

## Research in Brief

# Mother Load: Parental-Status References in Canadian Business Magazines

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**ABSTRACT** This *Research in Brief* examines parental-status references in profile articles in top circulating Canadian business magazines from 2007 to 2011. The findings reveal significant quantitative and qualitative differences in parental-status references for women and men. In addition to the more frequent references to women's parental status, motherhood is portrayed less often as an asset and much more often as a potential conflict or challenge to one's career, than is fatherhood.

**KEYWORDS** Business media; Gender; Content analysis

**RÉSUMÉ** Cette « Recherche en bref » examine les références au statut parental dans les portraits d'hommes et de femmes d'affaires apparaissant dans des magazines économiques canadiens à grand tirage de 2007 à 2011. Les résultats révèlent des différences quantitatives et qualitatives importantes dans les références au statut parental des femmes par rapport à celles des hommes. En plus de mentionner plus fréquemment le statut parental des femmes, les articles dépeignent la maternité moins souvent comme un atout par rapport à la paternité et beaucoup plus souvent comme une embûche ou un défi pour une carrière.

**MOTS CLÉS** Médias économiques; Sexe; Analyse de contenu

### Introduction

In October 2005 at an industry event in Toronto, advertising executive Neil French was asked why there continues to be so few female creative directors of advertising agencies. French replied that women, after a few years in the industry, “wimp out” and “go off and suckle something” (Kingston, 2005). In a subsequent interview with *The Guardian* newspaper, French attempted to clarify his incendiary statements: “What I did say was to be a creative director requires 100 per cent commitment. People who have babies to look after can't do that” (Cadwalladr, 2005). The ensuing uproar led to French's resignation as creative director of WPP Group (Bosman, 2005).

While French's original statements were rightly lambasted as sexist, his comments published in *The Guardian* are resonant with those of feminist researchers such as

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Deirdre Johnston and Debra Swanson (2003), who have observed, “Mothers live the double bind of professional woman versus good mother” (p. 244). In the controversial cover story of the July 2012 issue of *The Atlantic*, titled “Why Women Still Can’t Have It All,” Anne-Marie Slaughter noted that “to value family over professional advancement, even for a time—is directly at odds with the prevailing social pressures on career professionals.” Earlier, advertising executive Nancy Vonk (2005), in her widely read and lauded online response to Neil French’s original remarks, titled “Female Like Me,” expressed her fear that French was articulating unspoken but widespread beliefs about women’s dubious commitment to her profession, and that such assumptions would have a discriminatory impact on women’s chances for appointment and promotion in the industry.

The quantitative data and qualitative examples presented in this research brief speak to the Canadian business media’s potential role as disseminator or challenger of the assumption that motherhood and career success are inherently at odds. Parental-status references in profile articles in top circulating Canadian business magazines from 2007 to 2011 are counted and examined here to see, first, whether the parental status of women is referenced more often than that of men, and secondly, whether notable differences exist in the characterization of the parenthood-career relationship in the references to motherhood and fatherhood.

## Review

The findings presented in this brief relate to two areas of research: the media’s portrayal of ambitious and successful women and the presentation of working mothers in magazines. *The Globe and Mail* columnist Elizabeth Renzetti (2012) relates her realization upon reading Slaughter’s *Atlantic* article:

Every time I’ve interviewed a powerful woman who has children, I’ve asked how she manages the juggling act, without once considering the inherent sexism of the question. ... While I’ve grilled all sorts of women on how they maintain the holy trinity of work, life and sanity, I don’t think I’ve ever asked a single male interview subject the same question.

Feminist media scholarship confirms that the coverage of female public figures differs from that of their male counterparts, with respect to references to the subject’s family life (Gill, 2007; Heldman, 2009; Montalbano-Phelps, 2005; Ross, 2010). While the coverage of businesswomen in the media has received significantly less critical attention than that of female politicians, research points to a similarly increased attention to women’s families (Koller, 2004; Krefting, 2002; Lee & James, 2007). Feminist media scholars have also examined how work and working are presented in women’s magazines, including as a potential conflict with traditional notions of motherhood. In their discussion of the maternal contradictions that they found in women’s magazines in the late 1990s, Johnston and Swanson (2003) noted the relative absence of working mothers, “who may be confident and successful, but the message is that there are not many mothers who can make this work” (p. 262).

In *Gendered Media: Women, Men, and Identity Politics*, Karen Ross (2010) quotes United Kingdom Member of Parliament Glenda Jackson, who noted a vast discrepancy

between the media's positive presentation of a woman who "clean[s] offices to keep her family together, to raise her children" and of one who "wants to run that office, [who] will be presented as an unnatural woman and even worse, as an unnatural mother" (p. 101). The seeming incompatibility of being both a "mother" and a "leader" that Jackson identified in the media, echoing Johnston and Swanson's "double bind" argument, is a specific instance of a more widespread gendered conception of good leadership aligning with stereotypically masculine-agentic traits, and *not* with the communal traits stereotypically associated with femininity and, even more strongly, with maternity (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Heilman, 2001; Schein, 1973).

### Methodology

According to the Print Measurement Bureau, the five English-language Canadian business magazines with the highest circulation are *Canadian Business*, *Financial Post Magazine*, *Profit*, *MoneySense*, and *Report on Business* (PMB, 2012). *Canadian Business*, *Financial Post Magazine*, and *Report on Business* are all general-interest business magazines. *Financial Post Magazine* estimates its readership at 945,000 ("Reader Profile," 2012). *Canadian Business* claims 856,000 readers ("Canadian Business Media Kit," 2012), and *Report on Business* 970,000 ("Media Kit," 2012). All three publications boast to potential advertisers about their access to MOPEs—managers, owners, professionals, and executives. *MoneySense*, a personal finance magazine, reaches 753,000 readers ("Overview," 2012). *Profit*, with a readership of 184,000, is aimed at entrepreneurs and small-business owners ("About Profit," 2012). *MoneySense*, *Profit*, and *Canadian Business* are all published by Rogers. *Financial Post Magazine* and *Report on Business* are newspaper inserts, distributed with *The Globe and Mail* and *The National Post*, respectively.

To locate profiles in these five publications from 2007 to 2011, first, the Canadian Business & Current Affairs (CBCA) Business Complete database was searched, using ProQuest. A profile was defined as an article whose subject(s) included one or more individuals. Next, ProQuest was used to "search within" the profiles for parental-status reference terms such as "mother," "father," "child/ren," et cetera. Finally, the parental-status references were coded into three broad categories, according to their characterization of the impact of parenthood on the subject's career, as either neutral, or an asset, or a conflict/limitation. This content analysis was undertaken to see whether the magazines promoted a gendered depiction of parenthood as a limiting factor or challenge to career success for women but not for men.

### Findings

#### *Parental-status references*

The search for profiles yielded 521 articles in four of the top five magazines: *Canadian Business*, *Financial Post Magazine*, *Profit*, and *Report on Business*. *MoneySense's* format of how-to stories on investing, real estate, retirement planning, and other topics related to managing personal finances did not include profile articles. Of the 521 individuals profiled, 392 were men (75%) and 129 women (25%). Women are under-represented as profiled subjects in the magazines studied here, in comparison with Statistics Canada (2012a) labour force data on management occupations (36.5% female) and professional occupations in business and finance (51.2% female). This inequitable cov-

erage of female subjects is consistent with other research into the coverage of women in Canadian business magazines (Grandy, 2011).

The 521 profile articles were next searched for parental-status references, using the following terms: mother, son, kid, father, daughter, parent, child/ren. Eliminating expressions such as “parent company” and “mother-lode” and numerous references to the profiled subjects’ own parents left 130 articles (25% of the 521 profiles) containing references to a subject’s parental status. Dividing all the profiles into male and female subjects revealed that 31.8% of the profiles of women (41 of 129) referenced the subject’s parental status, compared to 22.7% of the profiles of men (89 of 392). An unpaired *t*-test showed that the difference over the five years between the percentage of profiles in which a subject’s motherhood is referenced ( $M = 32.6$ ,  $SD = 9.1$ ) and the percentage that reference fatherhood ( $M = 22.1$ ,  $SD = 4.5$ ) is statistically significant ( $p < 0.05$ ).

### *Depiction of impact of parenthood on career*

#### QUANTITATIVE RESULTS

Neutral descriptions of parenthood—the basic facts about the subject’s number of offspring and marital status—appeared frequently in the profiles. For example, Jade Raymond, the studio director for Ubisoft, was described as “now settled in Toronto with her husband and eight-month-old daughter” (Timm, 2010). Chip Wilson, the founder of lululemon, was depicted as “the father of five boys, whose ages now range from two to 19, from two marriages” (Bouw, 2007). Such neutral descriptions accounted for 44.2% of the parental-status references in the profiles of women and 65.2% of those in the profiles of men.

Parenthood as an asset to success can be seen in the references to subjects whose children help run, expand, or will eventually take over a business. For example, we read in the profile of Andreas Apostolopoulos, real estate developer and Silverdome owner: “He was married by then, and later brought his three kids (Jim, Pete and Steve) into the business, telling them they had three career options. They could be doctors, lawyers, or work for him” (Castaldo, 2011). Comparably, in a piece on Cora Tsouflidou, the creator and owner of the Cora chain of restaurants, the writer noted, “As Cora’s grew, [son] Nicholas Tsouflidou took on an increasing role in managing operations” (Pachner, 2010). Fatherhood is depicted as an asset in 25.8% of the parental-status references for men, while motherhood is presented likewise in 7% of the parental-status references for women.

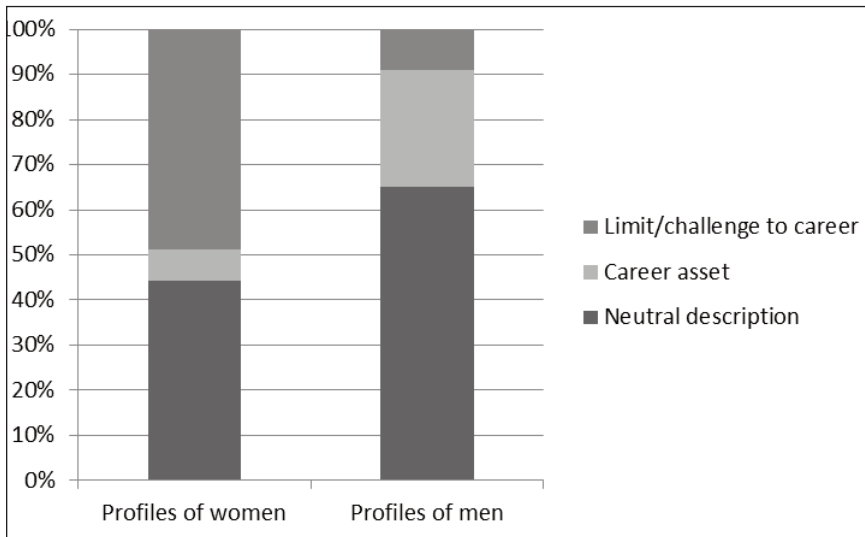
The most interesting—and quantitatively the biggest—difference between the characterization of motherhood and fatherhood in this sample was found in the references that present parenthood as limiting to or conflicting with one’s career. For instance, an article on former Air Canada CEO Robert Milton stated “he wanted out, wanted freedom from the grind of running a major public company so he could spend more time with his children” (DeCloet, 2009). Likewise, in her piece on Desjardins Group CEO Monique Leroux, Jacque McNish (2011) related:

In 2000, Leroux decided to leave the demanding Royal Bank job, which entailed constant travel between Toronto and Montreal, because “sometimes in your life you have to make decisions for your family.” The choice she made

with her husband, Marc, a telecommunications executive, was to adopt their first and only child.

As shown in Figure 1, while 48.8% of the parental-status references in the profiles of women depicted motherhood as conflicting with or challenging to one’s career, fatherhood was presented likewise in just 9% of the parental-status references in the male profiles.

**Figure 1: Parenthood-career impact in parental-status references in Canadian business magazines, 2007-2011**



*QUALITATIVE OBSERVATIONS*

Numerous references highlighted women’s efforts to balance working and mothering. For example, Saima Haleem “juggled raising a new born son while studying for medical exams” (Dias, 2009). MBA student Carole St. Laurent-Pelé “while working fulltime ... managed to get a bachelor of education degree and raise her two children” (Milne & Dindar, 2008). The president of the Women’s Tennis Association Tour, Stacey Allaster, “admits travelling for one-third of the year and raising two young adopted children, who are four- and six-years-old, is a tough balancing act” (Prashad, 2009a). A tone of awe came through in this description of Linamar CEO Linda Hasenfrazt:

Within two years, she was running two additional facilities, including Vehcom; finishing up her MBA; renovating a home with her contractor husband, Ed Newton; and getting ready to welcome their second child. They now have four: Katie is 14; Emily is 12; Tommy, 11; and Olivia, 9. One has to ask: How did she do it? (Calleja, 2010, p. 44)

However, journalists writing for these magazines did not, apparently, “have to ask” the same question of successful male executives with large families.

Because business magazines tell success stories, the career decisions necessitated by motherhood were sometimes presented as the impetus for the subjects' success. Anita Roddick, founder of The Body Shop, "wanted a 9-to-5 job that would give her time to care for their two children, so she opened a store" (Spence, 2007). Cora Tsouflidou was described as a "40-year-old mother of three, deserted by her husband, [who] goes into the restaurant business to survive and sees it take off beyond her wildest dreams" (Pachner, 2010). We read that "the original mompreneur," Sandra Wilson, "launched Robeez Footwear Ltd. in the basement of her Burnaby, B.C., home with her 18-month-old son at her feet" (McElgunn & Shiffman, 2009). There were no comparable examples of parental compromise leading to business success in the male profiles.

The work-family compromises made by men were, however, generally presented in positive language. For example, David Pett (2009) wrote of economist and strategist David Rosenberg, "His time in New York had been rewarding, but his desire to return to Toronto, where his wife and children lived (Rosenberg commuted on weekends), was a stronger pull." Hedge fund manager Brian Hunter, we read, took a job that "let him move to Western Canada, where he wanted to raise his kids" (Watson, 2008). Another executive, Peter Barnes, was described as "no workaholic," on the evidence of his taking long vacations with his wife and children (Prashad, 2009b).

In two of the articles about men, however, career was presented as taking precedence over family time—a choice which none of the women subjects was shown as making. Stewart Sinclair (2008) profiled chief investment officer Rohit Sehgal:

Professionally, he was a success. But as work consumed more and more of his time, his personal life suffered. ... And while he is close with his three children, who are in their 30s, he concedes that he was often an absent figure in their childhoods. "I don't even remember how my kids have grown," he says. "I've seen the pictures."

In *Report on Business* magazine's March 2011 issue, Dave Ebner described a poignant scene between pulp and paper executive Chad Wasilenkoff and his four-year-old son:

It's early Sunday evening, his dad has been away for a week and Titan wants to play. Wasilenkoff apologizes—he's busy, working. The young father worries he hasn't taught Titan how to make a paper airplane. They haven't tossed around a baseball. "I really feel I'm missing out." But Wasilenkoff's addicted to ramping up his company. He can't say no—and the game is finally really on.

The rarity of a man making the opposite choice, like Robert Milton cited above, was foregrounded at the start of an article on the resignation of WestJet CEO Sean Durfy: "Sean Durfy says he quit as head of WestJet to spend time with his family. For real" (McCullough, 2010). The writer, Michael McCullough, went on to explain, "When a CEO quits his job for 'personal reasons,' it is usually dismissed as code for an ouster;" but not so, seemingly, when a CEO quits *her* job.

## Conclusions

This examination of Canadian business-magazine profiles reveals significant quantitative and qualitative differences in parental-status references for women and men.

In addition to the more frequent references to women's parental status, motherhood is portrayed less often as an asset and much more often as a potential conflict or challenge to one's career, than is fatherhood. Is it fair to critique the business press for this difference? Are the magazines thus passing on to the powerful readership they address—the MOPEs who make hiring, promotion, and board appointment decisions—Neil French's message that women are distracted by parenthood in a way that men are not, and therefore cannot be expected to attain the same career success? Or should the magazines be praised for acknowledging this extra challenge that women in business must deal with? One might argue that the problem is not really with the media, but with the gendered reality in which we live: where for women, parenthood can still conflict with one's career, in a way (or to a degree) that it does not seem to for men.

In her provocative 1989 *Harvard Business Review* article "Management Women and the New Facts of Life," the piece that launched the "Mommy Track" debate, Felice Schwartz called for changes to traditional corporate management tracks to accommodate those whom she described as "career-and-family" women, for the mutual benefit of both talented female employees and the companies that employ them. However, data on women in the workforce suggests those changes have not been widely made. A 2010 report from TD Economics, titled *Career Interrupted: The Economic Impact of Motherhood*, attributes half of the persistent 20% wage discrepancy between men's and women's earnings in Canada to a "motherhood gap," which increases with each child (Caranci & Gauthier, p. 1).

The decision to stay home with children, according to the Canadian Labour Congress (2008), continues to be a frequently cited reason for women's departure from the workforce (see also Hewlett & Luce, 2005). Furthermore, nearly 34.4% of Canadian women age 25 to 44 who work part-time cite caring for their children as the reason for their limited employment, compared to just 3.6% of part-time male workers in that age group (Statistics Canada, 2012b). Motherhood is thus one of the "holes" in what Douglas Branson (2007) described as the "leaky" pipeline (p. 39) between post-graduate education in business, law, and other professions, where women are equal or dominant in numbers, and the executive suite, where women continue to be scarce, holding just 6.1% of Financial Post 500 CEO positions in Canada, for example (Catalyst, 2012).

What role can the popular business media play in helping to create a corporate culture in which motherhood is not seen as a conflict with one's career, and thus another obstacle to women's executive advancement? The answer is not to decrease motherhood references in profile articles or to elide the challenges that come with parenthood. Melissa Stanton (2012), another journalist responding to Slaughter's "Why Women Still Can't Have It All" article, suggests instead: "The solution isn't to ignore the parenting part of a woman's life and treat her more like a man. It's exactly the opposite: discuss the parental logistics required of both women *and* men." Business magazines like those discussed here could draw attention to and promote discussion of not just "career-and-family" women, but "career-and-family" parents, and thus challenge the gendered stereotypes that continue to hamper *both* sexes, at home and at work.



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