Bringing your family to work: How family structure homophily and gender influence the formation of network ties

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Abstract

Homophily, the tendency to form relationships with similar others, is a major driver of network tie formation at work. Family structure - whether an employee is married and a parent – is an important aspect of the self, yet the extent to which people prefer to form relationships with coworkers with the same family structure (i.e., family structure homophily) has received inadequate attention. In several experiments, we provide evidence of family structure homophily for married individuals operating in environments in which the ideal worker ideology threatens the family self. Gender differences emerged from our analysis, revealing that men but not women prefer family structure similar ties. To understand the psychological mechanisms and build theoretical insights, we conducted a qualitative study of full-time working parents. Results revealed that gender differences in family role responsibilities and unique struggles with professional image result in the formation of different types of ties for men and women. Men form weak homophilous ties based on family similarity; family becomes an extra conversation lever to broadly connect with others with similar experiences. Conversely, for women, family prompts a preference for deep exchanges involving learning and problem-solving with fewer closer contacts that develop after certain requirements are in place.