



The Rosabeth Moss Kanter Award

For Excellence in Work-Family Research

INTERVIEW WITH THE AUTHOR

What were the major findings of your study?

In our study we were examining the case of a watershed policy reform in Germany, where federal parental leave had been extended to three years of leave supported by a flat-rate parental benefit to the caregiver in the early 1990s, generating what still is one of the most generous entitlements worldwide. The behavioral implications of the policy, e.g. in terms of mothers' employment and the duration of work interruptions following childbirth, have long been examined. But what has been distinctive about our study is that we were able to rediscover some unique survey data from the German Socio-Economic Panel that allowed us to take a serious look at whether parental leave policies might also have affected women's preferences for work.

And, unfortunately, this is exactly what we were finding. While Germany had a generous leave program already before, it turned out that the introduction of the three-year entitlement over time led to a decline in the subjective importance that mothers were placing on work. This decline occurred both as a consequence of actual leave-taking among new mothers who were employed prior to childbirth, and that was a first surprise, also among new mothers who had been homemakers prior to childbirth. Moreover, we found the exact same patterns in both West and East Germany despite the fact that, back in the 1990s and as a consequence of 40 years of political separation, both parts of the country exhibited sharply distinct gender role norms in general. We also found that declining subjective work orientation was in fact one reason why mothers were delaying their return to work, especially as far as their return to full-time employment was concerned.

Were you surprised by the findings?

Yes! As social scientists, our first instinct is that changes in behavior reflect changes in circumstances. Behavior is surely affected by both preferences and constraints, but constraints and opportunities are seen as definitely more changeable than preferences. Preferences and identities are thought to form mainly through socialization in adolescence, and any later-life changes are taken to be relatively marginal, at least in essentials. So if policies might change preferences at all, it will be over the long haul of history because new generations will get used to new policies and ideas, and will then think them best. George Homans once summarized this notion of preference formation by the remark "What is always becomes what ought to be". And then we have our findings that mothers preferences were changing in Germany in response to a watershed policy change, within a few years time, and in non-trivial ways. We literally couldn't believe our eyes at first. We treated the data very hard statistically, but after all the efforts, that still was what the data was saying. We were in a way confirming the egalitarian feminist's nightmare, that some feminist German economists had indeed been warning about almost 25 years earlier.

What do you think are the most important implications of your findings for employees? For human resource practitioners?

In general our findings illustrate that family policies are more than economic incentives. Family life is deeply personal, but as parents we are also sensitive to norms and expectations about proper parenting and proper ways to reconcile family and work roles that may be prevalent in our social environment. And family policies at least sometimes seem to carry these cultural undertones as well, and then affect family outcomes also via this cultural channel. Our particular case has been a historical watershed reform which may have been quite singular in some respects, but the general message could well be that not just public but also corporate policies carry cultural messages -- which of course may or may not attract employees to a particular employer, for example. But then the concrete lesson to US policy makers and practitioners from our study may actually be in the negative: as we have examined a European policy that seems far removed from anything that public or corporate policy would be willing or able to implement in this country. Our study and the evidence on negative side effects of long leave entitlements that we report should not serve as any argument for inaction in the US. If anything, the opposite is true: our results also showed that the earlier German policy that had an 18-month leave entitlement after childbirth did not generate any negative effects on women's work orientations, which leaves a lot of room to develop parental leave policies in the US without incurring the negative side effects that we find.



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**The making of a
good woman:
Extended parental
leave entitlements
and mothers' work
commitment in
Germany.**

American Journal of
Sociology



2016 Finalists

Gangl, M., & Ziefle, A. (2015). The making of a good woman: Extended parental leave entitlements and mothers' work commitment in Germany. *American Journal of Sociology*, 121(2), 511-563. WINNER

Little, L. M., Major, V. S., Hinojosa, A. S., & Nelson, D. L. (2015). Professional image maintenance: How women navigate pregnancy in the workplace. *Academy of Management Journal*, 58(1), 8-37.

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2016 Nominees

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Flood, S. M., & Moen, P. (2015). Healthy Time use in the encore years do work, resources, relations, and gender matter?. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, 56(1), 74-97.

Gassman-Pines, A. (2015). Effects of Mexican immigrant parents' daily workplace discrimination on child behavior and family functioning. *Child Development*, 86(4), 1175-1190.

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