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# Psychosocial Processes of Discrimination Against Women in the Workplace

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## Abstract

This work aimed to analyze the influence of stereotypes on discrimination against women. Specifically, it investigated the effects of the candidate gender (man vs. woman), the status regarding parental leave (exercising the right vs. waiving the right), and the stereotypes of competence, sociability, and morality regarding this discrimination. Consistent with previous studies, the candidate gender and the parental leave status interact and together influence discrimination against women (Study 1,  $F(1, 229)=22.45$ ,  $p<.001$ ). In turn, the triple interaction of candidate gender, parental leave status, and the three dimensions of stereotypes (Study 2,  $F(4, 587)=2.73$ ,  $p=.030$ ,  $\eta^2=.018$ ) revealed that the woman who took parental leave received more positive evaluations in the three stereotypical dimensions, in comparison with to the woman who waived her right to the leave, and, at the same time, she was poorly assessed in the competence dimension, compared to the man who exercises the same right (Study 2,  $N=312$ ).

**Keywords:** gender discrimination, parental leave, sexism, social psychology, stereotypes.

## *Procesos Psicosociales de Discriminación contra la Mujer en el Lugar de Trabajo*

### Resumen

El objetivo de este trabajo fue analizar la influencia de los estereotipos en la discriminación contra la mujer. Específicamente, se investigó los efectos del género candidato (hombre frente a mujer); el estado con respecto al permiso parental (ejercicio del derecho frente a la renuncia al derecho) y los estereotipos de competencia, sociabilidad y moralidad sobre esta discriminación. De acuerdo con estudios anteriores, el género de los candidatos y el estado de licencia parental interactúan e influyen juntos en la discriminación contra las mujeres (Estudio 1,  $F(1, 229) = 22.45$ ,  $p < .001$ ). A su vez, la triple interacción del género candidato, el estado de licencia parental y las tres dimensiones de los estereotipos (Estudio 2,  $F(4, 587) = 2.73$ ,  $p = .030$ ,  $\eta^2 = .018$ ) revelaron que la mujer que tomó la licencia de paternidad se evaluó de manera más positiva en las tres dimensiones estereotipadas, en comparación con la mujer que renunció a su derecho a la licencia quien, al mismo tiempo, se evaluó de manera más pobre en la dimensión de competencia en comparación con el hombre que ejerce el mismo derecho (Estudio 2,  $N=312$ ).

**Palabras clave:** discriminación de género, estereotipos, licencia parental, psicología social, sexismo.

Gender-stereotype studies have been using one of the most influential models in Social Psychology: The Stereotype Content Model (SCM: Fiske, Cuddy, Glick, & Xu, 2002; Fiske, Xu, Cuddy, & Glick, 1999). This model defends the two-dimensionality of stereotypes by arguing that they vary systematically based on two universal dimensions: competence and sociability, through which it is possible, respectively, to know the capacity of others to achieve their goals and to anticipate the intentions of others with regard to ourselves (Cuddy et al., 2009).

Gender stereotypes accentuate the inter-category differences (men vs. women) by offering a simplified version of reality. Therefore, gender as an immediately detected social category, chronically salient, relatively fixed, and easily polarized (Ellemers, 2018) has served historically to legitimize inequality between men and women and to naturalize women's invisibility in the public sphere (Garrido-Luque, Álvaro-Estramiana, & Rosas-Torres, 2018). The studies on this theme have indicated, for example, that the way in which mothers are perceived increases inequalities between men and women in the labor market (González, Cortina & Rodríguez, 2019). In this condition, they are assessed as less competent and more emotional compared to women who do not have children. Consequently, working mothers are less likely to be interviewed, hired, trained, or promoted compared to parents or women without children (Correll, Bernard, & Paik, 2007; Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004; Sullivan, 2015). Following this line of argument, while working mothers receive more negative assessments in terms of competence, a trait associated with high status occupations, men who have children are assessed as more sociable and ensure that perceived competence is maintained (Cuddy et al., 2004; Glick, Wilk, & Perreault, 1995).

However, this two-dimensional model about the perception of people and groups has been questioned in the face of the argument that studies at the interpersonal level as well as at the group level (Brambilla, Rusconi, Sacchi, & Cherubini, 2011;

Leach, Ellemers, & Barreto, 2007) have combined characteristics related to morality with others related to sociability, thus merging dimensions that are in reality distinct. As it were, even though morality and sociability are part of a broader dimension, termed "benevolence", they would be conceptually different (Leach et al., 2007). Morality includes traits such as honest, sincere, and trustworthy, while sociability includes traits such as pleasant, warm, and friendly. In this regard, the models formed by three dimensions (morality, sociability, and competence) have presented a better fit compared to the models formed solely of two dimensions in which morality and sociability appear joined (Brambilla et al., 2011; Leach et al., 2007; López-Rodríguez, Cuadrado, & Navas, 2013).

In addition, studies have shown that the morality dimension has been used as an "alternative" basis of positive evaluation for groups that are not successful (minority groups), which makes it difficult for them to receive positive assessments in terms of competence (e.g., Leach et al., 2007). However, although this theoretical model has been corroborated by recent research (Brambilla et al., 2011; Cuadrado, López-Rodríguez, & Navas, 2016; López-Rodríguez et al., 2013), it has been little explored by studies that assess perceptions about men and women.

Considering the theoretical arguments presented thus far and the current debate in the Spanish scenario on parental leave equalization between mothers and fathers, this article will use the Stereotype Content Model, including the morality dimension, to assess how perceptions about women who exercise their right to parental leave have repercussions on gender inequalities in the workplace. In particular, this investigation goes a step further in relation to previous work, in that it proposes to investigate stereotypical assessments about the exercise of a right guaranteed to fathers and mothers. Said another way, it is not about being a father or being a mother that this research concerns, but rather about taking parental leave. Furthermore, for stereotype assessment this

study adopts the Stereotype Content Model that considers morality as a dimension differentiated from sociability and that has been little used in the investigation of the phenomenon of discrimination against women.

### Overview of the Research

The objective of this work was to analyze the influence of stereotypes on discrimination against women. Specifically, it examined the effects of the candidate's gender (man vs. woman), the status regarding parental leave (exercising the right vs. waiving the right), and the stereotypes of competence, sociability, and morality on this discrimination.

In order to meet this objective, two hypotheses were established that guided the conduct of two studies. In Study 1, hypothesis 1 ( $H1$ ) was tested: the gender of the candidate (man vs. woman) and the status regarding parental leave (exercising the right vs. waiving the right) influence the assignment of positions of higher status and responsibility in a hierarchical organizational structure. In Study 2, the second hypothesis ( $H2$ ) was tested: the woman who exercises the right to parental leave will be stereotyped as more sociable and moral, and as less competent, compared to the woman who waives the right to the leave, and to the man who exercises the same right.

### Study 1

In the first study, hypothesis 1 ( $H1$ ) was tested experimentally: the candidate's gender (man vs. woman) and parental leave status (exercising the right vs. waiving the right) influence the assignment of positions of higher status and responsibility in a hierarchical organizational structure. This hypothesis was raised in line with previous studies showing that employers create distinct expectations for female and male employees (Eagly, Wood, & Diekmann, 2000) and that women continue to encounter barriers that prevent them from occupying upper management positions (Heilman & Okimoto, 2008), facing a higher level of job insecurity and receiving lower pay. On top of this,

when they become mothers they are judged by different standards in the workplace, compared to fathers (Garrido et al., 2018).

In this regard, considering that minority status leads to more stereotyped characterizations and less chance of being selected or promoted (Heilman, 2012), it is expected that the woman exercising the right to parental leave will be discriminated against threefold: for being a woman, a mother, and for exercising the right to parental leave, being absent from the workplace.

## Method

### Participants and Design

Study participants included 315 members of the general population of Spanish nationality, ages 18 to 57 years ( $M=33.18$ ,  $SD=14.34$ ). Sampling was non-probabilistic, snowball type. Most participants (55.90%) were female. The study utilized repeated measure design.

### Procedures

SurveyMonkey software was used to administer online questionnaires.

### Instruments

*Discrimination (Michinov, Dambrun, Guimond, and Méot, 2005)*. Using Macintosh software applications (HyperCard 2.3), developed a method to measure discrimination through participant decision making on how to best organize an office staff composed of various employees. They were then presented a hierarchical structure composed of four levels. This assignment task offered two measures of discrimination: the position in the hierarchy and the order in which they were assigned.

More specifically, participants were asked to assume that they were part of an office staff composed of 6 employees plus themselves. The images of these employees (drawings of white and dark-skinned people) were presented on the screen and were identified by a first name. There were 3 women (2 Europeans with fair skin and

1 of them African with dark skin) and 3 men (2 Europeans with fair skin and 1 of them African with dark skin). The first names served to reinforce the ethnicity of each of these co-workers.

For the present study, some modifications were made. The assignments of the job positions chosen by the participants on the computer were recorded by the SurveyMonkey software. Six employees made up the office staff, being 3 women (2 without labels and 1 with the label “exercises right to parental leave”) and 3 men (2 without labels and 1 with the label “exercises right to parental leave”). Regarding the measures of discrimination, only the position in which each employee was placed was being evaluated. Higher scores reflected lower positions in the company’s hierarchical structure.

### Data Analysis

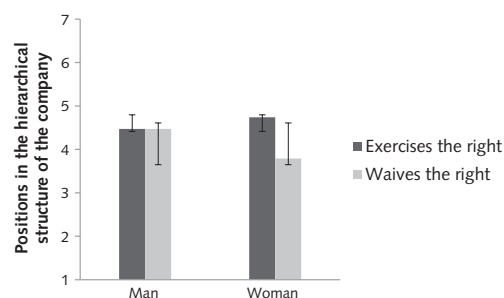
A repeated measures analysis was carried out using a mixed model to demonstrate the effect of the candidate’s gender and the status regarding parental leave (exercise right vs. waive right) on discrimination.

### Results

Repeated measures analysis using a mixed model revealed a significant interaction effect between candidate gender and parental leave status  $F(1, 229)=22.45, p<.001$ . The main effect of candidate gender  $F(1, 6)=3.98, p=.08$  was not significant. In turn, the main effect of parental leave status  $F(1, 214)=21.39, p<.001$  was significant. The analysis of the interaction effects revealed that discrimination (operationalized in terms of the assignment to positions in a hierarchical organizational structure) varies according to the candidate’s gender and parental leave status (exercising the right vs. waiving the right).

Analyzing the interaction effect between candidate gender and parental leave status, a closer look at the data indicates that there are no statistically significant differences in the hierarchical structure between the man who exercises his right to leave ( $M=4.47, SD=.11$ ) and the man who does not exercise this right ( $M=4.47, SD=.08$ ). In

contrast, the woman who exercises her right to the leave is assigned positions further from the top of the hierarchy ( $M=4.74, SD=.11$ ), compared to the woman who does not exercise this right ( $M=3.79, SD=.08$ ). Together these results suggest that in the interaction between these two variables (candidate gender and parental leave status), gender, rather than the leave status itself, structures the discrimination. The means are summarized in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Positions in the hierarchical structure of the company by candidate gender and parental leave status (exercises the right vs. waives the right).

### Discussion

The results found here confirm hypothesis 1 ( $H1$ ), demonstrating the fact that the man exercising his parental leave right is not impeded from being assigned high status positions in the hierarchical organizational structure. In contrast, we observed the assignment of positions further from the top of the hierarchy for the woman when she exercises her right to the leave.

Thus, although a study of more than 40,000 employees in 36 countries has shown that men and women report similar problems in combining work and family roles (Lyness & Judiesch, 2014), the results found here are consistent with previous investigations demonstrating that men, compared to women, are not susceptible to the same negative perceptions when they become parents (Gungor & Biernat, 2009). In addition, promotion becomes increasingly difficult for women compared to men as they move up the organizational hierarchy, suggesting that women face obstacles to attaining positions of success (Heilman, 2012).

In other words, we observe that in exercising this right as it is, parental leave has negative effects for the woman, which means that she sees her professional career interrupted. In the case of the man, exercising the right to parental leave does not have negative consequences in the workplace. Once this result was verified, the second study of this investigation aimed to answer the following question: To what extent do stereotypes contribute toward explaining the situation of discrimination against women in the workplace?

## Study 2

The objective of this study was to test the hypothesis ( $H_2$ ) that women who exercises the right to parental leave will be stereotyped as more sociable and moral, and as less competent, compared to women who waives her right to the leave, and to men who exercises the same right.

This hypothesis is based on earlier works that indicate stereotypes as providers of viable explanations for gender inequalities, justifying social positions as deserved and appropriate, and reducing the possibility of social change (Cundiff & Vescio, 2016; Ellemers, 2018).

In addition, it corroborates previous investigations studying the strength of gender stereotypes in supporting the idea that men and women are different in relation to the characteristics associated with commitment and productivity in the workplace; they describe men as rational and independent, and women as affective, helpful, and devoid of the attributes necessary for success (Burgess, 2013; Heilman, 2012; Heilman & Okimoto, 2008); and demonstrate the challenges women face in advancing their professional careers (Albiston, 2007; Kricheli-Katz, 2012), especially when they become mothers (Correll et al., 2007).

## Method

### Participants and Design

Study participants included 312 members of the general population of Spanish nationality,

ages 18 to 59 years ( $M=33.01$ ,  $SD=14.67$ ). Sampling was non-probabilistic, snowball type. Most participants (57.4%) were female. The study utilized repeated measure design and the designation of participants for each of the conditions occurred in a random manner.

### Procedures

The procedure used was the same as in Study 1.

### Instruments

**Experimental Manipulation.** The instrument used presented an account of a situation that occurred in a company's promotion process involving two candidates. The report varied over three levels according to the gender of the candidates who were competing (man vs. man / woman vs. woman / man vs. woman) and over two levels according to the candidate's situation (exercised the right to parental leave vs. waived the right to parental leave), which resulted in six experimental conditions. In the situation involving two men, in one condition the candidate exercising the right to the leave was promoted, and in the other the candidate who had waived his right to the leave received the promotion. The same manipulation was used in the condition involving two women. When the case involved a man and a woman, both of them exercised the right to the leave and the manipulation was done only on the gender of the candidate. In other words, in one condition the man was promoted and in the other the woman was the one who received the promotion.

**Stereotypes.** The scale used was that of Cuadrado, López-Rodríguez and Navas (2016), elaborated from the works of Fiske et al. (2002), Leach et al. (2007), and Brambilla et al. (2011). The scale contains eighteen items with a 5-point likert type response format, ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). Participants answered: "Think of the person who was promoted by the company and tell us to what extent you believe that each of the following characteristics describes that person." Examples of the items include Morality (*honest*,

*sincere, fair*); Sociability (*friendly, helpful, pleasant*); Competence (*reliable, intelligent, competent*). Through a principle components analysis, using varimax rotation, the items were grouped into three factors (sample adequacy index,  $KMO=.94$ ,  $X^2(153)=3799.03$ ,  $p<.001$ ), which together explain 67.03% of the total variance. The reliability index for each of the factors: Morality (Cronbach's  $\alpha=.87$ ); Sociability (Cronbach's  $\alpha=.87$ ); and Competence (Cronbach's  $\alpha=.90$ ).

### Data Analysis

The repeated measures ANOVA revealed a significant triple-interaction effect between candidate gender, candidate situation, and the three dimensions of stereotypes  $F(4, 587)=2.73$ ,  $p=.03$ ,  $\eta^2=.01$ . The corresponding post hoc analysis revealed that, in relation to the competency dimension ( $p=.058$ ), the man who exercised the right to parental leave is perceived as more competent than the man who waived it. And the woman who exercises the right to parental leave, compared to the woman who waives it, is considered more competent, while compared to the man who exercises the same right, she is considered less competent (Table 1).

In relation to sociability ( $p<.001$ ), the man who exercises the right to parental leave is perceived as more sociable than the man who waives it. The woman who exercises the same right is assessed

as more sociable, both compared to the woman who waives the right to the leave and compared to the man who exercises the same right (Table 2).

Finally, the analysis done on the morality stereotype dimension ( $p<.001$ ) revealed the same pattern found in the assessment on sociability. In other words, the man who exercises the right to the leave was perceived as more moral in relation to the man who waived it, and the woman who exercises the right to the leave was stereotyped as more moral than the woman who waives the right that is guaranteed to her, and the man who exercises the same right (Table 3).

### Discussion

The results obtained partially confirm the hypothesis ( $H2$ ), since in the competence dimension the woman who decides to benefit from the right to maternity is perceived as more competent. Specifically, in the dimensions of sociability and morality the data obtained corroborate the hypothesis. However, regarding competence, the woman who exercises the right to parental leave is assessed as less competent than the man who exercises the same right, but is better evaluated in relation to the woman who waives her right to leave.

Together, the results presented here are consistent with the argument that stereotypes support the status quo, legitimizing the hierarchical system

**Table 1**  
*Descriptive Statistics for the Competence Stereotype Dimension in the Different Groups*

Candidate gender and parental leave condition	Candidate promoted	Stereotype Dimension	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Man who exercises the right vs. man who waives the right	Man exercising the right promoted	Competence	64	4.10	.77
	Man waiving the right promoted		58	3.55	.87
Woman who exercises the right vs. woman who waives the right	Woman exercising the right promoted		59	4.02	.69
	Woman waiving the right promoted		34	3.65	.98
Man who exercises the right vs. woman who exercises the right	Man exercising the right promoted		49	4.02	.80
	Woman exercising the right promoted		48	4.00	.79
Total			312	3.91	.83

Note: Scores range from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*).



**Table 2***Descriptive Statistics for the Sociability Stereotype Dimension in the Different Groups*

Candidate gender and parental leave condition	Candidate promoted	Stereotype Dimension	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Man who exercises the right vs. man who waives the right	Man exercising the right promoted	Sociability	64	3.71	.80
	Man waiving the right promoted		58	3.04	.63
Woman who exercises the right vs. woman who waives the right	Woman exercising the right promoted		59	3.47	.61
	Woman waiving the right promoted		34	3.16	.46
Man who exercises the right vs. woman who exercises the right	Man exercising the right promoted		49	3.51	.82
	Woman exercising the right promoted		48	3.61	.73
Total			312	3.44	.73

Note: Scores range from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*).

**Table 3***Descriptive Statistics for the Morality Stereotype Dimension in the Different Groups*

Candidate gender and parental leave condition	Candidate promoted	Stereotype Dimension	N	M	SD
Man who exercises the right vs. man who waives the right	Man exercising the right promoted	Morality	64	3.94	.87
	Man waiving the right promoted		58	3.06	.96
Woman who exercises the right vs. woman who waives the right	Woman exercising the right promoted		59	3.78	.83
	Woman waiving the right promoted		34	3.27	1.01
Man who exercises the right vs. woman who exercises the right	Man exercising the right promoted		49	3.69	1.01
	Woman exercising the right promoted		48	3.93	.77
Total			312	3.63	.96

Note: Scores range from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*).

and contributing to the persistence of disparities between men and women (Cuddy et al., 2004; Glick & Fiske, 2001), since women continue to be assessed as less competent in relation to men who exercise the same right, guaranteeing their inferior status in the workplace.

However, exercising the right to parental leave generated a more positive assessment for a woman compared to the one who had given up the leave that was rightfully hers. This result is consistent with the assumption that the mother who waives the right to parental leave may have been assessed more negatively for violating the gender stereotype that links the mother to the

physical and emotional care of her children and their success due to parental involvement (Etaugh & Folger, 1998; Morales & Aguirre, 2018).

In this regard, previous studies have found that employed mothers who do not conform to “appropriate” gender expectations are diminished as caregivers, and their performance and competence at work are questionable (Albiston, 2007; Benard & Correll, 2010; Sterling & Reichman, 2016). Moreover, in the workplace, a break from traditional gender roles is connected with penalties such as lower pay, less willingness to hire and promote and fewer recommendations for organizational rewards (Heilman & Chen, 2005).

On the other hand, the results found concerning the stereotyping of women who exercise the right to parental leave (compared to those who waive the right) as more competent, moral, and sociable diverges from what has been shown in previous studies. In the studies by Cuddy, Fiske and Glick (2004), for example, working mothers were perceived as competent, but less sociable when compared to mothers who did not work. Following that same line, the results found here are also aligned with previous investigations that pointed out that the increase in gender salience (e.g., maternity) guarantees more negative assessments when compared to men or women who do not share these personal attributes (Burgess, 2013; Heilman & Okimoto, 2008). However, the findings regarding the assessment of the woman who exercises the right to parental leave as more moral suggest, as has been pointed out in previous studies, that the morality dimension has acted as an alternative basis of positive evaluation for those social categories that are perceived as less competent (Leach et al., 2007).

Regarding the assessments of the men (who exercise the right to parental leave vs. those who waive the right to parental leave), the stereotypical attributions revealed that the man who exercises the right to the leave is more positively assessed in the three dimensions, and these results confirm what others studies have already shown: the men who exercise the right to parental leave continue to be seen as competent and producing direct gains for their partners (Bygren, Erlandsson & Gähler, 2017; Johansson, 2010). Which determines that, in addition to being competent, they are considered more sociable and moral. Thus, men with children are significantly less likely to be discriminated against in the workplace, compared to the mothers (Plickert & Sterling, 2017).

### General Discussion and Conclusion

Broadening our understanding of the phenomenon of discrimination against women in the workplace, this research provides evidence that the candidate's gender (female vs. male) and parental

leave status (exercising the right vs. waiving the right) interact and together influence discrimination against women in the working world (e.g., Benard & Correll, 2010; Sterling & Reichman, 2016). In turn, the stereotyping assessments with respect to the dimensions of competence, sociability, and morality contribute towards justifying the continuation of this phenomenon.

It is relevant in this work the confirmation of the use of the morality dimension as an "alternative" basis of positive evaluation for women, since it is difficult for them to receive positive assessments in terms of competence when compared to men (Leach et al., 2007).

As a whole, the variables investigated here (candidate gender, parental leave status, and stereotypes) contribute to the maintenance of the glass ceiling (Connor, Glick, & Fiske, 2016). In the same direction as the findings of Glick, Wilk, and Perreault (1995), the competence stereotype dimension seems to continue to be the one that most significantly predicts the occupation of high-status jobs. In the comparison between men and women who exercise the right to parental leave, although the woman may have been assessed as more moral and sociable, she was considered less competent compared to the man, which contributes to legitimizing the differences between men and women in the workplace hierarchy.

In addition, although the results corroborate the notion that children produce a direct or indirect increase in gender differences in the labor market (Flaquer & Escobedo, 2014; Livermore, Rodgers, & Siminski, 2011), this article indicates that this factor is not sufficient to explain discrimination against women in this context. Thus, the present work reinforces the argument that gender equality in the workplace will not be achieved without substantial changes in the traditional gender roles, although granted there may have been significant changes in gender stereotypes, especially in the feminine, a number of the traditional stereotypes remain in force, influencing, in a differentiated way, intergroup relations and discrimination against women (Ellemers, 2018).

In this regard, actions and policies for gender equality could envisage proposals aimed at promoting effective changes in the construction of gender roles; just as future studies could investigate issues that would support the development of such practices. Other viable solutions to eradicate the phenomenon of discrimination against women in the workplace pertain to the use of “gender-fair” language in the descriptions and announcements of traditionally male jobs (Horvath & Sczesny, 2011); employing women in traditionally male roles in organizations (Heilman, 2012); and support for employees in reconciling stereotyped role expectations between men and women in relation to work and family needs (Ellemers, 2018).

Finally, given the gaps left by these studies, future investigations could consider looking into what other psychosocial processes, such as Sexism (Glick & Fiske, 1996) and Social Dominance Orientation (Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, & Malle, 1994), underlie the maintenance of the phenomenon of discrimination against women in the workplace.

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