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Testing the Gender Role-Perception Theory: A Proposed Explanation for the Lack of Maternity Leave Policy in the United States

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Key words: maternity leave, Hofstede's theory of individualism, historical influence, gender roles, perceptions of mothers, United States, political affiliation

Introduction

Maternity leave is a policy that affects everyone, whether they be mothers, fathers, newborns, or the organizations. When there is a lack of maternity leave, it makes it impossible for mothers to be able to take care of their newborns while still being financially stable. There is a severe lack of maternity leave policy in the United States, but there is no complete or adequate explanation for this lack of policy. This paper will propose and test a new theory, the Gender Role-Perception Theory. This theory attempts to explain the lack of maternity leave policy in the United States by bringing together the gender role ideology of the United States with the perceptions of working mothers.

This paper will begin with some background information on the current maternity leave policy in the United States. It will then transition to an explanation of some of the present theories for the lack of maternity leave policy, and why these explanations are not adequate. Next, it will explain the proposed Gender Role-Perception Theory. Then, it will transition into the test of the theory with an explanation on the study, the hypotheses, and the methodology used. Finally, there will be results from the study, along with a discussion of the results and a conclusion.

Background Information on Maternity Leave Policy in the United States

The United States is the only industrialized country in the world that has no federal law requiring any portion of maternity leave to be paid. There is also no legal provision on the federal level that is directly related to maternity leave. Instead, maternity leave falls under the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA). This act is not universal, it does not guarantee

paid maternity leave, and it is estimated that less than 20% of mothers are covered by this act

(Plotka & Busch-Rossnagel, 2018; Neckermann, 2017). The FMLA only applies to

organizations that have more than fifty employees. On an individual level, employees must have

worked for more than 1,250 hours for one employer during a year (Kelly, 2008). Mothers who

are in a lower socioeconomic class and single mothers are less likely to be covered than mothers

who are in a higher socioeconomic class and married (Plotka & Busch-Rossnagel, 2018).

It is possible for individual states to create legal provisions related to maternity leave, but

very few have done so. While almost half of the states in the United States have adopted some

sort of maternity or other family leave policy, only six have policies that require even a partially

paid maternity leave (Kamerman & Kahn, 1991; Neckermann, 2017). Individual employers are

able to provide paid maternity leave, but it is estimated that only one of every ten United States

workers are covered by such a policy (Neckermann, 2017). Even with the federal, state, and

organizational level policies combined, it is estimated that less than half of working women in

America have both job/benefit protection and a cash benefit to replace part of their earnings for a

time of only six to eight weeks following childbirth (Kamerman & Kahn, 1991).

It is also important to look at research concerning how maternity leave affects a woman's

career and her organization. When it comes to returning to their jobs, many women are able to

reacclimate to their organization within a few weeks, and are able to work with even more

concentration than before. Moreover, it has been found that women with longer maternity leaves

have an easier time readapting to their jobs, and that women who take maternity leave will be

just as productive and engaged in their jobs after the leave as they were before (Fried, 1998;

Plotka & Busch-Rossnagel, 2018). On top of all these benefits for the organization, research has

also shown that the availability of paid maternity leave is positively associated with a larger

representation of women in management positions (Kalysh, Kulik, & Perera, 2016). While these

are all positive benefits for the organization and mother's careers, there are also negative

outcomes of maternity leave. The difference is that these consequences mostly affect only the

mother.

The length of a woman's maternity leave can change her co-workers perceptions of her.

If a woman takes a longer maternity leave, then she is likely to be seen as less committed to her

job when compared to a woman who took a shorter leave or no leave. Furthermore, a longer

maternity leave can have negative effects when women are applying to new jobs, as they are

seen as less desirable candidates due to the time taken away from work (Hideg, Kristec, Trau, &

Zarina, 2018).

While this information does show the lack of maternity leave in the United States, it does

not explain why there is a lack. There are some current theories that try to explain this lack of

federal policy, but they are not adequate or complete enough.

Present Theories on the Lack of Maternity Leave Policy in the United States

There are two current theories that could explain the lack of maternity policy in the

United States. They are Hofstede's theory of individualism, and the influence of the history of

the United States. While both of these theories can be used to partially explain the lack of

maternity leave policy in the United States, they are not fully adequate.

Hofstede's theory of individualism comes from his theory on cultural dimensions. There

are five cultural dimensions that make up the full theory, but when discussing maternity leave

policy in the United States only individualism versus collectivism is important. Individualism is the opposite of collectivism, and it represents the degree to which individuals look after themselves instead of staying integrated into a group. Collectivism represents the degree to which individuals look after the group instead of just themselves. Research has shown that individualistic societies focus more on themselves and their immediate family, while collectivist societies are more focused on the protection of the group (Chudzikowski & Migliore, 2011). The United States is an individualistic country. In fact, six out of ten Americans believe that individual liberty is more important than ensuring that there is no one in society who is in need (Neckermann, 2017).

This individualism in the United States is a possible explanation for the lack of maternity policy. Other employees see someone who takes maternity leave as prioritizing their family over their work (Morgenroth & Heilman, 2017). In the context of an individualistic culture, it is possible to understand that other employees may view a woman taking maternity leave as receiving benefits without putting in the work, and so taking resources from their own family. However, at the same time, since this theory states that people look out for themselves and their family first, then it would seem that a maternity leave policy is something everyone would want as it would help their family. Research has shown that maternity leave has many benefits for the mother and the child, meaning that the mother and her direct family would want a maternity leave to receive those benefits.

The other possible explanation is the history of the United States. Some researchers suggest that the lack of maternity leave policy in the United States is connected to the different levels of class consciousness in the United States when compared to Europe. A large amount of

European countries are post-feudal societies. In these types of societies, there are residual effects from the feudal system. These effects are seen through the higher classes feeling that they have a responsibility to provide for those who are in lower classes. Research has shown that when social structures encourage employees to see society as being structured by class, then there is a larger possibility of them supporting socialist parties/policies (Neckermann, 2017). It is also possible to see this difference as labor unions have more power and influence in Europe than in the United States (Wisensale, 2001).

This does connect well to the differences between maternity policy in the United States and Europe. The majority of European countries have a minimum of a guarantee of paid maternity leave for twelve to sixteen weeks, while the United States has no such guarantee (Kamerman & Kahn, 1991). However, if history was the explanation for the lack of maternity leave, then there would be the same effects in all countries, depending on whether they have a feudal history or not. This is not the case. For example, Papua New Guinea did not have a feudal system (Hassal & Singin, 1999). Although their lack of feudalism is similar to the United States, they do have a maternity leave policy (Friesen, Vince, Boas, & Danaya, 1999). This means that a history of a feudal system is not a viable explanation for the lack of maternity leave policy in the United States.

The Gender Role-Perception Theory

The Gender Role-Perception Theory is a new theory suggested by the author that attempts to explain the lack of maternity leave policy in the United States by bringing together the gender roles in the United States and perceptions/attitudes towards mothers, especially

working mothers. Historically men have been seen as the leaders in the United States, meaning

that men are seen as the more powerful gender. For example, men's activities have involved

power and status while women's activities have focused on domestic duties. Women's focus on

domestic duties is further cemented by the biological need for women to be responsible for

childbearing and nursing (Zaikman, Marks, Young, & Zeiber, 2016). These separate roles have

also lead to the idea that women possess the characteristics necessary to be the ideal caregiver:

warmth and the ability to nurture; while men possess the characteristics necessary to be the ideal

worker: competency and agency (Coleman & Franiuk, 2011; Sallee, Ward, & Wolf-Wendel,

2016). These traditional gender roles where the mother stays at home and the father works can

be connected to the lack of maternity leave policy in the United States, as the lack of policy may

be a way to push women from the workplace and back to their home with their children.

The second part of the theory is the perceptions/attitudes towards mothers. There are

many negative perceptions of mothers, especially when it comes to working mothers. Studies

have found that, in general, mothers are assumed to be less ambitious, while father are assumed

to be more financially secure (Kemkes, 2008). Other studies have found that women who take

maternity leave are expected to be less successful in their careers, but are also viewed as less

family-oriented and warm than stay at home mothers. Furthermore, mothers are more likely to

be criticized for a perceived lack of involvement with the home than fathers are (Coleman &

Franiuk, 2011). Many times, working mother are seen as choosing to put something else, their

career, "over" their child (Odenweller & Rittenour, 2017). When women become mothers, they

exchange perceived competence for perceived warmth (Cuddy, Fiske, & Glick, 2004). It is very

difficult to find any research that includes positive perceptions of working mothers. There is

some research that focuses on the spillover between work and family for working mothers, but the only positive part of this is the possibility of some skills from one role helping with the other role (Hammer & Crain, 2013).

By bringing together the negative perceptions of working mothers and the gender roles found in the United States, the Gender Role-Perception Theory is formed. When people leave their gender roles, they are seen in a negative light (Zaikman et al., 2016). When women become working mothers, they are leaving their traditional gender role. This then causes society to punish them through negative perceptions. These negative perceptions are used as a way to force women out of the workforce and back into the home. The interaction between gender roles and perceptions of mothers makes it possible to see why the United States does not have any maternity policy.

The Main Model

The gender roles in the United States lead to the possibility that the United States has a culture that favors mothers who do not work. When negative perceptions/attitudes towards working mothers is connected with the traditional gender roles of the United States, the possibility that the lack of maternity leave in the United States is a way for society to push mothers out of the workplace and back into the home emerges. The Gender Role-Perception Theory argues that the negative perceptions of working mothers are used as an excuse in order to not have maternity leave policy in the United States, with the hope that this lack of policy will cause women to leave the workforce and emphasize the traditional gender roles.

H1a: Gender role ideology predicts the favorability of a government mandated maternity leave.

H1b: This relationship is mediated by the perceptions/attitudes toward working mothers (See

Model 1.)

Model 1.
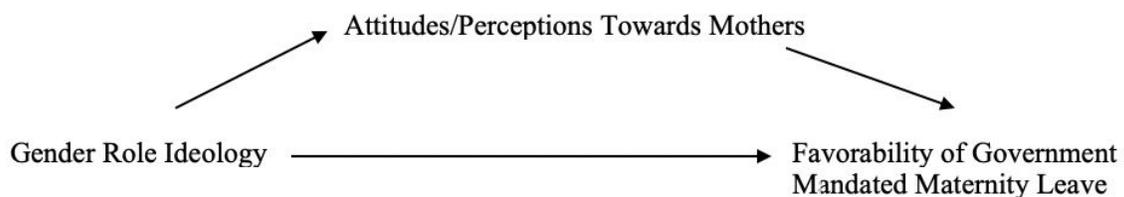
Note: This model shows the proposed relationship explained in H1b.

The Role of Political Affiliation

Gender roles also have effects when it comes to politics. Female candidates are seen as

more competent in issues such as education or child-related issues, while male candidates are

seen as more competent in issues such as military or defense issues. Furthermore, women are

stereotyped as more liberal than men (Huddy & Terkildsen, 1993). Thus, it is possible that

people who identify as more conservative will be larger supporters of traditional gender roles

than people who identify as more liberal. Following the model suggested in H1a and H1b, then,

people who identify as liberal should be more supportive of government mandated maternity

leave than people who identify as conservative.

H2: Those with a more conservative political ideology will be less likely to support a government mandated maternity leave than those with a more liberal ideology.

The Role of Gender

Previous research has shown that women are more likely to be egalitarian than men (Barnett, 2002). This suggests that men will be more likely to support traditional gender roles, and thus be less supportive of working women. It could be suggested that men will be less supportive of government mandated maternity leave than women.

H3: Women are more likely to support a government mandated maternity leave than men.

The Role of Education

Previous studies have shown that as a person's education level increases, then they become more egalitarian. The amount of women earning a college degree has greatly increased, which allows them more opportunities in the workplace (Marks, 2008). Furthermore, the increase of women's education is one of the larger threats to domesticity (Wharton, 2008). Thus, it is proposed that when a person has a higher level of education, they are less supportive of traditional gender roles, and more likely to support a government mandated maternity leave.

H4: Level of education is positively related to one's support for government mandated maternity leave.

The Role of Age

Age is another important factor. Studies have shown that children are affected by their

mother's employment. As the need for dual earners has increased, more women have joined the

workforce (Barnett, 2002). This means that more children are growing up with a working

mother. Previous studies have shown that people with employed mothers are less likely to see

differences between masculine and feminine roles than people with stay at home mothers (Vogel,

Broveman, Broverman, Clarkson, & Rosenkrantz, 1970). Additionally, as gender roles have

somewhat changed over time, especially with the need for dual earners, younger generations

have become more accepting of working women (Cunningham, 2008). Thus, it is proposed that

younger people will be less likely to support traditional gender roles, and more likely to support

government mandated maternity leave.

H5: Age is negatively related to support for government mandated maternity leave.

Method

The data for this study was collected through the use of a survey. The collection process

was convenience sampling done through Facebook. The survey was posted on 3 different

Facebook groups, including one aimed at parents whose children are either about to be entering

or are in college, a group for people involved in sales, and a group focused on finance and

insurance. Along with these groups, the survey was also posted on 2 individual's Facebook

pages. All posts requested that people take the survey and share it if possible.

The survey used the shortened Gender Role Beliefs Scale, developed by Brown and

Gladstone (2012), to measure gender role ideology. This scale is a shorter version of the original

scale created by Kerr and Holden (1996). The shortened scale is a ten item scale that was found

to have a strong internal consistency. In an item-test analysis, it was found that Cronbach's

alpha would not increase if any items were deleted. This scale was also previously tested for

reliability between genders, and found to be appropriate for use for both male and female

participants (Brown & Gladstone, 2012).

The measure of attitudes/perceptions towards working mothers comes from a scale

created by the author. When tested through an item-test analysis, it was found that the scale had

a Cronbach's alpha value of 0.91. Additionally, this value would not increase if any item was

deleted from the scale.

Political affiliation was measured on a five point Likert scale ranging from conservative

to liberal. Education level, gender, and age were all self-reported. The survey also contained

questions to measure attitudes against government mandated maternity leave (both paid and

unpaid) which used a five point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Finally, there were some questions included on the survey that focused on attitudes towards stay

at home fathers. These questions were also measured on a five point Likert scale ranging from

strongly agree to strongly disagree. While there are no hypotheses focusing on stay at home

fathers, this information was used as a comparison to other models and to view possible future

research directions. See Appendix A. for full survey.

Once the survey was completed, the data were coded. This included some items that

were reverse coded. The items from the scale created by the author were tested for internal

consistency. The coded items in scales were then averaged together to give each participant an

average score on the Gender Role Beliefs Scale and the Attitudes Towards Working Mothers Scale. Correlation, regression, and Sobel tests were used to test the hypotheses.

Participants

There were 65 participants. Of these participants, 67.7% were female and 32.3% were male. The most common race was white, making up 89.2% of total participants. The most common marital status was married/living with significant other, making up 80% of total participants. The most common household structure was of a dual-earner household, making up a total of 67.7% of participants. The most common education level was a bachelor's degree, making up 38.5% of total participants. The most common political affiliation was somewhat liberal, making up 30.8% of total participants. For complete demographic information on the sample, see Table 1.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Study Participants

Demographic	Percentage
Gender	
Female	67.7%
Male	32.3%
Race	
White	89.2%
Hispanic/Latino	4.6%
American Indian/Alaskan Native	1.5%
Bi-Racial	1.5%

Multi-Racial	3.1%
Marital Status	
Married/Living with Significant Other	80%
Separated/Divorced	9.2%
Single	10.8%
Household Earner Structure	
Dual-earner	67.7%
Single-earner	32.3%
Main Earner in the Household	
Yes	61.5%
No	38.5%
Job Type	
Full-time	81.5%
Part-time	12.3%
Unemployed	6.2%
Age	
18-24	4.6%
25-34	26.2%
35-44	21.5%
45-54	24.6%
55-64	20%
65+	3.1%
Education Level	
High school degree	7.7%

Some college	18.5%
Associates degree	4.6%
Bachelor degree	38.5%
Some graduate school	7.7%
Graduate degree	23.1%
Political Affiliation	
Conservative	20%
Somewhat conservative	10.8%
Moderate	27.7%
Somewhat Liberal	30.8%
Liberal	10.8%

Results

Table 2. shows the correlations among the variables. Correlations show that the main model was not supported. While H1a was supported, with results showing that those with more egalitarian gender role ideology are more likely to support both a federally mandated maternity leave in general and a paid federally mandated maternity leave, there was no mediating effect of attitudes towards working mothers. Thus, H1b was not supported. In a post-hoc analysis, the main model was broken down into two different models (one focusing on federally mandated maternity leave in general, and one on paid maternity leave). While the model with federally mandated maternity leave was not significant ($t = .66$, ns), the model with paid maternity leave approached significance ($t = -.74$, $p < .10$).

Results showed that those with a more conservative political ideology were less likely to be supportive of both a federally mandated maternity leave in general and a paid federally mandated maternity leave. This supports H2. This relationship between political ideology and

Table 2.

Variables	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Gender Role Beliefs	3.46	.519	-								
2. Attitudes Towards Working Mothers Scale	3.71	.698	.51**	-							
3. Attitudes Towards Stay at Home Fathers	4.10	.898	.42**	.395**	-						
4. Attitudes Against Federally Mandated Maternity Leave	2.28	1.596	-.199	-.035	-.276*	-					
5. Attitudes Against Federally Mandated Paid Maternity Leave	2.37	1.692	-.316*	-.237	-.287*	.720**	-				
6. Gender	1.32	.471	-.321**	-.240	-.262*	.274*	.299*	-			
7. Education Level	3.98	1.582	.009	-.075	-.091	-.192	-.002	-.141	-		
8. Age	3.38	1.283	.045	.079	-.020	.054	.171	-.079	.321**	-	
9. Political Affiliation	3.02	1.293	.476**	.226	.322**	-.320**	-.388**	-.419**	.077	.043	-

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01level
*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

attitudes against both a general maternity leave ($r = -.32$) and a paid maternity leave ($r = -.39$). were significant.

When it came to gender, H3 was not supported. Results actually showed the opposite than was expected, as men were more supportive of a federally mandated maternity leave than women. In terms of education and age, both H4 and H5 were not supported. However, there were some other interesting findings in the results. In regards to stay at home fathers, there were several significant correlations. Those with more positive attitudes towards stay at home fathers were more likely to be in favor of a government mandated maternity leave (both in general and paid), to have more egalitarian gender role ideology, to have more positive attitudes towards working mothers, to have a more liberal political ideology. These results all call for future research.

Sobel Tests

Additional post-hoc models were created and tested through the Sobel test. While not all models were significant, there were several that are significant. The first is the relationship between political affiliation and a federally mandated maternity leave in general. This relationship was mediated by gender role ideology. This relationship had a t-statistic of 1.996 ($p < .05$), making it significant at an alpha value of .05. Another model tested was with the relationship between political affiliation and a federally mandated paid maternity leave. This relationship was also mediated by gender role ideology, and had a t-statistic of 2.23 ($p < .05$). This model is also significant at the alpha value of .05. These two findings are important as they implicate the importance of both political affiliation and gender role ideology on maternity leave policy. Future research into these relationships could possibly help create a theory on the lack of maternity leave policy that focuses on political affiliation.

Another model that was tested and found to be significant was a relationship between attitudes towards stay at home fathers and a federally mandated paid maternity leave, which was mediated by gender role ideology. This model had a t-statistic of -2.15 ($p < .05$). Interestingly, the same model with the change from paid maternity leave to maternity leave in general was not found to be significant with a t-statistic of -1.48 ($p > .05$).

Conclusion

While the main model was not supported, this study did encounter some significant results. Not only was there support for hypotheses H1a and H2, but there were also several post hoc analysis of models that are significant at an alpha level of .05.. One of the findings of this study that is extremely interesting and calls for future research is the fact that the models with a paid federally mandated maternity leave were the models that were found to be significant at the alpha level of .05. The only model with the federally mandated maternity leave in general that was found to be significant was the model with political affiliation and gender role ideology. This also calls for future research to study why people are more supportive of a paid maternity leave than maternity leave in general.

Another area for future study is concerning the result of H3. While the author has not been able to find a similar result or explanation in past research, there are possible reasons for this result. One possible explanation is that women are more knowledgeable of the negative consequences of motherhood and maternity leave on work, such as the motherhood penalty and the negative perceptions of working mothers. It is not possible to create a complete explanation for this result currently, as it would require further research. Future research into this area could

explain these findings as well as possibly create an explanation for the lack of policy in the

United States.

There were some limitations to this study. Firstly, the study was relatively small at only

65 participants. If there were more participants than the study would be more reliable and valid.

Also, the participants were not very diverse in terms of race, marital status, household earner

structure, and job type.. While this does increase generalizability of the results to particular

groups, a more diverse sample could possibly change the results. Finally, while the Gender Role

Beliefs Scale is a validated scale, some of the items on the scale seemed to be outdated. Many

participants made comments about the scale items seeming ridiculous and out of date

considering the current year. It is possible that with a different measure of gender role ideology

the results would be affected in some way.

While the Gender Role-Perception Theory was not found to be totally supported by the

results, the results did show many possible directions for future research into the lack of

maternity leave policy in the United States. Furthermore, the results showed that many

perceptions of explanations for the lack of maternity leave are not supported (such as the effect

of gender on attitudes towards a federally mandated maternity leave). Possibly the most

important outcomes of this study were the future research possibilities, and the addition to the

literature on the lack of maternity leave in the United States. In order to find an adequate

explanation for this lack, it is important that the topic continues to be the center of research.

Appendix A

This survey is for a class, OMS 367. It is completely confidential and voluntary. Thank you so much for participating!

Section 1. Please select the response you most agree with.[1]

1. It is disrespectful to swear in the presence of a lady.*[2]

2. Mothers should stay at home with their children.

3. The initiative in courtship should usually come from the man.*

4. Working mothers are less ambitious than other employed women.[3]

5. Women should have as much sexual freedom as men.*

6. Working mothers are less committed to their family than stay at home mothers.[4]

7. Stay at home mothers have better parenting skills than working mothers.[5]

8. Women should be more concerned with their children than their work.[6]

9. Women with children should not work outside the home if they don't have to financially.*

10. The husband should be regarded as the legal representative of the family group in all matters of law.*

11. Mothers can be just as good of employees as anyone else. (R)[7]

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[1] Items were on a 5-point Likert Scale of strongly agree, agree, neither agree or disagree, disagree, and strongly disagree
[2] *Indicates that item comes from the shortened Gender Role Beliefs Scale (Brown & Gladstone, 2012)
[3] (Kemkes, 2008)
[4] (Kemkes, 2008)
[5] (Kemkes, 2008)
[6] (Mills, Culbertson, Huffman, & Connell, 2012)
[7] (R) indicated a reverse-keyed item

12. Except perhaps in very special circumstances, a man should never allow a woman to pay for the taxi, buy the tickets, or pay the check.*

13. It is just as acceptable for a father to stay at home as it is for a mother.[8] (R)

14. Stay at home mothers are warmer than working mothers.[9]

15. Working mothers are less focused on their children than stay at home mothers.[10]

16. Men should continue to show courtesies to women such as holding open the door or helping them on with their coats.*

17. Stay at home mothers are more competent mothers than working mothers.[11]

18. The ideal mother is a stay at home mother.[12]

19. Stay at home mothers are better caretakers than stay at home fathers.[13]

20. Working mothers care less about their jobs than working women without children.[14]

21. It is strange for a woman to drive a tractor trailer.*

22. It is strange for a man to sew clothes.*[15]

23. Women should be concerned with their duties of childbearing and housetending, rather than with the desires for professional and business careers.*

24. Mothers who take longer maternity leave are less committed to their job.

25. Swearing and obscenity is more repulsive in the speech of a woman than a man.*

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[8] Item used for comparison
[9] (Odenweller & Rittenour, 2017; Cuddy et al., 2004)
[10] (Odenweller & Rittenour, 2017)
[11] (Odenweller & Rittenour, 2017)
[12] (Odenweller & Rittenour, 2017)
[13] Item used for comparison
[14] (Cuddy et al., 2004)
[15] Items 21 and 22 were originally one item. Adapted into two items based on critique for being double barreled (Mills et al., 2012)

Section 2: Please select the response you most agree with.[16]

1. The United States should have a federally mandated maternity leave.

2. The United States should have a federally mandated PAID maternity leave.

Section 3: Demographics

What is your gender?   Male, Female, Other

What is your race?   White, Hispanic/Latino, Black/African American, Asian, Native

Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Bi-Racial, Multi-Racial, Other

What is your marital status?   Single, Married/Living with Significant Other,

Separated/Divorced, Widowed

What is your household earner structure?   Single-earner, Dual-earner, Other

Are you the main earner in your household?   Yes, No

What is your job type?   Full-time, Part-time, Unemployed

What is your age?   Under 18, 18-24, 25-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65+

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[16] These items related to attitudes towards maternity leave. They were measured on the same 5-point Likert Scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

What is your education level?   Some high school, High school degree, Some college,

Associates degree, Bachelor degree, Some graduate school, Graduate degree

Political Affiliation: Conservative, Somewhat conservative, Moderate, Somewhat liberal,

Liberal

What is your state of residence?

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