with more choices.* In addition to treating all women as a homogenous group, traditional attitudinal measures also tend to provide a limited set of response options that do not reflect the full array of possible strategies. To explore how views might change if people are offered a wider array of response choices, we examined vignettes for parents who faced a problematic situation, such as a dissatisfying job or low-quality child care, to see if views change when respondents are offered additional options that address to the problematic issue.

Two different samples received a vignette in which an employed mother is satisfied with her child care arrangement and her family depends on her income, but she is not satisfied with her job. One sample had three choices: stay at the job, cut back to part-time work, and stay home. The other was given the additional option of seeking another job. We repeated this procedure in the parallel vignette for employed fathers. Finally, two vignettes explored differences in responses when a single mother was not satisfied with her child care arrangements but was satisfied with her job and her family depended on her income. In this case, the second sample was given the additional option of seeking alternative child care arrangements.

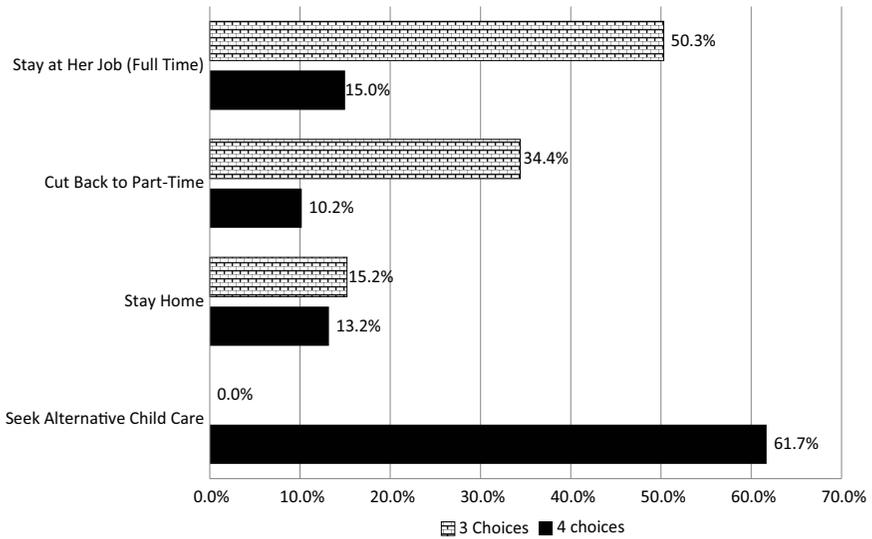
Figure 3 compares responses for two versions of the vignette about a married mother who is not satisfied with her job. In the first version, when the only options are to stay at the job, cut back to part time, or stay home, 61 percent say she should either pull back or stay home, with only 39 percent indicating she should stay in her full-time job. When, however, the option to “seek another job” is added, it becomes the most popular, with 42 percent endorsing this choice. Since about the same share of respondents continue to feel it is best for the mother to stay home, the respondents who endorse seeking another job are drawn mostly from those who would recommend that she stay at her job or work part-time.

Considering working fathers, Figure 4 shows that while gender differences persist, views about fathers’ options also change when we expand the answer categories. While 61 percent believe a father should stay at his full-time job even if he is dissatisfied, that percentage declines to 24 percent when we add the option to seek another job, with a clear majority (again 61 percent) saying he should do so. Not surprisingly, people then become less likely to suggest a father should pull back or stay home (from 39 percent to 15 percent). While these findings point again to the prevalence of nuanced views on parental employment, they also suggest caution in overstating support for stay-at-home fathers, especially in a cultural context that places such a high value on market work (England 2010).

Figure 5 shows that the same pattern holds for single mothers. Adding the option to seek alternative child care arrangements to the vignette in which a single mother is not satisfied with her child care, 62 percent choose “alternative childcare,” with “cutting back” and “staying home” dropping from 50 percent to 23 percent. Here, too, the addition of a category that responds more directly to the problem makes a big difference.

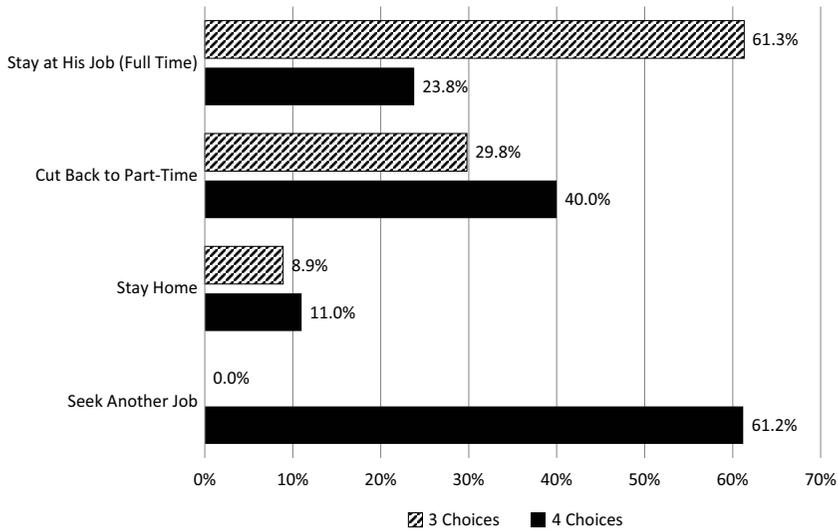


**FIGURE 3: Married mother, not satisfied with her job: what do you think she should do?**



**FIGURE 4: Alternative. Single mom, not satisfied with child care: what do you think she should do?**

The comparisons for married and single mothers demonstrate stronger support for mothers' employment when people are offered options other



**FIGURE 5: Married dad, not satisfied with his job: what do you think he should do?**

than staying home. Whether the mother is married or single, and whether the difficulty is with her job or her child care, respondents prefer an option that allows her to resolve the conflict without leaving the labor force. The pattern of support for fathers' employment, while consistently stronger, is nevertheless similar.

These findings show that providing even a single additional option dramatically alters how people respond to questions about how to strike a balance between paid work and caregiving. In each case, moreover, there is strong support for options that allow both mothers and fathers to work. Most people contend with an even wider range of strategic considerations than any survey can describe. Nevertheless, when questions offer a more realistic array of options, they reveal a more nuanced concern for both the circumstances parents face and the range of actions they might pursue.

*Variation in support for parents' employment among respondents.* Our analysis has thus far focused on the level of support for parents' employment. The next issue to explore is, Does support vary across social groups, and if so, how? While space does not allow for a full discussion of this question, we can report some selected results and general conclusions.<sup>5</sup> Most important, the variation among respondents from different social groups is small relative to the dramatic effects produced by varying the

**TABLE 2: Regression Results for Support for the Employment of Married Mothers, Single Mothers, and Married Fathers**

|                           | <i>Married Mothers</i> | <i>Single Mothers</i> | <i>Married Fathers</i> |
|---------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|
| Intercept                 | .417*                  | .289*                 | .672*                  |
| Female                    | -.059*                 | -.064*                | -.001                  |
| Education                 | .004                   | .011                  | -.003                  |
| Household Income (×1,000) | -.170                  | .604                  | 2.380                  |
| African American          | .019                   | .081†                 | .092*                  |
| Hispanic                  | -.039                  | -.043                 | -.131*                 |
| Number of observations    | 1661                   | 1217                  | 1650                   |
| <i>R</i> <sup>2</sup>     | .001                   | .004                  | .004                   |

\* $p < .05$ ; † $p < .10$ .

conditions in the vignettes. Demographic characteristics such as education, income, age, and gender have little effect on responses. The most powerful predictors, instead, are political orientation and religious attendance, with more politically conservative and more frequent church-goers more likely to prefer traditional work and family arrangements. Table 2 presents the results of regression analyses that assess the influence of gender, race and ethnicity, and social class on support for the employment of married mothers, married fathers, and single mothers.

Women are slightly less likely than men to support the full-time employment of married and single mothers, but there is no gender gap for views on married fathers. Across these three outcomes, the social-class indicators (respondent's education and household income) fail to predict respondents' views. The weakness of these social class indicators may well reflect a key finding from vignettes: that some aspects of parental employment have cross-cutting effects. There is less support for the employment of mothers or fathers when the family does not need their income, and this circumstance is more likely to pertain to affluent mothers who are married. On the other hand, more affluent parents tend to be able to secure higher-quality child care, and this engenders more support for their employment. Finally, support for employment increases when the job is satisfying, a circumstance that is more prevalent for affluent married mothers than for single mothers or African American parents, who have had less access to satisfying jobs (Kalleberg 2013). The circumstances of parents' employment thus point in different directions for those in different social class positions, and these countervailing associations preclude a simple relationship to social class factors.

While the vignettes could not include information about a parent's race or ethnicity, we can nevertheless examine whether respondents' own racial identity shaped their views. African American respondents were more likely to support the full-time employment of single mothers and married fathers, although there were no racial differences in support for the employment of married mothers. This pattern may well reflect the high levels of employment among single mothers in the African American community (Barnes 2015; Jones 2009), and it indicates African Americans' continued commitment to the ideal of men's financial contribution even if circumstances often thwart the realization of this objective (Edin and Nelson 2013).<sup>6,7</sup>

Taken as a whole, however, these respondent characteristics explain very little—an intriguing finding that may point to a weakening of traditional gender norms. When respondents' attention is directed to the particular circumstances of parents' lives, they are less likely to respond in a tradition-bound manner rooted in ideological notions of separate spheres and dichotomous gender differences. This appears to be the case regardless of the racial, ethnic, social class, gender, or other social identity of the respondent.<sup>8</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Feminist scholarship has long emphasized the need to recognize that women (and men) are diverse groups that cannot and should not be understood as a unitary whole. Indeed, the intersectional approach can be viewed as a way to recognize the complexities within the broad categories of gender (Collins 2002). The thrust of our analysis has been to explore an important aspect of this complexity by addressing the misconceptions embedded in the notion of a unitary "gender norm." Traditional measures continue to show both a long-term trend toward the increasing acceptance of women's employment alongside enduring ambivalence about the employment of mothers, especially when they have pre-school children. We find that such ambivalence diminishes considerably when specific aspects of a mother's situation are taken into account.

Support for the employment of married mothers with young children depends to a great extent on the particulars of her job and her family situation. Roughly three-quarters of respondents support the full-time employment of married mothers of preschool children if these mothers are satisfied with their job and child care arrangements and their families need the income; more than 9 in 10 support the full-time employment of single

mothers under similar circumstances. When the option to work part-time is added to the mix of options, people express nearly universal support for the employment of single mothers and more than 90 percent support for married mothers.

Support for the employment of married fathers is also more complex and conditional than the hegemonic male breadwinner model presumes. While almost everyone believes fathers with preschool children should work under the most favorable circumstances, this support drops to just over one in five when fathers are portrayed as dissatisfied with their job and child care arrangements and their families do not need the income. When we add more options to the array of choices, respondents have even more nuanced views about parents' work and family decisions.

Finally, people perceive differences in who benefits or suffers when a parent works, but these potential conflicts do not appear to be extreme. They view parents' employment as more beneficial for the parent than for the child, but the overall average of these perceived differences is small. More important, although the stress on women's domestic responsibilities and men's breadwinning obligations persists, this double standard is shrinking considerably. Even though Americans still apply a gender lens to their views on parental employment, these views are greatly tempered when people consider the contextual factors impinging on workers and parents. Indeed, specifying the options and trade-offs facing contemporary mothers and fathers helps explain the contradictory findings of other analyses.

To illuminate these matters, we designated identical variations in job and family conditions for all the vignette subjects, whether they were married mothers, single mothers, or single fathers. Yet job and family circumstances and opportunities remain far from equal in the real world. Despite a narrowing of the gender earnings gap, women continue to face discrimination in the workplace and most wives continue to earn less than their husbands (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 2014; Winslow-Bowe 2006). Even when a woman earns more than her spouse, her income may be interpreted as supplemental while his is seen as essential (Potuchek 1997). Single mothers face even greater obstacles in securing high-quality child care and family-supportive jobs. In short, while artificially equalizing circumstances in our vignettes is a valuable research strategy for developing a fuller understanding of people's views, we recognize that mothers and fathers make their actual work and family choices in the context of unequal realities and daunting obstacles. Yet it is important to know, as this study shows, that there is substantial support

for gender flexibility when mothers and fathers face similar challenges (see also Schrieber and Sussman 2015).

Our findings point to a number of theoretical, methodological, and policy implications. To unravel the meaning and significance of cultural beliefs about gender and parenthood that appear contradictory, we need to pay attention to how institutional arrangements intersect to form varied contexts of choice. If we are to understand how and why views on gender are changing or stalling, we at least need to know as much as possible about how people evaluate different mixtures in a parent's work, child care, and financial resources.

Although we have focused on gender (contrasting mothers and fathers), marital status (contrasting married and single women), class and economic resources (as indicated by a family's financial need), and parenting resources (as indicated by a parent's satisfaction with child care arrangements), many additional aspects of diversity also warrant attention. Some other important conditions that are likely to shape people's views include the parent's circumstances at work (such as earnings, job security, working conditions, commuting time, and prospects for advancement) and the parent's family context (including same-sex marriages, cohabiting couples, the degree of support from relatives and friends, and the racial and ethnic composition of the household).<sup>9</sup> Although we were not able to explore the effects that might stem from these additional complexities, our approach does suggest some directions for future research. Our analysis shows how even a small set of indicators describing a family's specific situation can produce marked swings in people's views about gender, work, and family. Studies that aim to understand the contours of cultural change need to recognize this complexity and refine our understanding of it.

A more complex understanding of cultural norms and beliefs can also inform public policy. Everyone is most supportive of parental employment—for married mothers, single mothers, and fathers—when they know these parents have access to satisfying work and good child care. Such support points to a cultural shift in favor of employed mothers and caregiving fathers that has outpaced the arrival of institutional structures that would enable parents to enact these more flexible gender strategies. Our findings highlight the widespread, if latent, public support for providing the kinds of supports, such as paid parental leave, high-quality, affordable child care, and flexible job structures, that would ease the conflicts facing contemporary mothers and fathers. These findings are also consistent with those of others, such as Pedulla and Thébaud (2015), who find that support

for work–family policies and egalitarian relationships tend to reinforce one another. If so, the time has arrived to create institutional structures that acknowledge and align with this widespread—if not yet widely recognized—cultural change.

## NOTES

1. One GSS question, FEPRESCH, focuses on the effects on children, but does not directly compare the potential costs and benefits for children with those for parents and spouses.

2. Unfortunately, cell size limitations made it impossible to vary whether the subject was in a same-sex or heterosexual relationship or to specify and vary the race and ethnicity of the person described in the vignettes. Social desirability bias also makes it difficult to specify race and ethnicity explicitly, suggesting that we need to think creatively about how to investigate the significance of these categories in shaping people's responses. Additionally, the parent's education as well as many other important features of her or his job may affect people's views and are potential topics for additional inquiry (see Pedulla and Thébaud [2015] for an example).

3. The full wording of the vignettes is available in an online appendix.

4. We decided that probing alternative arrangements when the family depends on the parent's income would be ambiguous, since there may be any number of possible avenues to take. We also decided that it was too complicated to prompt respondents with vignettes where there were multiple impediments to the parent's employment.

5. A complete report of how social, demographic, and ideological factors influence respondents' answers is lengthy. Since it requires a systematic comparison of many different questions, it will be presented in a companion paper (Jacobs and Gerson 2015).

6. The statistical significance of the effect for African American respondents for single mothers is less than .10, but this effect becomes stronger in other models. The lower levels of support for fathers' employment observed for Hispanic respondents do not persist in other models that include more control variables.

7. We tested a number of gender by race by class interactions. While most of these tests were not statistically significant, in some models African American men's views differ from those of African American women.

8. Just to be clear, race, class, and gender remain powerful determinants of inequality. Gender, race, ethnic, and educational disparities in income are clearly evident in our data. The point here is to explore the social contours of views regarding the employment of parents, not the contours of such inequalities *per se*.

9. Some researchers have employed different research strategies than ours in order to probe respondents' beliefs about race and ethnicity. For example, the use

of ethnic names or pictures may provide a less obtrusive research strategy than inserting the words “African American” or “Latina” into the vignettes (Bertrand and Mullainathan 2004; Gilliam 1999).

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