

Unpacking Americans' Views of the Employment of Mothers and Fathers Using National Vignette Survey Data SWS Presidential Address

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Abstract

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

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