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# Not Ideal: The Association Between Working Anything but Full Time and Perceived Unfair Treatment

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## Abstract

Ideal-worker norms permeate workplaces, guiding employers' evaluation of workers and perceptions of workers' worth. The authors investigate how an ideal-worker norm violation—working anything but full time—affects workers' perception of unfair treatment. The authors assess gender and parental status differences in the relationship. Analyses using Midlife Development in the United States II data reveal that women who violate the norm when they have children perceive greater unfair treatment than women who violate the norm but do not have children in the study period. Men who work anything but full time do not perceive unfair treatment. The authors' findings inform efforts to challenge ideal-worker norms.

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ideal-worker norms, unfair treatment, gender, parenthood, MIDUS, work hours

“Ideal-worker” norms—beliefs that workers should devote full time, uninterrupted hours to paid work—are built into the structure and culture of the workplace. Employers use these norms as a metric against which to measure workers’ commitment, competence, and success (Acker, 1990; Blair-Loy, 2003; Moen & Roehling, 2005; Williams, 2000). Because ideal-worker norms call for complete commitment to paid work through long work hours, around-the-clock availability (especially for professionals), and prioritizing employers’ interests above personal ones, employers stigmatize and penalize workers who work part-time (Epstein, Seron, Oglensky, & Saute, 1999; Stone, 2007), take temporary leaves from work (Judiesch & Lyness, 1999), or use flexible work arrangements (Glass, 2004; Williams, 2000). Penalties are especially pronounced for men who work part-time or take temporary employment leaves to engage in family caregiving (Williams, Blair-Loy, & Berdahl, 2013).

We focus on the impact of violating ideal-worker norms on workers’ *perceptions* of unfair treatment at work. Our particular interest in perceptions of unfair treatment is motivated by research that links perceived unfair treatment to worker disengagement, feelings of powerlessness and dissatisfaction, lowered productivity, and poor health (see Ensher, Grant-Vallone, & Donaldson, 2001; Goldman, Gutek, Stein, & Lewis, 2006; Gutek, Cohen, & Tsui, 1996; Pavalko, Mossakowski, & Hamilton, 2003; Sloan, 2012). Thus, our analyses provide one possible route by which ideal-worker norms create disengaged and unhealthy workers. Moreover, studying perceptions of unfair treatment following ideal-worker norm violations is a necessary step in redesigning work amid mounting personal, organizational, and societal problems—including poor health and work–life conflict—caused by the pressure to conform to ideal-worker norms (Correll, Kelly, O’Connor, & Williams, 2014; Williams, 2010).

We examine perceptions of unfair treatment for ideal-worker norm violations using a nationally representative sample of U.S. workers. Since one of the primary ways workers exhibit ideal work behavior is by working consistently and continuously full time (Moen & Roehling, 2005), we examine perceptions of unfair treatment among a group of

workers who, at one point, embodied the ideal worker through full time employment. We investigate whether an ideal-worker norm violation among this group—specifically, a recent shift from full time work to either part-time work or temporary unemployment, which we call “anything but full time,” results in perceived unfair treatment upon a return to the labor force. We ask: Compared with those who have worked continuously full time, are workers who recently worked anything but full time more likely to feel ignored, micromanaged, or unfairly given undesirable tasks at their current job? Because penalties for violations of the ideal-worker norm differ by gender and parental status, we also ask: Does the effect of having recently worked anything but full time on perceptions of unfair treatment differ among mothers, fathers, and nonparents?

## **When Workers Violate Ideal-Worker Norms**

Evidence from diverse samples of workers in different organizational contexts indicates that employers view workers who violate ideal-worker norms as uncommitted, unmotivated, and poor organizational citizens (Almer, Cohen, & Single, 2004; Epstein et al., 1999; Rogier & Padgett, 2004; Wayne & Cordiero, 2003; Williams et al., 2013). Employers penalize non-full time workers with slower wage growth, lower promotion rates, poorer performance reviews, and worse work assignments relative to workers who work continuously and consistently full time (Coltrane, Miller, DeHaan, & Stewart, 2013; Glass, 2004; Johnson, Lowe, & Reckers, 2008; Judiesch & Lyness, 1999; but see Weeden, 2005).

Penalties for anything but full time work vary depending on the reason prompting the reduction. Being a mother elicits negative stereotypes about workers' productivity, commitment, and competence (Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Although employers tend to stigmatize workers who take time off after becoming a parent, fathers face harsher character judgments than mothers in response to this time off (Vandello, Hettinger, Bosson, & Siddiqi, 2013). And unlike other reasons for leave (e.g., illness or job training), parenthood is not temporary; it signals a potentially long-term break from ideal-worker norms, especially for mothers. Indeed, employers impose greater penalties on workers who adopt non-full time work schedules for family caregiving rather than professional reasons (Coltrane et al., 2013; Leslie, Manchester, Park, & Mehng, 2013). Employers penalize men more for temporary leaves associated with family caregiving than other types of temporary leaves

(Brescoll, Glass, & Sedlovskaya, 2013; Epstein et al., 1999; Leslie et al., 2013; Williams, 2000) and men with significant family caregiving responsibilities report more harassment, mistreatment, and lower pay than men with fewer or no caregiving responsibilities (Berdahl & Moon, 2013; Coltrane et al., 2013; Williams, 2010).

By exploring the link between ideal-worker norm violations in a worker's past and their subjective work experiences, we gain further insight into how ideal-worker norms affect workers. Given previous research, we expect that those who work anything but full time will perceive less fair treatment than those who do not, and that parents—especially men—who work anything but full time will perceive less fair treatment.

## **Data and Methods**

### *Sample*

Analyses draw on data from the second wave of the National Survey of Midlife Development in the United States (MIDUS II; Ryff et al., 2006). Collected in 2004–2006, the MIDUS II is a follow-up study of 1995/1996 MIDUS I respondents who were drawn from a random-digit-dial, nationally representative sample of adults aged 25–74, selected from working telephone numbers. Of the 7,108 participants in MIDUS I, 4,963 participated in the second wave phone questionnaire, yielding a mortality-adjusted response rate of 75% for MIDUS II. At the time of the second wave, respondents were between the ages of 35 and 86.

We restricted the analytic sample by excluding: (a) 2,372 respondents not employed at the time of the follow-up survey because they did not answer questions about treatment at work; (b) 85 self-employed respondents who are likely to have a different understanding of questions about unfair treatment; (b) 272 respondents who were not working full time in 2000 (because full time employment signals ideal-worker norms and we explore deviations from these norms); and (d) 75 individuals who worked 60+ hr/week, including 23 who worked 80+ hr/week. We omit workers who worked long hours because they may be particularly likely to embrace ideal-worker norms and view violations as personal failures deserving of penalty (Blair-Loy, 2003). Thus, their inclusion may overstate perceived unfair treatment. These exclusions leave us with a baseline sample of 2,159 respondents who worked full time in 2000 and worked for pay in 2004, the year we have information for the outcomes. Some of these individuals worked anything but full time while others worked continuously full time from 2001 to 2004.

Since we restrict analyses to employed respondents in 2004, ours is a conservative test. Workers who experienced excessive unfair treatment at work because of violations of ideal-worker norms may have left the labor market and would therefore be excluded from our sample.

### *Focal Dependent Measure*

We measure perceived *unfair treatment* with responses to the following three items about a respondent's current job: (a) *dumped on*: "How often do you think that you are unfairly given the jobs that no one else wanted to do?," (b) *ignored*: "How often do you feel that you are ignored or not taken seriously by your boss?," and (c) *micromanaged*: "How often are you watched more closely than other workers?" (response choices: 1 = *never*, 2 = *less than once a year*, 3 = *a few times a year*, 4 = *a few times a month*, 5 = *once a week*+). We analyze these outcome variables separately because each measures a unique aspect of unfair treatment. For example, being dumped on and micromanaged are perceptions of relative treatment at work—in other words, treatment in relation to coworkers. Being ignored by a boss, on the other hand, indicates a perceived lack of opportunity and that a worker feels that his or her employer has given up on the worker.<sup>1</sup>

### *Focal Independent Measures*

We use two measures of *ideal-worker norm violations*. First, we indicate whether a worker recently worked anything but full time with a dichotomous variable coded 1 if a worker either worked part-time or temporarily withdrew from the labor force in the 5-year window preceding data collection and 0 if a respondent worked consistently and continuously full time. We combined those who ever worked part-time and those who were temporarily unemployed during this study window because fewer than 10% (mostly women) worked entirely part-time and roughly 2% did not work at all in the 5-year window.

Because parents could have plausibly worked anything but full time for non-caregiving reasons (i.e., because they were ill or looking for a new job), we also draw on a series of questions that asked how respondents changed their work schedules *specifically because of having children*. These measures allow us to better assess how child-related work changes affect perceptions of unfair treatment. Specifically, respondents with children were asked the following question: Next, we are interested in how having children may have changed your work situation.

Which of the following changes did you make because you were living with children? (a) Did you stop working at a job to stay at home and care for the children?, (b) Did you cut back on the number of hours worked at a job to care for the children?, (c) Did you switch to a different job that was less demanding or more flexible to be more available to the children?, and (d) Did you work longer hours to meet the added expenses of having children? Multiple responses were allowed. While we are particularly interested in the effects of anything but full time work on perceived unfair treatment, the MIDUS II also asks whether respondents *increased* their work hours because of having children. Because women and men might make different work schedule changes in response to children, we examine both reductions to and increases in work time. We created a set of four dichotomous variables from this item coded 1 if a worker: (a) stopped work or cut back hours,<sup>2</sup> (b) switched to a less demanding job, (c) worked longer hours, or (d) made any combination of changes. We coded workers as 0 if they made no changes due to living with children so “made no changes” is the reference category. Although all parents were asked these questions, we examine the effects of these schedule changes on the outcomes for a subsample of respondents who had a child (or children) between 2000 and 2004. This restriction ensures that we capture workplace behavior changes due to children born close in time to the study period, since young children are most likely to affect current job experiences.

We capture respondent *gender* with a dichotomous variable coded 1 if female and 0 if male. To determine whether respondents worked anything but full time upon becoming a *parent*, we created a variable coded 1 if a respondent had a child in the 5-year window preceding data collection and 0 if he or she did not. Respondents coded 0 on this variable may have children born before 2000.

### Control Measures

Following the general standards for control variables set by prior research on ideal-worker norms, we include a series of measures of individual-level attributes. Models include *race/ethnicity* coded 1 if a respondent is non-Hispanic White and 0 if she or he is Hispanic, Black, Asian, Native American, Hawaiian, or other race. Given the absence of a direct measure of work experience, models include a proxy measure of years of *work experience* (current age minus the age at which a respondent first worked for pay). We measure a respondent's highest level of *education* with a continuous variable coded: 1 = *less than a high school*

diploma, 2 = high school diploma or GED equivalent, 3 = 1–2 years of college, 4 = 3–4 years of college and no degree, 5 = AA or 2-year vocational degree, 6 = Bachelor's degree, 7 = some graduate school, 8 = Master's degree, and 9 = PhD/professional degree. We include a dichotomous variable coded 1 if a person is *married or cohabiting* and 0 if not. To capture the effects of the presence (and number) of children born prior to the study window, we include a dichotomous variable coded 1 if a respondent has children aged 5–17 in the household, as well as a continuous measure of the number of children in the household.

One's *occupation* might influence experiences with our focal variables, so we include a dichotomous variable coded 1 if he or she holds a professional, executive, or managerial job, and 0 if not. Models also include a dichotomous measure denoting whether a respondent has *supervisory control* (coded 1) or not (coded 0) as well as a continuous measure of *weekly work hours*. Because job security may be linked to work perceptions (see Pugh, 2013), we control for perceived *job security* with responses to the question: "If you wanted to stay in your present job, what are the chances that you could keep it for the next 2 years?" (1 = *poor*, 2 = *fair*, 3 = *good*, 4 = *very good*, 5 = *excellent*). To minimize confounding effects of work–family conflict and legitimate negative judgments employers have about those with home interference, we control for two aspects of *home-to-work interference*: (a) how often a worker has experienced personal or family distractions at work and (b) how often a worker felt that his/her responsibilities at home reduced job effort. Response choices for both items range from 1 = *never* to 5 = *all of the time*.

## Analytic Strategy

We estimate ordinary least squares regression models and begin by regressing measures of unfair treatment on working anything but full time and controls. To address whether perceptions of unfair treatment vary for workers whose part-time schedules or temporary unemployment coincided with the birth of a child, we estimate the relationship between having a child in the study period and the outcomes in two subsamples: those who worked anything but full time between 2000 and 2004 and those who worked continuously full time. To assess which group (men who had a child and worked anything but full time, men who had a child and worked continuously full time, etc.), if any, perceived the highest levels of unfair treatment, we compare predicted values of the outcomes for each group. Finally, among the subsample of workers who had a child in between 2000 and 2004, we estimate the

effects of specific changes to work behavior due to children on the outcome variables of interest.

Following Winship and Radbill (1994), we present weighted descriptive statistics but include sample stratification parameters in models (e.g., respondent race/ethnicity, education, and gender) rather than employ sampling weights. Multicollinearity is not a problem; all variance inflation factors are less than 2.02 with an average variance inflation factor of less than 1.41 for the models.

## Results

Table 1 displays descriptive statistics for the pooled sample, as well as broken down by gender and parental status.

The most common form of perceived unfair treatment is feeling dumped on, followed by being ignored, and feeling micromanaged. Fourteen percent of the sample worked anything but full time between 2000 and 2004, while 51% of workers had a child during this time period. Almost half—43%—reported working more to meet the added expenses of having a child. About one third of the sample either stopped working or cut their hours to provide care for their child. Roughly a fifth switched to a less demanding job because of having children, while 28% made more than one change upon the arrival of a child. The most common combination of changes during the 5-year spell was changing jobs and cutting hours or stopping work, which occurred 38% of the time, followed by working more hours and cutting hours or stopping work at some point in the study window (22%).

We found no statistically significant differences in perceptions of feeling dumped on, ignored, or micromanaged across gender–parenthood categories. Men, on average, were less likely to have worked anything but full time when they had a child compared with women who had a child. Women who did not have a child during the study period were more likely to work anything but full time than men who did not have a child. Respondents who had a child during the study period altered their work schedules in gendered ways. Fathers were more likely than mothers to work longer hours to meet child expenses, while mothers were more likely than fathers to stop or cut back work or switch jobs.

### *Anything but Full Time Versus Continuous Full Time*

Those who recently worked part-time or were temporarily unemployed do not perceive different levels of being dumped on, ignored, or

**Table 1.** Descriptive Statistics.

	Women			Men		
	Pooled sample	Had child, 2000–2004	Did not have child, 2000–2004 <sup>a</sup>	Had child, 2000–2004	Did not have child, 2000–2004 <sup>a</sup>	Range
<b>Dependent variables</b>						
Dumped on	2.57 (1.28)	2.56 (1.28)	2.45 (1.26)	2.70 (1.27)	2.54 (1.28)	1–5
Ignored	2.12 (1.25)	2.13 (1.23)	2.01 (1.25)	2.26 (1.24)	2.04 (1.22)	1–5
Micromanaged	1.90 (1.18)	1.81 (1.10)	1.79 (1.15)	1.92 (1.15)	1.91 (1.25)	1–5
<b>Independent variables</b>						
Worked anything but full time	0.14	0.16 <sup>b</sup>	0.22 <sup>c</sup>	0.07	0.10	Dichotomous
Work schedule changes due to child (no change is omitted):						
Work more due to child expense	0.43	0.33 <sup>b</sup>	–	0.53	–	Dichotomous
Stop work/cut hours for child care	0.35	0.51 <sup>b</sup>	–	0.17	–	Dichotomous
Switch jobs to be available to child	0.18	0.28 <sup>b</sup>	–	0.11	–	Dichotomous
Made 2+ changes (due to child)	0.28	0.38 <sup>b</sup>	–	0.18	–	Dichotomous
Female	0.50	–	–	–	–	Dichotomous
Had a child, 2000–2004	0.51	–	–	–	–	Dichotomous
<b>Controls</b>						
White	0.90	0.89	0.91	0.91	0.90	Dichotomous

(continued)

**Table 1.** (continued)

	Women		Men		Range	
	Pooled sample	Had child, 2000–2004	Did not have child, 2000–2004 <sup>a</sup>	Had child, 2000–2004		Did not have child, 2000–2004 <sup>a</sup>
Work experience (years)	31.70 (8.80)	26.66 <sup>d</sup> (5.88)	36.30 (8.79)	27.73 <sup>e</sup> (6.59)	36.76 (8.10)	7–66
Education	4.15 (2.43)	4.36 (2.43)	4.06 (2.39)	3.94 (2.39)	3.92 (2.36)	1–9
Married/cohabiting	0.69	0.64 <sup>b</sup>	0.60 <sup>c</sup>	0.85	0.81	Dichotomous
Family distracts work	2.22 (0.74)	2.39 <sup>b</sup> (0.71)	2.22 (0.79)	2.21 (0.70)	2.10 (0.70)	1–5
Home reduces work effort	1.96 (0.75)	2.02 (0.78)	1.86 (0.77)	2.08 <sup>e</sup> (0.75)	1.85 (0.62)	1–5
Number of children in house	2.16 (1.56)	2.11 <sup>b</sup> (1.12)	2.38 (1.89)	2.46 (1.32)	2.15 (1.59)	0–17
Children aged 5–17 in house	0.32	0.07 <sup>d</sup>	0.64	0.05 <sup>e</sup>	0.70	Dichotomous
Managerial or professional occupation	0.39	0.46	0.37	0.40	0.31	Dichotomous
Supervisory control	0.48	0.51	0.40	0.52	0.51	Dichotomous
Weekly work hours	41.54 (9.10)	40.13 <sup>b</sup> (7.59)	38.89 <sup>c</sup> (9.27)	44.72 (8.33)	43.50 (9.28)	2–60
Job stability	4.47 (0.91)	4.56 (0.85)	4.40 (0.92)	4.53 (0.84)	4.45 (0.99)	1–5

Note. Standard deviations in parentheses. Adapted from Midlife Development in the United States II.

<sup>a</sup>Did not have a child 2000–2004, but may have had child prior to 2000. <sup>b</sup>Difference between women and men who had child, 2000–2004. Significant at  $p < .05$ . <sup>c</sup>Difference between women and men who did not have child, 2000–2004. Significant at  $p < .05$ . <sup>d</sup>Difference between women who did and did not have child, 2000–2004. Significant at  $p < .05$ . <sup>e</sup>Difference between men who did and did not have child, 2000–2004. Significant at  $p < .05$ .

**Table 2.** OLS Regression Estimates of the Effects of Working Anything but Full Time on Perceived Unfair Treatment at Work.

	A	B	C
	Dumped on	Ignored	Micromanaged
Worked anything but full time, 2000–2004	−0.05 (.13)	−0.21 <sup>†</sup> (.13)	0.13 (.12)
Female	−0.04 (.07)	−0.06 (.07)	−0.18*** (.07)
Had a child, 2000–2004	0.06 (.10)	0.18 <sup>†</sup> (.10)	−0.05 (.09)
White	0.01 (.14)	−0.19 (.14)	−0.36*** (.12)
Years of work experience	−0.004 (.005)	−0.001 (.01)	−0.01 (.004)
Education	−0.07*** (.005)	−0.04* (.02)	−0.03 <sup>†</sup> (.02)
Married/cohabiting	−0.28*** (.08)	−0.08 (.08)	−0.22*** (.08)
Family distracts work	0.10 <sup>†</sup> (.05)	0.17*** (.05)	0.22*** (.05)
Home reduces work effort	0.08 (.05)	0.11* (.05)	0.12* (.05)
Children aged 5–17 in household	−0.11 (.09)	−0.01 (.09)	−0.10 (.08)
Number of children in household	−0.004 (.02)	0.01 (.02)	0.01 (.02)
Managerial/professional occupation	−0.17* (.08)	−0.13 (.08)	−0.13 <sup>†</sup> (.08)
Supervisory control	0.02 (.07)	−0.05 (.07)	−0.01 (.07)
Weekly work hours	0.01* (.005)	0.001 (.01)	0.01 (.01)
Job stability	−0.16*** (.04)	−0.21* (.04)	−0.16*** (.03)
Constant	3.11***	2.84***	2.60***
N	1218	1215	1219
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.06	.07	.08

Note. Standard errors in parentheses. OLS = ordinary least squares. Adapted from Midlife in the United States II.

<sup>†</sup>p < .10, two-tailed. \*p < 0.05, two-tailed. \*\*p < 0.01, two-tailed. \*\*\*p < 0.001, two-tailed.

micromanaged compared with those who worked continuously full time, net of controls (see Table 2). Thus far, we have little evidence to suggest that workers perceive greater unfair treatment when they work anything but full time compared with those who work continuously full time.

### *Parental Status by Anything but Full Time Versus Continuous Full Time*

Table 2 models do not account for how, if at all, anything but full time work that coincides with having a child is associated with

**Table 3.** OLS Regression Estimates of the Effects of Having a Child on Perceived Unfair Treatment at Work, by Anything but Full Time 2000–2004.

	A	B	C
	Dumped on	Ignored	Micromanaged
Panel A: Worked anything but full time, 2000–2004			
Had a child, 2000–2004	0.18 (.24)	0.65** (.23)	0.37 <sup>†</sup> (.21)
Constant	2.39 (.85)	2.22 (.82)	3.48 (.75)
N	172	173	172
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.11	.17	.25
Panel B: Worked continuously full time, 2000–2004			
Had a child, 2000–2004	0.04 (.11)	0.09 (.11)	−0.12 (.10)
Constant	3.39 (.44)	3.05 (.03)	2.35 (.39)
N	1046	1042	1047
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.06	.05	.07

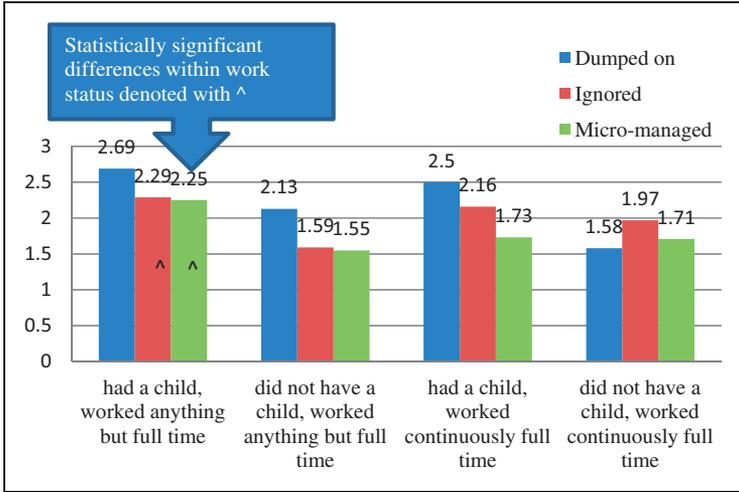
Note. Models include controls for gender, race, work experience, education, marital status, presence of children between the ages of 5 and 17, number of children in household, family distractions at work, home reduced job effort, occupation, supervisory control, weekly work hours, and job stability. Standard errors in parentheses. OLS = ordinary least squares. Adapted from *Midlife in the United States II*.

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ , two-tailed. \*\* $p < 0.01$ , two-tailed.

unfair treatment. Analyses shown in Table 3 address this question. Among those who recently worked anything but full time (Panel A), workers who had a child report higher levels of feeling ignored and micromanaged compared with workers who did not have a child. By contrast, among those who worked continuously full time in the study period (Panel B), workers who had a child perceive similar levels of unfair treatment compared with their counterparts who did not have a child in the study period. Overall, these findings suggest that having a child does not, in and of itself, result in perceptions of unfair treatment. Rather, having a child *and* reducing one's work lead to perceived unfair treatment.

### *Anything but Full Time, by Gender and Parental Status*

We consider whether the relationship between working anything but full time and perceived unfair treatment differs for women and men who did and did not have a child in the study period. We find some evidence that



**Figure 1.** Predicted outcome values (women), 2000–2004 (no significant differences among men).

Note. Predicted values of work outcomes when controls set to mean or mode. Adapted from *Midlife in the United States II*.

working anything but full time in conjunction with having a child is associated with higher levels of perceived unfair treatment.

Figure 1 shows variation in the relationship between having recently worked anything but full time and the outcomes for women who either did or did not have a child during the 5-year study period. The figure excludes comparisons among men because we found no statistically significant differences in perceptions of unfair treatment at work among men, regardless of whether they recently worked anything but full time. The first two sets of columns in Figure 1 display information for women who worked anything but full time. Among them, those who had a child perceive higher levels of being ignored and micromanaged compared with those who did not have a child. Among women who worked continuously full time, we find no significant differences between those who had children and those who did not.<sup>3</sup>

### *Parents Who Altered Work Due to Children Versus Those Who Did Not, by Gender*

Analyses in Table 4 report the effect of child-prompted work behavior changes among the subsample of workers who had a child between 2000

**Table 4.** OLS Regression Estimates of the Effects of Recent Schedule Changes due to Children on Perceived Unfair Treatment at Work Among Respondents Who Had a Child 2000–2004, by Gender.

	A	B	C
	Dumped on	Ignored	Micromanaged
Panel A: Women who had a child, 2000–2004			
Worked more to meet child expenses	0.28 (.18)	0.37* (.19)	0.25 (.16)
Stopped work/cut hours to care for child	0.72*** (.22)	0.13 (.22)	0.32 <sup>†</sup> (.19)
Switched to less demanding job	0.14 (.19)	−0.18 (.20)	−0.14 (.16)
Made 2+ changes (due to child)	−0.41 (.18)	−0.06 (.26)	−0.22 (.22)
Worked continuously full time	Omitted	Omitted	Omitted
Constant	3.93***	2.56***	2.22***
N	283	280	283
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.08	.06	.08
Panel B: Men who had a child, 2000–2004			
Worked more to meet child expenses	−0.26 (.16)	0.16 (.16)	0.20 (.14)
Stopped work/cut hours to care for child	−0.10 (.23)	0.09 (.23)	0.07 (.20)
Switched to less demanding job	0.19 (.27)	−0.09 (.27)	0.39 (.25)
Made 2+ changes (due to child)	0.14 (.33)	0.03 (.33)	−0.17 (.30)
Worked continuously full time	Omitted	Omitted	Omitted
Constant	2.33**	2.44***	1.69 <sup>†</sup>
N	343	342	343
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	.05	.10	.14

Note. Standard errors in parentheses. Models include controls for race, work experience, education, marital status, presence of children between the ages of 5 and 17, number of children in household, family distractions at work, home reduced job effort, occupation, supervisory control, weekly work hours, and job stability. OLS = ordinary least squares. Adapted from *Midlife in the United States II*.

<sup>†</sup> $p < .10$ , two-tailed. \* $p < 0.05$ , two-tailed. \*\* $p < 0.01$ , two-tailed. \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ , two-tailed.

and 2004. These behaviors include violations of ideal-worker norms (e.g., cutting back work or stopping work altogether to care for children) and displays of ideal-worker norms (e.g., working longer hours to meet the added expenses of having children). Estimating models by gender

allows us to determine whether women and men who had a child from 2000 to 2004 perceive disparate levels of unfair treatment.

Among women who had a child between 2000 and 2004 (Panel A), those who increased their working hours due to the added expense of having a child feel more ignored at work than women who made no changes to their work schedule (the reference category). Women who stopped work or cut back hours to engage in child care report higher levels of feeling dumped on and being micromanaged compared with women who worked continuously full time (although the finding for being micromanaged is marginally significant). By contrast, regardless of the changes they made because of the birth of a child, none of the comparisons among men are statistically significant (Panel B).

## Discussion

Ideal-worker norms are widespread, used by employers to measure workers' worth (Williams, 2000), and by workers to measure their own success (see Blair-Loy, 2003). Previous research points to gender- and parental-status-specific penalties in employment outcomes for workers who violate ideal-worker norms; workers—especially men—tend to be penalized when their deviation from ideal-worker norms coincides with family caregiving (Coltrane et al., 2013; Leslie et al., 2013).

Our analyses focused on perceptions of unfair treatment among workers who returned to the labor force after violating one aspect of the ideal-worker norm. Consistent with previous research (Coltrane et al., 2013; Leslie et al., 2013), we found that workers report higher levels of unfair treatment when their part-time work or unemployment spell coincided with having a child than when it did not. Like others (see Epstein et al., 1999; Stone, 2007), we found higher reports of unfair treatment among women who worked anything but full time *and* had a child compared with women who worked anything but full time but did *not* have a child. Analyses of child-prompted schedule changes revealed that mothers who stopped paid work or cut hours to engage in child care perceived greater levels of being dumped on than women who had a child and remained employed continuously full time. Compared with mothers who worked continuously full time, those who increased work hours due to children reported higher levels of feeling ignored at work.

Surprisingly, we found that men did *not* perceive greater levels of unfair treatment when they worked anything but full time—whether they had a child or not—versus consistently full time. Nor did fathers

feel that they experienced greater unfair treatment when they worked more, worked less, or temporarily stopped work because of the needs of their children compared with when they worked continuously full time. These findings with regard to men depart from previous research in ways that highlight the salience of ideal-worker norms, especially their gendered implications. We offer several plausible interpretations of these findings for men.

Our findings that men do not perceive unfair treatment upon breaking ideal-worker norms suggest something unique about the ways in which men may internalize these norms. Workers tend to believe that a single-minded commitment to work is a sign of their personal and moral worth, dedication, and productivity (Blair-Loy, 2003; Kelly, Ammons, Chermack, & Moen, 2010). Men are particularly likely to internalize these ideologies because widely shared cultural beliefs equate masculinity with breadwinning (Williams, 2010). In other words, working long hours, fully devoting oneself to one's employer, and placing work above personal responsibilities are ways in which men do masculinity (Cooper, 2002; Kelly et al., 2010; Williams, 2010). Many workers also feel they owe their employers ideal-worker behaviors, expecting little in return and even invalidating negative emotions that arise from employer mistreatment—a sort of “one-way honor system” at work (Pugh, 2013). As a result, men who break ideal-worker norms may view their decision to do so as a personal failure—both as a man and as a good worker—and feel as though they *deserve* mistreatment. Because fathers tend not to take employment leave for child caregiving, men who work anything but full time know their choice to do so is unusual. This may further reinforce men's feelings that they deserve to be dumped on, ignored, or micromanaged at work in response to having taken time off for caregiving. Testing this interpretation would require data on men's understanding of the fairness of work options following fatherhood.

Another possibility is that men who work anything but full time in conjunction with having a child are relatively well positioned in the labor market. This privilege may affect their perceptions of mistreatment in two ways. First, privileged men are in a better position to leave jobs where they are treated poorly for anything but full time work. Second, employers may treat privileged men well in daily interactions that directly affect perceptions of treatment at work, even if employers penalize them in terms of wage raises or promotions—the more tangible outcomes we do not measure. Data on reward outcomes (e.g., recent promotions, salary) would enable us to test this explanation.

Employers' response to men who work anything but full time may also contribute to our unexpected findings. Employers may not disinvest in fathers who take temporary leave or work part-time because employers may believe such violations are temporary or that while on leave, a father's female partner is really doing most of the care. Because status expectations equate commitment to paid work with men (Benard & Correll, 2010), employers may assume that fathers who work anything but full time are still engaged in work on the side. In other words, if employers assume that fathers are still engaged in work even though they are technically not working a full time schedule, they may penalize fathers less or not at all when they reduce to part-time or stop work temporarily (see Leslie et al., 2013). Data on employers' actual treatment of workers is required to test these plausible interpretations.

Finally, we cannot rule out the possibility that our lack of statistically significant findings for men stems from a sample size too small to detect significant differences. Few men—particularly fathers—in the MIDUS II worked anything but full time. Although women and men reported similar levels of unfair treatment, regardless of whether they had a child, few men ( $n = 80$ ) had a child *and* worked anything but full time during the study window. That there just are not enough men doing this for a cultural meme to really exist, these men end up being judged on their individual merits, while mothers who do the same thing are immediately typecast as women who are opting out. Because of the norm that fathers do not take time off, a challenge for future scholars is to identify large enough samples that will enable them to detect possible differences among men.

The second major finding that warrants closer attention is the perceived unfair treatment of mothers who engage in ideal work behaviors. Normative discrimination—a form of discrimination in which judgment is made about individuals based on prescriptive stereotypes about how they ought to behave (see Benard & Correll, 2010; Correll, 2013)—suggests employers form judgments about women and men based on the work and family roles they should hold. Cultural conceptions of motherhood are antithetical to employment, as demonstrated by popular conceptions of child-comes-first motherhood (Hays, 1996; Williams, 2000, 2010). In fact, society tends to question the mothering skills of mothers who demonstrate commitment to paid work (Cuddy & Wolf, 2013; Williams, 2000) or are told that by working, they are not doing their mothering job correctly (see Epstein et al., 1999). Our finding that women who work longer hours due to the

birth of a child perceive being ignored more than mothers who work continuously full time is consistent with normative discrimination.

### Limitations

Our analyses are not without limitations. First, we cannot differentiate people who *voluntarily* worked anything but full time and those who did so involuntarily. This distinction is relevant to feelings of unfair treatment and an important focus for future research because involuntary movement to anything but full time work, especially with the same employer, can affect perceptions of unfair treatment differently than voluntary ones. For example, an involuntary move to help an employer in a time of need (i.e., an involuntary scale back to part-time when an employer experiences lowered product demand) may not be penalized by an employer but may make a worker feel more unfairly treated. Nor do we know if those who worked anything but full time remained with the same employer during their transitions out of full time work. It is possible that some of the workers who engaged in anything but full time work did so while looking for a better job, then reported their perceptions of a new job that had better conditions. Given that employer changes may disrupt penalties for ideal-worker violations (Glass, 2004), we may understate unfair treatment with the MIDUS data. Nevertheless, since only 4% of workers reported ever leaving the labor force between 2000 and 2004, and we are not concerned that nonmeasurable job changes influence our findings, especially since when we measure the effects of job changes in our parent subsample, they are unrelated to perceived unfair treatment.

Our use of MIDUS II data limits our sample to experienced workers, many of whom have supervisory power in a managerial or professional occupation. These workers are certainly held to ideal-worker norms, but they are also the workers with the greatest access to the resources that *enable* them to engage in ideal-worker norms (e.g., money to pay for child care or house cleaners). Future research should examine the mechanism driving perceptions of unfair treatment in samples of low-wage or unskilled workers who also face ideal-worker norms but often lack the support structures to embrace them.

Finally, we lack measures of perceived unfair treatment in or before 2000, the year we begin measuring a respondent's work history. It is possible that workers who felt unfairly treated responded by pulling back from full time work and thus are excluded from our sample. This omission yields a conservative estimate of mistreatment at work.

Despite these limitations, we are among the first to distinguish between temporary ideal-worker norm violations occurring temporally close to the birth of a child and those unrelated to the birth of a child (e. g., ill health, job training; but see Epstein et al., 1999; Kmec, Huffman, & Penner, 2013). Differentiating between ideal-worker penalties for norm violations related to family caregiving and norm violations for other reasons is critical for determining whether ideal-worker norm violations are different from ones associated with caregiving. This distinction is important; we find that simply having a child does not necessarily heighten perceived unfair treatment. Rather, it is the combination of having a child *and* working anything but full time that results in perceived unfair treatment, particularly among mothers. Moreover, we are among the first to capture both the effects of ideal-worker norm violations *and* engagement in ideal-worker norms among mothers and fathers on perceived unfair treatment. Our findings show that mothers face a no-win dilemma; they suffer from perceived unfair treatment when they decrease *and* increase their hours following the birth of a child.

## Conclusion

This analysis adds to a growing body of research that shows that workers, mothers in particular, face penalties for violating ideal-worker norms (Williams et al., 2013). In addition to the previously documented wage and promotion penalties (Coltrane et al., 2013; Glass, 2004; Johnson et al., 2008; Judiesch & Lyness, 1999; but see Weeden, 2005) and stigma for engaging in part-time work and taking leave (Epstein et al., 1999; Stone, 2007), we show that women who switch to anything but full time work near the time they have children perceive unfair treatment.

In addition to identifying the contours of ideal-worker norm violations, analyses also provide useful insights for advocates of workplace change. Ideal-worker norms result in overwork and work–life conflict (Williams, 2000) which have been shown to yield low job and life satisfaction, stress, burnout, and poor health (Allen Herst, Bruck, & Sutton, 2000). Our findings point to the challenge in shifting ideal-worker norms—specifically for men, who achieve a masculine identity from ideal work behaviors. Men may be particularly unlikely to push back against ideal-worker norms if they feel they deserve unfair treatment following a break with them. Nor will many men take employment leave to be a family caregiver if they feel this behavior violates the implicit employer–

employee contract (see Pugh, 2013). Identifying the practices and policies that challenge societal assumptions about ideal work is a good starting place in attempts to redesign work. More specifically, if ideal-worker norms are a meaningful metric for employer evaluation or workers and worker self-evaluation, redesign attempts may only be successful by also shifting what it means to be an ideal worker.

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### **Notes**

1. Separate analyses reveal a low interitem reliability ( $\alpha = .57$ ) when these items are combined into an index.
2. We combined stopped work and cut back on the number of work hours responses because they both represent violations of the ideal-worker norm. This eliminates the problem of small cell size—only 2% of first-time new fathers reported stopping work to care for a child.
3. Ideally, we want to compare outcomes between women and men who had a child and worked anything but full time to identify which gender perceives the most unfair treatment upon violating ideal-worker norms. The share of women (4%) and men (2%) who recently had a child *and* worked anything but full time is too small to make reliable comparisons. When we compare women and men who had a child, not accounting for their recent work status, we find that women perceive slightly less micromanagement than men ( $p < .10$ ) and similar levels of the other two outcomes.

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