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## Article

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# The Effects of Briefly De-Prioritizing Work or Childcare on Peruvian Workers: An Experimental and Gender-Based Approach

Rosa María Fuchs  and Renato Lopez-Jurado 

## ABSTRACT

Currently, both men and women face the challenge of balancing their work and childcare responsibilities, which is not always straightforward. When individuals experience tensions between their work and family life, they are likely to prioritize one over the other, often facing penalties for failing to fulfill a specific role. Thus, the present study aims to examine how people evaluate workers who briefly de-prioritize work or childcare. To achieve this, two experiments were conducted using factorial vignettes. The first experiment examined how briefly de-prioritizing childcare affects an individual's perception in the family domain, considering their gender. The second explored the opposite effect: how briefly de-prioritizing work influences the evaluation of the worker in the workplace, also incorporating gender as a variable. Study 1 had 262 participants and study 2 had 251. Participants were Business students in a private university. To test the hypotheses, each dependent variable was analyzed using a multiple independent group mean comparison. The results showed that even a slight de-prioritization of a role can trigger a perceptible reaction. In the family domain, a positive effect was observed for men when they prioritized their family. Each of the studies showed interesting results for implementing strategies that help workers harmonize their work and life without being penalized when briefly prioritizing one of them.

**KEY WORDS:** role prioritization, gender, work-life, vignette study.

**JEL Classification:** C90, J16, J22, J71.

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## 1. Introduction

Despite progress in the perception of women's role in the professional sphere—Peru being one of the Latin American countries with the weakest adherence to traditional beliefs on this matter (The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2022)—inequalities in daily life remain a reality. In the Peruvian context, women continue to bear a greater share of domestic responsibilities than men, whereas men devote more time to paid work (Freyre & López, 2011). This gap is also reflected in

labor force participation: whereas 92.4% of fathers are employed or seeking employment (Ministerio de Trabajo y Promoción del Empleo, 2023), this figure drops to 67.9% for mothers (Cubbin, 2024).

From the perspective of Social Role Theory (SRT), this distribution of responsibilities reinforces expectations about the roles and characteristics attributed to each gender, often without considering individuals' unique circumstances (Eagly & Wood, 2016). Presently, both men and women grapple with the challenge of managing work and childcare duties, a balance that can be difficult to achieve. Some new

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parents experience high levels of stress as they attempt to fulfill their parental responsibilities without compromising their performance in the workplace (Lévesque et al., 2020).

Balancing these domains often leads to role conflict (Heckman & Galletta, 1988), where the demands of work and family come into tension. Individuals facing such tensions may prioritize one role over the other, sometimes facing negative consequences for failing to meet expectations in a given domain (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). For instance, Steiner et al. (2022) demonstrated that those who experience work-family conflict are evaluated more negatively in the workplace but perceived as better parents. Similarly, women taking maternity leave may face negative workplace evaluations, whereas those who do not take leave may be judged negatively in the family domain (Morgenroth & Heilman, 2017).

Although previous research has analyzed the de-prioritization of roles from a long-term perspective, focusing on aspects such as maternity or paternity leave and sustained work-family conflicts, less attention has been given to the brief de-prioritization of roles—that is, everyday decisions in which temporary priority is given to one domain over another (Sanzari et al., 2021), such as leaving work to attend a child's school emergency, and its moderator variables.

Moreover, in recent years, academic interest in the paternal role in childcare has grown, with research exploring, for example, the adoption of paternity leave (Pizarro & Gartzia, 2024). However, it remains unclear to what extent gender continues to shape the perception of these decisions. Despite a decline in gender stereotypes and more equitable evaluation of competence between men and women, questions remain regarding their impact on how work-family balance is assessed (Eagly et al., 2020).

Therefore, the present study aims to examine how people evaluate workers who briefly de-prioritize work or childcare. To achieve this, two experiments are conducted using factorial vignettes, following the design proposed by Sanzari et al. (2021) but extending it to a developing-country context and incorporating additional dependent and moderating variables to capture more nuanced perceptions of temporary role de-prioritization. The first experi-

ment examines how briefly de-prioritizing childcare affects an individual's perception in the family domain, considering their gender. The second explores the opposite effect: how briefly de-prioritizing work influences the evaluation of the worker in the workplace, also incorporating gender as a variable. Additionally, as a novel contribution, this study examines the role of work motivation and the presence of a partner as factors that may influence the perception of decisions to prioritize one role over the other, responding to the call to provide additional information on why the target might need to de-prioritize certain responsibilities, which could serve as a protective mechanism.

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it provides empirical evidence on the brief de-prioritization of roles, an underexplored aspect, thus extending the findings of Sanzari et al. (2021) and going beyond studies that focus on long-term de-prioritization. Second, it extends the role prioritization model and SRT to the context of a developing country. Third, it incorporates variables that may influence the interaction between an individual's gender and their decision to de-prioritize a role, such as work motivation and the presence of a partner, factors that have not yet been widely considered in research on this phenomenon.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1. De-Prioritizing the Childcare Role

According to Convention C156 (1981), a worker has family responsibilities when they provide care and support to dependents within their family, such as young children. In this parental role, parents play a key function in facilitating their children's socialization process, which enables them to adapt to the demands they will face in different contexts and throughout adulthood (Maccoby, 2000).

Thus, to understand children's development, it is essential to consider the family system in which they live, where parents play a central role (Cox & Paley, 2003). A study conducted in 37 countries found that ideal parents are generally expected to be responsible, child- and family-oriented, affectionate, caring, and present (Lin et al., 2023). This parental involvement has positive consequences for children, both

physically (e.g., Alderman et al., 2010) and cognitively (e.g., Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

Although there has been progress in gender equality in recent years, fathers are still expected to be the primary financial providers, while also acting as guides, educators, caregivers, protectors, and disciplinarians for their children (Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2019). In other words, there is an expectation for greater involvement of fathers in childcare (Gatrell et al., 2021). By contrast, mothers are primarily associated with the caregiving role, and to a lesser extent, with the role of providers (Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2019). This is why, traditionally, men have faced harsher penalties for neglecting their work role than their family role (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985).

External reactions to the de-prioritization of the childcare role vary depending on the context. In the professional sphere, women who indicated that someone else could assume their parental role while they focused on their career faced reduced penalties during recruitment processes (Bedi et al., 2022). Similarly, those who presented themselves as work-devoted and emphasized the priority of the work role had higher chances of being hired and accessing more resources than those who portrayed themselves as primarily committed to family (Aranda & Glick, 2014).

By contrast, in the family domain, individuals who experienced family-work conflict were perceived as better parents, more reliable, and warmer than those who faced the opposite conflict, that is, prioritizing work over family (Steiner et al., 2022). In this regard, an increase in work demands had a negative impact on the perception of parental functioning (Snir, 2019). In the case of men, fathers who took moderate paternity leave were evaluated as warmer and better parents (Petts et al., 2022).

## 2.2. De-Prioritizing the Work Role

Over the years, organizations have valued workers who prioritize their work over other areas of their lives (Coron & Garbe, 2023). This type of worker is framed within the “ideal worker norm,” according to which employees are expected to always be available for their employers, often at the expense of caregiving responsibilities (Balan et al., 2022). This expectation may have been exacerbated, as workers now face a

paradox: Although technology allows for greater flexibility, it also makes them more available when the company needs them, making the work-family boundary more permeable (Worley & Gutierrez, 2020).

The “ideal worker norm” was constructed based on the characteristics of traditional families, where men worked while women stayed at home to care for the household (Steele, 2019). In other words, the characterization of the “ideal worker” had a strong masculine component associated with the role of the household provider (Lott & Klenner, 2018). However, recently there has been a reconfiguration of the “ideal worker” image, in which employees strive to manage their work demands while considering their family responsibilities (Balan et al., 2022). Still, the way workers integrate their work and non-work roles, as well as their decision to use organizational benefits that offer greater flexibility, depends on the social norms within the organization (Lott & Klenner, 2018).

Empirical evidence shows that the de-prioritization of the work role has consequences for both men and women. For example, women who take maternity leave are perceived as less competent and less deserving of rewards than those who remain in their jobs (Morgenroth & Heilman, 2017). Similarly, women with children are rejected more quickly and receive fewer callbacks in recruitment processes (Cheung et al., 2022).

However, at the professional level, men are more penalized than women when adhering to organizational initiatives that promote work-family balance (Beham et al., 2020; Gartzia et al., 2018). Being a father does not influence the deservingness of organizational rewards unless fathers choose to take paternity leave (Albiston & Correll, 2023). Additionally, men who take family leave are perceived as more feminine, weaker, and less agentic, which tends to predict a higher risk of facing organizational penalties (Rudman & Mescher, 2013).

## 3. Theoretical Framework

### 3.1. Social Role Theory

According to SRT, people make inferences about the attributes of men and women based on gender

roles (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Gender roles are defined as shared expectations regarding the behaviors associated with being a man or a woman (Atkinson et al., 2023). Such beliefs stem from the unequal distribution of labor in society, that is, from the differentiated allocation of domestic and occupational responsibilities typically assumed by men and women (Eagly & Steffen, 1984).

Thus, traditional role theories have described that men are associated with work-related activities and resource provision, whereas women are linked to family caregiving (Parsons & Bales, 1955). In this sense, people perceive that men and women primarily engage in different social spheres and, therefore, attribute different traits to each gender as if they were innate personality tendencies (Eagly & Wood, 2016). These differentiated perceptions manifest in distinct gender stereotypes.

Gender stereotypes describe how people behave and dictate how they should and should not behave (Rudman et al., 2012). Their content varies across two fundamental dimensions: agency and communion. Agentic characteristics are associated with goal achievement, whereas communal characteristics are linked to the establishment and maintenance of interpersonal relationships (Abele et al., 2016). Men are expected to be agentic, and women are expected to be communal (Benard & Correll, 2010).

Importantly, these evaluations are influenced more by social role expectations than by gender per se (Fuegen et al., 2004). When individuals act according to what is expected of them, they are socially reinforced (Eagly & Wood, 2016). However, when they deviate from social norms, they may face social penalties (Pet-tigrew & Duncan, 2020).

### 3.2. Role Prioritization Theory

SRT has been formulated according to dichotomies: A person is either agentic or communal, and dedicated to the home or to work. However, current statistics show that both men and women divide their time between work and domestic responsibilities (e.g., Freyre & López, 2011). In other words, they are involved in both roles, which means they are constantly violating the roles that are expected of them.

In this sense, complementing SRT, the role prioritization model proposes that if a man or woman meets

the social expectations for their gender, they have the freedom to engage in counter-stereotypical behaviors (Haines & Stroessner, 2019). In other words, the benefits and penalties depend on the satisfaction or de-prioritization of prescriptive roles (Sanzari et al., 2021). For example, a father who cares for his child on a workday faces penalties when no additional information is provided about his involvement with his job (Neuenswander et al., 2023).

## 4. Study 1

### 4.1. Hypotheses

Study 1 aims to analyze the consequences of momentarily de-prioritizing the family role in favor of the work role on the evaluation of workers' family status (commitment, competence, closeness, and custody). Additionally, it assesses whether gender and work motivations moderate this effect. The role of parents is acknowledged to be a crucial factor for the optimal development of children (Collins et al., 2000). Hence, many couples aspire to engage in shared parenting (Ranta et al., 2022).

In this regard, previous research has found that when individuals de-prioritize the family role, both fathers and mothers are perceived as less competent, likable, and dedicated to their families (Sanzari et al., 2021). Therefore, seeking to replicate these findings, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1a: Workers, regardless of gender, are penalized in their family status when they temporarily de-prioritize their family role in favor of their work role.

These penalties may differ depending on the parent's gender. For example, when people are aware that mothers have a job, they evaluate them less favorably in their maternal role compared to when they do not know whether they work. By contrast, for fathers, information about their employment does not lead to differences in their evaluation (Okimoto & Heilman, 2012). Consequently, some women may choose to conceal information about their family responsibilities to avoid negative consequences at work, whereas men do not share the same concern (Luhr, 2020).

According to SRT, the role of women is associated with family caregiving (Parsons & Bales, 1955). In fact, women experience greater guilt than men when facing work-family conflict (Aarntzen et al., 2023). In

this sense, de-prioritizing the family role may be more detrimental for women than men in maintaining their status as parents. Therefore, it is expected that working mothers receive greater penalties than their colleagues when they momentarily de-prioritize their family responsibilities.

H1b: Working women receive greater penalties to their family status than their male counterparts when they temporarily de-prioritize their family role in favor of their work role, compared to women who prioritize their family role.

According to the role prioritization model, the underlying inferential processes must be considered in the evaluation of others' behaviors (Haines & Stroessner, 2019). Penalties only occur when there is a de-prioritization of the traditional role (Sanzari et al., 2021). However, attributing the de-prioritization of the role to external factors may help reduce the gap between perceived characteristics of workers and what it means to be a good parent (Okimoto & Heilman, 2012).

Mothers are more penalized when they are directly attributed responsibility for suboptimal performance in a parenting task, compared to situations where the cause is external. In the case of fathers, this distinction does not create differences in the perception of their role (Villicana et al., 2015). Similarly, a study found that mothers who work by personal choice face greater penalties in their maternal role than those who do so out of economic necessity; however, in that study, fathers were not evaluated (Okimoto & Heilman, 2012), nor were the effects of momentarily de-prioritizing the parental role considered. Based on this evidence, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H2: Working women receive fewer penalties to their family status when they temporarily de-prioritize their family role in favor of their work role if they work out of economic necessity rather than professional development.

## 5. Methodology

### 5.1. Participants

The participants were selected from a group of classrooms belonging to the courses of the Faculty of Business Sciences at a private university in Metropolitan Lima. We chose to focus on business students because we sought the opinions of members

of society about workers, and business students are familiar with organizational practices. From this group, 20 classrooms were randomly selected for Study 1, which initially aimed to recruit 128 participants. However, in order to account for attrition, data collection was extended to a total of 428 participants.

After data collection, 159 individuals were discarded for failing the manipulation check questions or not answering items related to the central variables of the study. This left a preliminary sample of 269 participants. Subsequently, 3 participants were excluded for not meeting the criterion of being university students. Additionally, 4 more participants were removed after conducting a Mahalanobis distance analysis, which identified multivariate outliers based on the main variables. Consequently, the final sample consisted of 262 participants.

Of the participants, 58.8% were women. The majority of them were undergraduate students of Business Administration (33.6%), Economics (22.1%), and Business Engineering (15.6%). The average age was 20.34 years ( $SD = 1.97$ ), with an age range from 18 to 30 years. Additionally, 74.4% reported not being employed.

### 5.2. Materials

#### 5.2.1. Experimental Vignettes

For this study, experimental vignettes were designed and validated (based on Sanzari et al., 2021) by experts in the field. The validation process focused on several criteria, including realism, typicality in terms of workers' daily life, distinguishability across manipulations, memorability, brevity, and the inclusion of all potential factors that could affect participants' responses. The vignettes were identical in structure but differed in three key aspects: the target's gender, the decision made, and the motivation for working. These vignettes presented the scenario of a young and pleasant worker employed in the commercial department of a textile company in Lima, known for its positive work environment and fast-paced setting. The target lived with their partner, with whom they had purchased an apartment and shared the care of their three-year-old child. In a particular week, on the day they were usually

responsible for childcare, an important meeting related to a project arose. Given this situation, the target sought help from a family member to care for the child as their partner could not take on that responsibility, and they had to make a decision.

#### 5.2.2. Manipulation of the Target's Gender

The target's gender in the vignettes was manipulated through the use of different names. In conditions where the worker was male, the name "Enrique" was used, whereas in conditions where the worker was female, the name "Delia" was used.

#### 5.2.3. Manipulation of the Target's Decision

In the condition of family role de-prioritization, the vignette stated that the target "decides to leave their child with a family member during the afternoon of the following day." Conversely, in the family role prioritization condition, the target stays with their child.

#### 5.2.4. Manipulation of the Target's Motivation for Working

The target's motivation for working was manipulated through two specific conditions. In the first condition focused on economic necessity, the vignette indicated that the target "remains in this job mainly because their financial situation requires it. Their job is necessary to financially support their family." In the second condition centered on professional development, the vignette stated that this was their primary motivation, clarifying that the job was not necessary for the family's financial support.

#### 5.2.5. Family Competence

Parental competence was assessed using four items from Sanzari et al. (2021), designed to measure how effective or competent the targets were perceived in their family role. An example item was: "To what extent do you consider [Delia/Enrique] a competent [mother/father]?" Responses were collected using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (very little) to 7 (very much), where higher scores indicated a greater perception of family competence ( $\alpha = .82$ ).

#### 5.2.6. Family Commitment

Family commitment was measured using three items from Morgenthroth and Heilman (2017), de-

signed to assess how committed the targets were perceived to be in their family role. An example item was: "[Delia/Enrique] is committed to their family." Responses were collected using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), where higher scores indicated a greater perception of family commitment ( $\alpha = .73$ ).

#### 5.2.7. Child Custody

Participants were asked to imagine a scenario in which the target was about to divorce their partner and, as a judge, decide how many days per week the target should spend with their child. This question was adapted from a similar formulation used by Villicana et al. (2015). Responses ranged from 0 to 7 days, where a score of 0 indicated that custody would be fully assigned to the target's partner, whereas a score of 7 suggested that the participant would grant full custody to the target.

#### 5.2.8. Social Closeness

Social closeness was assessed using a four-item questionnaire from Okimoto and Heilman (2012), which aimed to measure the extent to which participants wished to interact with the target. An example item was: "Would you like [Delia/Enrique] to be your neighbor?" Responses were collected using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (not at all) to 7 (very much), where higher scores indicated a more positive attitude toward proximity with the evaluated target ( $\alpha = .83$ ).

### 5.3. Procedure

The research assistant visited the assigned classrooms and invited students to voluntarily participate in a study on first impressions. Participants scanned a QR code using their own devices, and those who provided informed consent proceeded to complete a survey distributed via Qualtrics XM. They were then randomly assigned to one of the experimental vignettes, which they read carefully before completing the corresponding scales.

The items in each scale were presented in random order to minimize potential biases. After responding to the scales, participants provided demographic information. At the end of the study, a debriefing was conducted, during which the true purpose of

the study was explained, and it was clarified that the case presented in the vignettes was entirely fictional. It is important to note that the research assistant remained in each classroom for 15 minutes while participants completed the survey.

## 6. Results

To test the hypotheses, each dependent variable was analyzed using a multiple independent group mean comparison with a 2 (target gender: man or woman)  $\times$  2 (decision made: de-prioritize family, prioritize family)  $\times$  2 (motivation to work: necessity or development) design. Data analysis was conducted using R Studio 4.4.1 (R Core Team, 2024). The means and standard deviations are presented in Table 1.

### 6.1. Family Competence

In line with H1a, it was found that parents' decision to leave or not leave their children to attend a work-related matter had a marginally significant effect on perceived family competence,  $F(1, 254) = 3.31, p = .07$ . Specifically, parents, regardless of gender, who momentarily de-prioritized their family were perceived as less competent than those who chose to stay.

In contrast to H1b, although the interaction between the target's gender and the decision made was marginally significant,  $F(1, 254) = 3.52, p = .06$ ,

no gender penalty was observed. However, a bonus was identified for Enrique, who was perceived as marginally more competent in the family role when he prioritized his family than when he left them ( $p = .05$ ).

Regarding H2, the interaction between the target's gender, the decision made, and the motivation for working did not show a significant effect ( $p = .12$ ).

Finally, an exploratory analysis found that motivation for working did have a significant influence on perceived family competence,  $F(1, 254) = 5.79, p = .02$ . Specifically, fathers and mothers who worked for professional development were perceived as more competent in their family role than those whose primary motivation was economic necessity.

### 6.2. Family Commitment

It was found that the decision of parents to leave or not leave their children to attend a work-related matter had a significant effect on attributed family commitment,  $F(1, 254) = 19.15, p < .01$ . Specifically, parents, regardless of gender, who temporarily de-prioritized their family role were perceived as less committed to their families than those who decided to stay. In contrast to H1b, although the interaction between the target's gender and the decision made was significant,  $F(1, 254) = 7.57, p < .01$ , no gender

**Table 1**  
Dependent Variables by Target Gender and Decision Made

Variables	De-prioritize work				Prioritize work			
	Delia		Enrique		Delia		Enrique	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Competence	5.52	0.82	5.29	0.86	5.46	1.03	5.65	0.78
Commitment	5.65	0.90	5.34	1.12	5.65	1.71	6.21	0.80
Custody	4.10	0.86	3.37	0.95	4.00	0.98	3.59	0.88
Closeness	5.07	1.02	5.03	1.10	4.87	1.00	4.95	0.95
Closeness	4.82	1.05	4.76	0.97	4.82	1.13	4.44	1.30

penalty was observed for women who de-prioritized their family role. However, a bonus was identified for Enrique, who was perceived as more committed to his family than women who either prioritized ( $p = .02$ ) or de-prioritized their family role ( $p < .01$ ), as well as in relation to men who de-prioritized their family role ( $p < .01$ ).

Regarding H2, the interaction between the target's gender, the decision made, and the motivation to work showed a significant effect,  $F(1, 254) = 4.29, p = .04$ . Specifically, it was found that Enrique, when working for professional development and prioritizing his family role, was perceived as more committed than Delia when she de-prioritized her family role, regardless of her motivation to work ( $p < .01$  for professional development and  $p = .02$  for economic necessity). Additionally, Enrique was also seen as more committed than Delia when she prioritized her family role and worked for professional development ( $p < .01$ ), as well as compared to himself when he chose to de-prioritize his family role, regardless of his work motivation ( $p < .01$  for professional development and  $p < .01$  for economic necessity).

### 6.3. Child Custody

In contrast to the formulated hypotheses, no direct or interaction effects were found for the variables of interest regarding the number of custody days assigned by participants to the vignette characters. This absence of effects is evidenced by all p-values being greater than .05. However, a significant effect of the target's gender on child custody allocation was found,  $F(1, 254) = 37.14, p < .01$ , indicating that participants assigned more custody days to Delia than to Enrique in a potential divorce scenario.

### 6.4. Social Closeness

In contrast to the formulated hypotheses, no direct or interaction effects were found regarding the perceived social closeness of participants toward the vignette characters. This absence of effects is reflected in the fact that all p-values were greater than .05.

## 7. Study 2

### 7.1. Hypotheses

Study 2 aims to analyze the consequences of temporarily de-prioritizing the work role over the family role

on the evaluation of workers' job status (competence, commitment, deservingness of rewards, deservingness of penalties, and social closeness). Likewise, it is examined whether the target's gender and having a partner influence these perceptions.

An ideal worker is one who prioritizes their work roles over their family responsibilities (Steele, 2019). This creates a role conflict, due to the opposing pressures of satisfactory participation in each role (Greenhaus & Beutell, 1985). Thus, a worker who goes against the norms or expectations of what it means to be an ideal worker is exposed to penalties (Lee, 2023).

Previous studies have found that those who temporarily de-prioritize their work role over their family role receive fewer growth and promotion opportunities and face more negative perceptions regarding their competence (Sanzari et al., 2021). In this regard, individuals who experience family-to-work conflict, as opposed to work-to-family conflict, are perceived with lower agency, lower performance, and are given fewer rewards and promotion opportunities (Steiner et al., 2022). Therefore, those who de-prioritize their work role are expected to face negative consequences regarding their status as workers.

H3a: Workers, regardless of gender, are penalized in their job status when they temporarily de-prioritize their work role over their family role.

Characteristics associated with the ideal worker have been linked to traditional masculinity (Lott & Klenner, 2018). According to SRT, these traditional conceptions correspond to fathers in their role as providers (Parsons & Bales, 1955). Therefore, when men behave incongruently with societal expectations, they face sanctions (Moss-Racusin, 2014). Given that the provider role is central to their identity, they are more likely to experience negative consequences when it is de-prioritized.

In this regard, research has shown that men who choose to work part-time face more workplace penalties than women in the same situation (Beham et al., 2020). Furthermore, when a male worker is seen caring for their child during a workday, they are perceived as less competent than when they are seen in the same situation over the weekend (Neuenschwander et al., 2023). Consequently, the following is proposed:

H3b: Male workers receive more penalties in their occupational status than their female counterparts

when they temporarily de-prioritize their work role in favor of their family role, than men who prioritize their work role.

The role prioritization model suggests that evaluative judgments regarding a worker's decision to de-prioritize a particular role depend on the reasons underlying that choice (Sanzari et al., 2021). In many societies, the family role is still more strongly associated with women, whereas men are primarily linked to the provider role (Villicana et al., 2015). These assumptions are particularly relevant for workers in a partnership, where a relational division of labor is expected. By contrast, single parents are generally perceived as having lower agency and communion than married parents (Daley et al., 2025).

Consequently, married fathers are often seen as more committed to their work than single fathers and more motivated than married mothers (Steffens et al., 2019). Therefore, when a man in a partnership temporarily prioritizes caregiving over professional responsibilities, he may face greater penalties, as it could be assumed that he is neglecting work unnecessarily, as his partner could assume the family role. By contrast, women's work commitment is less affected by marital status, because their role remains more strongly tied to domestic responsibilities.

H4: Male workers receive more penalties when they temporarily de-prioritize their work role in favor of their family role if it is explicitly mentioned that they have a partner, than those men who are not in a relationship and their female counterparts in both conditions (with or without a partner). In the case of women, knowledge of their marital status does not affect the penalties they receive.

## 8. Methodology

### 8.1. Participants

Participants were selected from a group of classrooms belonging to the courses at the Faculty of Business Sciences at a private university in Metropolitan Lima. Participants were students for the same reason as in Study 1. From this group, 17 classrooms were randomly selected to carry out Study 2, which initially aimed to include 128 participants. However, to account for potential attrition,

data collection was expanded to of 383 participants.

After the data collection process, 126 individuals were excluded for failing to pass the manipulation check questions or not responding to items related to the study's central variables, resulting in a preliminary sample of 257 participants. Subsequently, 1 participant was removed because of an extremely low standard deviation in the main variables, suggesting homogeneous responses regardless of the question content. Additionally, five participants were excluded following a Mahalanobis distance analysis, which identified multivariate outliers based on the main variables. Consequently, the final sample consisted of 251 participants.

Of the participants, 62% were women. The majority were undergraduate students majoring in Business Administration (37.5%), Economics (18.3%), Marketing (13.9%), and International Business (13.5%). The average age was 20.44 years ( $SD = 1.76$ ), ranging between 18 and 26 years. Additionally, 65.7% reported not being employed.

### 8.2. Materials

#### 8.2.1. Experimental Vignettes

For this study, experimental vignettes were designed and validated (based on Sanzari et al., 2021) by experts in the field. The validation process focused on the same criteria as Study 1. The vignettes were identical in structure but differed in three key aspects: the target's gender, the decision made, and the presence of a partner. Each vignette narrated the story of a young worker, perceived as likable, working in the commercial area of a textile company in Lima, characterized by a good work environment and a high workload. The protagonist had been in a role of interest within the company for eight months when, during a particular week, he/she faced a challenging situation: the need to leave work earlier than usual to care for his/her three-year-old child, as the daycare was closed owing to fumigation. Given this circumstance, the protagonist sought the support of a colleague, who, because of their own workload, could not relieve him/her. Consequently, the protagonist informed his/her boss of the situation that would occur the following day.

### 8.2.2. Gender Manipulation of the Target

The target's gender in the vignettes was manipulated by using different names. In conditions where the worker being evaluated was male, the name "Enrique" was used, whereas in conditions where the worker was female, the name "Delia" was employed.

### 8.2.3. Manipulation of the Decision Made by the Target

In conditions where the work role was de-prioritized, the vignette indicated that the target "leaves the office at lunchtime." By contrast, in conditions where the work role was prioritized, the target stays at the workplace.

### 8.2.4. Manipulation of the Presence of a Partner

If the target had a partner, it was specified that "the target is known to have a three-year-old child and lives with the father/mother of the child." In the second condition, it was stated that the target lives only with the child.

### 8.2.5. Job Competence

Job competence was assessed using six items from Sanzari et al. (2021), designed to measure how effective or competent the targets were perceived in their work role. An example item is: "Delia/Enrique seems competent." Responses were collected using a Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), with higher scores reflecting a greater perception of workplace competence ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

### 8.2.6. Job Commitment

Workplace commitment was assessed using three items from Morgenroth and Heilman (2017), designed to measure the degree to which participants perceive the targets as committed to their work role. An example item is: "(Delia/Enrique) is committed to their job." Furthermore, following the suggestion of one of the reviewers who examined the questionnaires, an additional item was included to assess commitment to the organization. Responses were recorded on a Likert scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree), with higher scores indicating greater perceived workplace commitment ( $\alpha = .84$ ).

### 8.2.7. Deservedness of Rewards

Deservedness of rewards was assessed using seven items adapted from Sanzari et al. (2021) and Allen and Rusch (1998), which measure the extent to which participants believe the target deserves organizational rewards. An example item is: "How much do you think (Delia/Enrique) deserves a bonus?" Responses were recorded on a Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a lot), with higher scores indicating a greater perception of deserving rewards ( $\alpha = .92$ ).

### 8.2.8. Deservedness of Penalties

Deservedness of penalties was measured using five items from Sanzari et al. (2021) and Rudman and Mescher (2013), which refer to the extent to which participants believe the target deserves organizational penalties. An example item is: "How much do you think (Delia/Enrique) deserves a salary reduction?" Participants were asked to respond using a Likert scale from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a lot) ( $\alpha = .85$ ).

### 8.2.9. Social Closeness

Social closeness was assessed using the same scale employed in Study 1 ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

## 8.3. Procedure

The procedure adopted for this experiment was similar to that followed in Study 1.

## 9. Results

To test the hypotheses, each dependent variable was assigned to a comparison of means from multiple independent groups: 2 (target gender: male or female) x 2 (decision made: de-prioritize work or prioritize work) x 2 (partner: with partner or without partner). Data analysis was performed using R Studio 4.4.1 (R Core Team, 2024). Means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2.

### 9.1. Job Competence

Contrary to the formulated hypotheses, no direct or interaction effects were found related to the variables of interest concerning the perceived job competence of the characters in the vignettes. This absence of effects is reflected in the fact that all  $p$ -values were above .05.

### 9.2. Job Commitment

The study revealed that the decision of workers to momentarily de-prioritize their work role significantly affected the perception of their job commitment,  $F(1, 243) = 44.30, p < .01$ . Specifically, those who chose to leave were considered less committed to their work than those who decided to stay in the office. In contrast to H3b, no statistically significant interaction was found between the worker's gender and the decision made,  $F(1, 243) = 1.01, p = .32$ .

Regarding H4, the results did not show a significant effect of the interaction between gender, the decision made, and the presence of a partner,  $F(1, 243) = 1.79, p = .18$ . However, a gender effect was found in the perception of job commitment,  $F(1, 243) = 4.22, p = 0.04$ , indicating that women were perceived as more committed to their work than men.

### 9.3. Deservedness of Rewards

In line with H3a, the decision of workers to momentarily de-prioritize their work role had a significant impact on the attribution of organizational rewards,  $F(1, 243) = 5.41, p = .02$ . Specifically, those who chose to leave received fewer organizational rewards than those who decided to stay in the office. In contrast to H3b, no statistically significant interaction was found between the worker's gender and the decision made,  $F(1, 243) = 0.18, p = .67$ .

Regarding H4, the results did not show a significant effect of the interaction between gender, the decision made, and the presence of a partner,  $F(1, 243) = 2.46, p = .12$ . However, a main effect of the worker's gender

was found,  $F(1, 243) = 7.72, p < .01$ , indicating that women received more organizational rewards than men. Additionally, a marginally significant effect of the presence of a partner on the attribution of rewards was found,  $F(1, 243) = 3.30, p = .07$ , such that those without a partner were perceived as more deserving of rewards than those with a partner.

### 9.4. Deservedness of Penalties

No significant impact of the workers' decision to momentarily de-prioritize their work role was found on the attribution of organizational penalties,  $F(1, 243) = .68, p = .41$ , thus rejecting H3a. In contrast to H3b, no statistically significant interaction was found between the worker's gender and the decision made,  $F(1, 243) = 0.44, p = .51$ .

Regarding H4, the results did not show a significant effect of the interaction between gender, the decision made, and the presence of a partner,  $F(1, 243) = .11, p = .74$ . However, a main effect of the worker's gender was found,  $F(1, 243) = 4.68, p = .03$ , indicating that men received more organizational penalties than women. Additionally, a marginally significant effect of the interaction between the target's gender and the presence of a partner on the attribution of penalties was found,  $F(1, 243) = 3.05, p = .08$ , such that Enrique was more penalized than Delia when both did not have a partner.

### 9.4. Social Closeness

Contrary to the formulated hypotheses, no direct or interaction effects were found related to the

**Table 2**  
Dependent Variables by Target Gender and Decision Made

Variables	De-prioritize work				Prioritize work			
	Delia		Enrique		Delia		Enrique	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Competence	5.19	0.98	5.11	0.85	5.46	0.89	5.22	0.92
Commitment	5.18	1.01	4.79	1.00	5.91	0.81	5.71	1.09
Rewards	4.80	0.98	4.37	0.98	5.10	1.03	4.70	1.16
Penalties	2.16	0.94	2.55	1.14	2.14	0.93	2.37	1.14
Closeness	4.82	1.05	4.76	0.97	4.82	1.13	4.44	1.30

variables of interest concerning the social closeness perceived by participants toward the characters in the vignettes. This absence of effects is reflected in the fact that all *p*-values were above .05.

## 10. Methodology

The present study aimed to analyze the consequences of the momentary de-prioritization of family and work roles on the evaluation of workers' family and professional status in Lima, as perceived by university business students. Although previous research has explored the effects of prioritizing one role over the other, only recently have studies begun to examine how these decisions are made in the workplace daily (Sanzari et al., 2021). This study seeks to replicate previous findings and assess their generalizability in the context of a developing country.

In general terms, the results of both studies indicate that individuals are often socially penalized even for a brief de-prioritization of the role in which they are being evaluated. However, gender did not show a consistent effect on perceptions, nor did the moderating variables considered: work motivation in Study 1 and the presence of a partner in Study 2. This suggests that social norms surrounding work and family balance remain sensitive to brief transgressions, even when individuals take measures to fulfill both responsibilities. The absence of consistent gender or moderator effects indicates that these judgments may operate as a general social mechanism rather than a gender-specific one.

The results indicate that workers, regardless of gender, were penalized for momentarily de-prioritizing one of their roles. Those who gave lower priority to their family role were perceived as less competent and committed to their family than those who prioritized it. Similarly, those who de-prioritized their work role were evaluated as less professionally committed and less deserving of organizational rewards than those who prioritized their work performance. These findings align with the results of Sanzari et al. (2021), who found that both fathers and mothers who neglect their family roles are evaluated more negatively in the domestic sphere. Likewise, individuals who de-prioritize their work tend to receive fewer growth opportu-

nities, promotions, and more unfavorable performance evaluations. Furthermore, these results are consistent with evidence from Steiner et al. (2022), which suggests that the direction of the work-family conflict influences social perception. In general, individuals receive a more positive evaluation in the domain they prioritize, but a more negative one in the domain they neglect.

Regarding the effects of gender on the evaluation of work and family status, no consistent interaction was found between the target's gender and the alignment of their decision with traditional gender roles. However, in Study 1, it was observed that Enrique received a bonus in the dimensions of competence and commitment when prioritizing his family, compared to the women or to himself when de-prioritizing his family. This suggests that norm violations can also produce reverse advantages when they align with evolving expectations of fatherhood. Although the absence of a significant effect of the target's gender aligns with the findings of Sanzari et al. (2021), these results contrast with other studies that have reported greater penalties for women in the family domain. For example, women who transgress their traditional role by prioritizing their career face more sanctions (Okimoto & Heilman, 2012), and when mothers fail to meet their family responsibilities, they are penalized, whereas this factor does not have negative consequences for fathers (Villicana et al., 2015).

These apparent contradictions may be explained by the growing recognition of the importance of work-life balance (Deloitte, 2024), as well as the need for childcare (Lin et al., 2023). In this context, both men and women are evaluated negatively when they de-prioritize their family roles. Furthermore, over time, the perception of women as more communal than men has intensified, whereas the advantage of men in agency over women has not experienced significant changes (Eagly et al., 2020). This may explain why men who prioritize their children are more socially rewarded: Not only are they fulfilling their traditional role but they are also making an effort to engage in a domain that has historically not been attributed to them, in line with the role prioritization model (Haines & Stroessner, 2019).

In the workplace, no significant differences were found between men and women in the penalization for temporarily de-prioritizing their work. This may be attributed to the current expectation that both the father and mother are able to balance their family roles while demonstrating their value in the workplace (Lévesque et al., 2020). Moreover, work continues to be a central aspect of personal identity, so its de-prioritization, even if temporary, affects the perception of a worker's commitment, regardless of gender. These results contradict previous studies suggesting gender-differentiated penalization. For example, Neuenswander et al. (2023) found that men are perceived as less competent when caring for their children during work hours, but not when they do so on a non-working day, whereas this penalization is not observed for women. Furthermore, the adoption of flexible work practices by men is associated with greater workplace penalization than by their female counterparts (Beham et al., 2020). This may be because, in these former cases, a clearer signal of work de-prioritization is sent.

An interesting finding of this study is that, although no differences were found in the interaction between work de-prioritization and the gender of the target, the consistent advantage for women in perceived job commitment and organizational rewards suggests a possible normative recalibration in workplace expectations. In fact, evidence indicates that the perception of competence between men and women has become more equitable over time, and in cases where differences are still perceived, they tend to favor women (Eagly et al., 2020). Moreover, recent studies have found that gender discrimination in selection processes has decreased and, in some cases, even reversed, benefiting women (Schaefer et al., 2023). However, another possible explanation is that participants may have responded under the influence of social desirability norms, which suggests the need for further research to better understand this phenomenon.

Work motivation did not act as a moderating variable in the family domain hypotheses, as no interaction was found between the worker's gender and the decision made. This contrasts with the findings of Riggs (1997), who found that mothers working for professional development received less

approval and were viewed as less communal than those working out of economic necessity. However, that study addressed a more radical form of de-prioritization—continuing or leaving work—rather than a momentary decision. The only difference observed was the bonus awarded to Enrique in the dimension of family commitment. There were indications that men who prioritize their family and work for professional development are evaluated more favorably than women in the same situation. This suggests that it is more acceptable for men to take an active work role socially, as it aligns with traditional gender expectations, whereas in women, such a choice might be perceived as a deviation from their more domestically associated role (Parsons & Bales, 1955), and therefore, would not be as valued.

Additionally, it was found that fathers and mothers who work for professional development are perceived as more competent in the family domain than those whose primary motivation is economic. In this regard, one study suggests that economic pressures negatively affect the positivity of parents, influencing their parenting practices (Neppel et al., 2015). It could also be interpreted that when someone does not need to work to financially support their family, they are assumed to have met those needs in a more “organized” manner, leading to the attribution of more valued characteristics in parenting.

However, the presence of a partner had no impact on the interaction between the gender of the target and the decision made in the work domain. The literature does not provide evidence on this matter, other than studies that analyze individual perceptions of workers' marital status. For instance, married fathers are seen as more motivated in their work than married mothers and single fathers (Steffens et al., 2019). In our study, it is possible that no significant effect was observed because the work de-prioritization was temporary, which would limit its influence on the evaluation made. However, it was found that people without a partner were perceived as more deserving of rewards than those with a partner. Coltrane et al. (2013) identified a bonus for married men and divorced women, which may seem contradictory. However, this dis-

crepancy could be explained by the perception of need: Our sample may consider that people without a partner require more support and, consequently, are given greater rewards.

### **10.1. Theoretical and Practical Implications**

From a theoretical perspective, this study provides evidence for SRT by demonstrating that a prolonged de-prioritization of a role is not necessary for a penalty to occur for role non-compliance. Our findings indicate that even a brief de-prioritization—whether precautions are taken, such as leaving a child with a relative or leaving work just a few hours early—can result in a slight penalty for workers.

Furthermore, our findings replicate previous results from Sanzari et al. (2021), which indicate that penalties arise when a role is de-prioritized, regardless of gender. In fact, the momentary de-prioritization does not appear to activate gender-based penalties, in line with the role prioritization model, because it is a temporary, not sustained, decision. These results also prompt reflection on whether the increasing involvement of men in the family sphere and women in the work environment has rendered theories explaining differences based on gender obsolete. Nevertheless, investigating the inferential processes underlying each decision remains essential to better understand its impact on status evaluation.

Regarding social closeness and child custody variables, no significant effects were found. For more objective measures, the use of vignettes may not be the most suitable method for generating a response. Alternatively, the brief de-prioritization described may not have been sufficient to trigger an effect.

From a practical approach, companies are suggested to implement strategies to mitigate penalties associated with the momentary de-prioritization of one role over another, especially when this does not compromise performance. In this regard, promoting an organizational culture that values the balance between work and personal life could be an effective measure to foster a more understanding and flexible environment with the demands that workers face in their day-to-day lives.

### **10.2. Limitations and Future Research Directions**

Among the main limitations of this study is the composition of the sample, which consisted of a relatively young population from a single university. This could skew the findings toward a more aware or sensitive perspective on these issues, limiting their generalizability to other groups, such as adults with work experience or older individuals. Nonetheless, this study represents an initial step toward examining how insights from previous research apply to a younger population in Lima, who will soon enter the labor market and whose social perceptions of their colleagues who are parents may play a relevant role in workplace dynamics.

Another limitation is that this study did not focus on a specific masculine or feminine sector, in which these results could vary. Additionally, the vignettes used were lengthy, which may have hindered participants' overall understanding of the situation and formation of more accurate judgments. If participants could not recall every detail of the vignettes, they might have made inaccurate evaluations. Although memory was controlled for by including only participants who recalled every detail, it was not possible to determine whether they did so by isolating or integrating the information.

Finally, the heterogeneity in sample size for each experimental condition could have affected the comparison between groups. Despite these limitations, the study should be understood as an exploratory effort that offers initial evidence on how temporary role de-prioritizations are socially perceived. As such, it provides a foundation for future research to build upon, ideally incorporating more diverse and representative samples as well as refined experimental designs.

For future research, a more balanced sample should be used in relation to experimental conditions, ensuring a similar number of participants in each group. Furthermore, it would be valuable to expand the sample to include working parents, who could offer a different perspective than university students.

Additionally, it remains relevant to continue exploring other moderating variables, such as the perceived economic need of the target or the frequency with which they momentarily de-prioritized their

roles. It would also be useful to employ complementary methodologies to triangulate the obtained information, such as field studies that observe whether men and women experience differentiated penalties based on their role prioritization habits in both the work and family domains.

## 11. Conclusions

The present research aimed to evaluate, through two experiments, whether the momentary de-prioritization of one role over another influences the negative perception within the relegated role. Additionally, the study sought to analyze the impact of the target's gender and other variables, such as work motivation and having a partner.

The results showed that even a slight de-prioritization of a role can trigger a perceptible reaction. In the family domain, a positive effect was observed for men when they prioritized their family. However, beyond this finding, no consistent gender penalty was found, nor was there a significant influence of the other variables, suggesting that these may not be determinant in contexts where role de-prioritization is brief.

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