When men lean out: Subtle reminders of child-raising intentions and men and women's career interests

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HIGHLIGHTS

• Expecting to be primary caretakers of future children, women seek flexible careers.
• Flexible careers are often also low-paying and low-status.
• We tested if child-raising intentions cause women to seek flexible careers.
• Instead, child-raising intentions increased men's interest in flexible careers.
• Men encouraged to "lean out" may take on fewer work and more family duties.

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Female-dominated occupations tend to be lower paying, but also less time-consuming and more flexible than male-dominated occupations. Women may pursue occupations with short, flexible workweeks because they expect to be primary caretakers of future children. In a pre-registered study we investigated how subtle reminders of child-raising intentions shape college students’ occupational interests. We hypothesized that priming women with child-raising intentions reminds them of future caregiving responsibilities and decreases their interest in high-hour, low-flexibility (HH/LF) occupations. However, women reported less interest than men in HH/LF careers regardless of prime (intentions to raise kids versus have pets). Reminding men of child-raising intentions decreased their interest in family-unfriendly HH/LF occupations, particularly among men low in hostile sexism. The results suggest that, whereas women may link child-raising intentions to occupational pursuits regardless of whether such intentions are made salient, reminders of child-raising intentions raise the awareness of non-sexist men of their future family responsibilities.

When asked about career plans, a woman seeking a recommendation letter from one of the authors responded, “My father was a doctor and I wanted to be one, too. But, I also want children, so I'll probably choose a less demanding field.” This comment illustrates how intentions to have children in the future influence women’s decisions to pursue family-friendly careers in the present. Although men and women report similar commitments to work and family, women are expected by both genders to take on the majority of household duties (Bianchi, 2011). According to social role theory, men and women represent their future selves differently to fit gender roles in society. Women are expected to be primary caregivers, and men are expected to be primary breadwinners (Eagly, Wood, & Diekman, 2000). These roles are consistent with gender distributions in the current workforce: male-dominated occupations tend to demand longer and less flexible workweeks than female-dominated occupations (BLS, 2013). Thus, women may pursue occupations perceived as having short, flexible, workweeks because they foresee the need to take time off work for family responsibilities (Baruch & Barnett, 1986). In contrast, men may pursue time-consuming and inflexible careers, which also tend to be lucrative, because they will be expected to provide financially for their future families (Brown & Diekman, 2010).

However, little is known about how manipulating the saliency of child-raising intentions affects young adults’ occupational interests. Asking women if they plan to have kids may heighten the accessibility of their caregiver selves, leading them to emphasize the compatibility of future caretaker and work responsibilities. Consistent with the claim that gender role primes affect self-stereotyping and long-term goals, women who viewed stereotypical depictions of women in commercials activated gender stereotypes and reported less interest in male-dominated careers (Davies, Spencer, Quinn, & Gerhardstein, 2002). Thus, we hypothesized that women reminded of child-raising intentions...
intentions would report less interest in inflexible and time-consuming careers than female controls (H1), and that they would include more references to flexibility and low time demands when describing the reasons for their career choices (H2).

In contrast, reminders of child-raising intentions may increase the accessibility of breadwinner selves for men unless they reject the complementarity of gender roles. Because sexism is rooted in a belief in traditional gender roles (Zaikman & Marks, 2014), men who are low in sexism and, thus, who do not expect female partners to take on most caregiving responsibilities may feel more accountable to future family responsibilities when reminded of plans to raise children. We examined hostile and benevolent sexism in the current study. We expected men who were low in either form of sexism and who were reminded of intentions to raise children to report less interest in time-consuming and inflexible careers than other men (H3).

Lastly, we did not expect gender identification to affect women's responses to reminders of child-raising intentions (H4). Despite valuing gender equality more than weakly-gender-identified women (Becker & Wagner, 2009), highly-gender-identified women likely recognize that they cannot eschew future caregiving responsibilities unless their male partners invest less in their careers. Thus, it is important to examine men's, in addition to women's, prospective family roles: When men select occupations allowing shorter, more flexible workweeks, their female partners benefit from greater sharing of family responsibilities and more time to focus on their own occupational pursuits (Groft, Schmader, & Block, 2015).

1. Methods

Pre-registered procedures, hypotheses and data analysis plans are available at: https://osf.io/gq5hp/?view_only=48f4cb933f6642c295a2e33c44a43e06.

1.1. Participants

We decided a priori to collect data from 200 participants (100 women), or until June 30th 2015. We were able to sample 201 participants but excluded 10 participants from further analysis because of missing data (n = 3), because they did not self-identify as women or men (n = 5), and because they acceded our predefined age cut-off of 25 years (n = 2). Consequently we included 191 participants in the final analysis. Participants were undergraduate students (M age = 19.24, SD = 1.52; 103 women, 88 men) from Brandeis University (n = 88) and Tufts University (n = 103) who participated for course credit or monetary compensation.

1.2. Procedure

The study had a 2 × 2 × 2 × 2 mixed design with repeated measures on the last two factors. Participants were randomly assigned to either the kids prime condition or the control condition, during which they either had to answer the question: “Do you have any kids or are you planning to have kids in the future?” or the control question: “Do you have any pets or are you planning to have pets in the future?”. This questionnaire also included additional filler demographics and preference questions (e.g., age, favorite television shows).

Following, participants rated the desirability as a future career of 20 different professions (see Appendix A) that varied in how time-consuming and flexible they seemed to a separate pilot sample of 36 participants (see supplementary material for pilot study details). Stimuli came from a list of 49 professions sourced from a web search for diverse and popular occupations. Participants responded to the question: “Please rate the following professions in regards to how desirable they are for you as a future career” using a 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = extremely). Participants also wrote short essays explaining why they desired their top 3 careers. Finally, participants completed the Ambivalent Sexism Inventory (ASI; Glick & Fiske, 1996), which assesses hostile and benevolent sexism, and two measures of gender identification: The identity subscale of the Collective Self-Esteem Scale (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) and an Inclusion of Gender in the Self scale (Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992; see supplementary material).

2. Results

To test the effects of the kids versus pets prime on career preferences, we followed our pre-registered analysis plan and also conducted exploratory post-hoc analyses.

2.1. Pre-registered planned analyses

We submitted career desirability ratings to a 2 × 2 × 2 × 2 (Prime: kids, pets) × 2 (Work Hours: high, low) × 2 (Work Flexibility: high, low) mixed model ANOVA with repeated measures on the last two factors (see Fig. 1). We originally predicted a significant 4-way interaction (H1) which was not confirmed by the current analysis, F(1, 187) = .82, p = .37. Instead, the analysis revealed significant main effects for gender, flexibility and hours (see Table 1), which were qualified by a significant 2-way Hours × Gender interaction, F(1, 187) = 6.57, p = .01, r² = .03, and a significant 2-way Flexibility × Hours interaction, F(1, 187) = 15.64, p < .001, r² = .08. No other effects were significant (all ps > .20).

Although we did not find the predicted 4-way interaction, we conducted a series of planned comparisons that followed our analysis plan. Contrary to our predictions, this analysis did not reveal a significant effect of condition on women’s career evaluations (all ps > .45). Interestingly, however, we did find a marginally significant condition effect for men’s evaluations of low hours, low flexible (HH/LF) careers, F(1, 187) = 3.00, p = .087, r² = .02, such that men in the kids prime condition (M = 3.08, SD = 1.00) rated these professions significantly lower than men in the pets prime condition (M = 3.46, SD = .98). Please note, however, that this condition effect was limited to HH/LF professions, and did not extend to the least family-friendly HH/LF careers, suggesting that men might particularly care about flexibility, rather than number of hours, when reminded of their child-raising intentions.

Providing additional evidence that condition affected the gender gap in career preferences, men in the pet prime condition (M = 3.21, SD = .71) rated HH/LF careers (the most family-unfriendly occupations) as significantly more desirable than women (M = 2.75, SD = 1.05; F(1, 187) = 5.19, p = .024, r² = .03). In contrast, men who were primed with kids (M = 3.03, SD = 1.05) rated HH/LF careers equally low as their female counterparts (M = 2.73, SD = .85; F(1, 187) = 2.52, p = .11).

2.2. Additional exploratory post-hoc analyses

To follow up on the finding that condition affected LH/LF rather than HH/LF professions we decided to isolate the unique effects of hours from flexibility by unpacking the non-significant Gender x Prime x Flexibility interaction and the non-significant Gender x Prime x Hours interaction. Prime did not affect men or women’s ratings of HH or LH jobs (all ps > .21). In contrast, prime did affect preferences for careers varying in flexibility, but again, only for men: Although the simple effect of condition on men’s career choices was not significant F(1, 187) = 2.37, p = .03.
.12, we found that men in the pets prime condition (M = 3.33, SD = .70) rated LF careers significantly more favorably than women (M = 2.95, SD = .91), F(1, 187) = 4.64, p = .032, ñ² = .02, while men in the kids prime condition (M = 3.06, SD = .92) rated the LF careers equally low as women (M = 2.94, SD = .78), F(1, 187) = .46, p = .50. Moreover, only when primed with kids, F(1, 187) = 5.55, p = .02, ñ² = .03 and not when primed with pets, F(1, 187) = .22, p = .64, did men rate LF careers significantly lower than HF careers (see Fig. 2).

2.3. Free Responses

To test H2—that women in the kids versus the pet prime condition would include more references to shorter and more flexible work weeks when describing why they selected their top career choices—we instructed two research assistants blinded to condition to code essay responses. They first counted the frequency with which essays referenced the expected number of work hours and the flexibility of work hours. Coding discrepancies were discussed and resolved. However, depending on rater, only 3 or 18 participants mentioned the number of expected work hours, and only 6 or 12 participants mentioned the flexibility of work hours. Given these low numbers of mentions no further analyses on these two categories could be conducted (see supplementary material).

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>p</th>
<th>Partial ñ²</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Condition</td>
<td>187</td>
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<td>.298</td>
<td>0.006</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>7.69</td>
<td>0.006</td>
<td>0.04</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hours</td>
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<td>0.048</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condition × Gender</td>
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<td>0.608</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condition × Flexibility</td>
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<td>0.275</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Condition × Hours</td>
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<td>0.219</td>
<td>0.64</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender × Flexibility</td>
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<td>0.567</td>
<td>0.452</td>
<td>0.003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender × Hours</td>
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<td>6.569</td>
<td>0.011</td>
<td>0.034</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility × Hours</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>15.641</td>
<td>&lt;.001</td>
<td>0.077</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>0.156</td>
<td>0.693</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility × Hours × Sex</td>
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<td>0.677</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flexibility × Hours × Condition × Sex</td>
<td>187</td>
<td>0.821</td>
<td>0.366</td>
<td>0.004</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 191.

2.4. Moderation

2.4.1. Hostile and benevolent sexism

To test H3, interest in HH/LF occupations were regressed on participant gender (women = 0, men = 1), prime (kids = 0, pets = 1), hostile sexism and benevolent sexism (both standardized) in a hierarchical regression model (see Table 2). Main effects were entered into Step 1, 2-way interactions into Step 2, 3-way interactions into Step 3, and the 4-way interaction into Step 4. Step 1 was significant, R² = .11, F(4, 186) = 5.50, p < .001. There was a significant main effect of gender, ß = .19, t(186) = 2.63, p = .009, a significant main effect of hostile sexism, ß = .27, t(186) = 3.43, p = .001, and a significant main effect of benevolent sexism, ß = −.21, t(186) = −2.70, p = .008. No other main effects or 2-way interactions were significant (ps > .069, Step 2 ðΔR² = .03). Step 3 was also significant, ðΔR² = .04, F(14, 176) = 2.57, p = .002. The Participant Gender × Prime × Hostile Sexism interaction was significant, ß = −.35, t(176) = −2.17, p = .03, as was the Participant Gender × Prime × Benevolent Sexism interaction, ß = −.37, t(176) = 2.36, p = .02. No other 3-way interactions were significant (ps > .62). The four-way interaction was also not significant, ß = .10, t(175) = .51, p = .61 (Step 4 ðΔR² = .001, F(15, 175) = 2.40, p = .003).

Next, we decomposed the Participant Gender × Prime × Hostile Sexism interaction. Consistent with H3, the results revealed a significant Participant Gender × Kids Prime interaction among participants who were low in hostile sexism, ß = .36, t(176) = 2.03, p = .04, in which men primed with pets (M = 2.96) reported significantly more interest in HH/LF occupations than women primed with pets (M = 2.47), t(176) = 2.04, p = .04. However, participants low in hostile sexism and who were primed with kids did not show a significant gender difference, t(176) = 1.24, p = .22 (see Fig. 3). This result was not completely in line with our prediction that men who were low in hostile sexism would show less interest in HH/LF occupations when primed with kids versus pets; however, that the kids prime eliminated a gender difference observed in the control condition is conceptually consistent with our prediction. No other simple effects were significant for participants low in hostile sexism (ps > .16). The Participant Gender × Kids Prime interaction was not significant for participants who were high in hostile sexism, ß = −.21, t(176) = −1.18, p = .27. Participant Gender × Prime × Hostile Sexism interactions did not emerge for other careers (ps > .14).

Fig. 1. Career preferences for careers varying in number of expected work hours and perceived flexibility of these hours as a function of prime condition and gender. Error bars represent standard errors.
Lastly, we decomposed the 3-way interaction involving benevolent sexism. Contrary to H3, the Participant Gender × Kids Prime interaction was not significant among participants low in benevolent sexism, $\beta = - .26, t(176) = - 1.34, p = .18$. The Participant Gender × Kids Prime interaction was significant among participants high in benevolent sexism, $\beta = .41, t(176) = 2.30, p = .02$; however, simple slopes analyses did not reveal any significant effects ($p > .51$).

### 2.4.1.1. Exploratory post-hoc analyses

We did not expect benevolent sexism to interact with participant gender and prime to affect interest in other career types: indeed, interactions did not emerge for HH/LF or LH/FF careers ($p > .32$). However, we did find a significant Participant Gender × Prime × Benevolent Sexism interaction for LH/FF careers, $\beta = .46, t(176) = 2.83, p = .005$. Among participants low in benevolent sexism the Participant Gender × Kids Prime interaction was not significant, $\beta = -.26, t(176) = - 1.32, p = .19$; however, among participants high in benevolent sexism the Participant Gender × Kids Prime interaction was significant, $\beta = .57, t(176) = 3.06, p = .003$. In the pet prime condition, men ($M = 3.37$) preferred LH/FF careers marginally significantly more than women ($M = 2.83$), $b = .54, t(176) = 2.01, p = .05$. This gender difference in career preferences was no longer significant in the kid prime condition, $b = .54, t(176) = .43, p = .66$. Given that we did not pre-register a prediction of this result, additional future work is needed to examine its robustness. However, it is possible that men who are high in benevolent sexism are particularly likely to focus on the importance of work flexibility — while ignoring work hours — when considering how to balance future work and childcare responsibilities.

### 2.4.2. Gender identification

To test H4, interest in HH/FF occupations were regressed on participant gender (women = 0, men = 1), prime (kids = 0, pets = 1), CSES gender and benevolent IOS-gender (both standardized) in a hierarchical regression model. Consistent with H4, analyses did not reveal significant interactions involving gender identification ($p > .23$).

#### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>1.</th>
<th>2.</th>
<th>3.</th>
<th>4.</th>
<th>5.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hostile sexism</td>
<td>2.46</td>
<td>.88</td>
<td>.45*</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.22**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Benevolent sexism</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.09</td>
<td>.05</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CSES gender</td>
<td>3.50</td>
<td>1.38</td>
<td>.45*</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IOS gender</td>
<td>3.97</td>
<td>1.76</td>
<td>.45*</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>LF/HH career interest</td>
<td>2.91</td>
<td>.95</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.02</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* $p < .001$.  
** $p < .005$.

### 3. Discussion

Women are over-represented in careers that put fewer demands on their time and have more flexible work hours (BLS, 2013), but that also pay less, provide fewer leadership opportunities, and are less prestigious (Frome, Alfeld, Eccles, Jacquelynne, & Barber, 2008). Here we provide data suggesting gender differences in the extent to which reminders of child-raising intentions influence men and women’s career choices. We found that women rated family-friendly careers with shorter, more flexible workweeks more favorably than family-unfriendly careers with longer, inflexible workweeks. In contrast, only when reminded of their child-raising intentions did men report a preference shift away from family-unfriendly careers. This was particularly true for men low in hostile sexism, suggesting that men who do not subscribe to traditional gender roles are more likely to adjust their career preferences to accommodate future child-raising responsibilities. Please note, however, that some of the expected interactions and effects (e.g., the predicted 4-way interaction and the simple effect of condition for women’s career choices) were not significant; Moreover, the findings regarding the effect of the prime on men’s career interests, as well as the findings regarding job flexibility, result from an exploratory analysis. Thus, we need to be cautious when interpreting these findings until they can be replicated.

One reason that our prediction that reminding women of their child-raising intentions would change their career preferences was not confirmed may be that women are chronically aware of the responsibilities that come with raising a child (Baruch & Barnett, 1986), rendering the manipulation ineffective for them. Indeed, women are more likely than men to spontaneously consider future family-related obligations when choosing a career (Williams & Chen, 2013). The priming manipulation might have activated these considerations only in men, leading them to change their preferences toward more family-friendly careers. Although we need to be careful when interpreting these initial results before future replication, our findings suggest an interesting possibility: At this critical time when the course for future careers is set, young men prefer jobs with longer, more flexible workweeks that, while more lucrative (Brown & Diekman, 2010), may prevent them from playing an active role in raising their future children. Rather than simply being unmotivated to choose family-friendly careers, however, non-sexist men may just need to be reminded of their intentions to have families. Such reminders alone can prompt them to make career choices that will allow them to be more involved with family life when the time comes. The benefits could be plenty: Men who meet their communal goals, especially when caring for their own children, are more satisfied with their lives (e.g., Duckworth & Buzanell, 2009). Women with partners who share family-related responsibilities have
more latitude to pursue their own careers (Croft et al., 2015), and children with involved fathers experience developmental benefits (Marsiglio, Amato, Randal, & Lamb, 2000).

In her book, Facebook C.O.O. Sheryl Sandberg encouraged women to “lean-in” and focus on their careers, rather than pre-maturely disengaging from work that may interfere with future family responsibilities (Sandberg, 2013). Maybe, by reminding men to sometimes lean-out, both genders will eventually be able to lean-in, not only in regards to their careers but also when it comes to family-involvement.

Appendix A

Low Flexible, High Hours (LFHH)
Chemical Engineer
Electrical Engineer
Human Resources Manager
Business Executive
Sales Manager
Low Flexible, Low Hours (LFLH)
School Administrator (Principal)
Public School Teacher
Pharmacist
Optometrist
Production Manager
High Flexible, High Hours (HFHH)
Web Designer
Marketing Director

Lawyer
Business Analyst
Statistician
High Flexible, Low Hours (HFLH)
Interior Designer
Software Developer
Personal Financial Advisor
Computer Systems Analyst
Clinical Psychologist

Appendix B. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2015.09.007.

References


