

## **College Students' Perceptions of Mothers: Effects of Maternal Employment-Childrearing Pattern and Motive for Employment<sup>1</sup>**

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*This study examined primarily middle-class Caucasian college students' (n = 460) perceptions of mothers as a function of their employment-child-rearing pattern (continuous employment following 6 weeks of maternity leave, interrupted employment until the child was in first grade, or discontinued employment after the child's birth) and employment motive (fulfillment, financial, or unstated). Results showed that continuously employed compared to other mothers were perceived as less communal and were less positively evaluated. Further, continuously employed mothers were seen as less communal if their employment was for fulfillment rather than financial necessity. Inferences about the mother's perceived commitment to the maternal role help explain some of the communality findings, and perceived maternal role commitment and communality explain the evaluation findings. Discussion focuses on college students' views of normative roles and characteristics for women.*

<sup>1</sup>This research was supported by a grant from the University of Connecticut Research Foundation. The authors thank Laurin Hafner for his help with the statistical analysis and they express their appreciation to the student experimenters who collected the data: Stacy Wyman, Gerald Limone, Tara Purcell and Keith Downes.

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College women today aspire toward both the career and motherhood roles (e.g., Baber & Monaghan, 1988; Fiorentine, 1988). However, consistent with the motherhood mandate that women should be physically available to their young children at all times (Russo, 1979), the majority of college females do not want to work while their children are very young (Baber & Monaghan, 1988; Machung, 1989; Schroeder, Blood, & Maluso, 1992). In accordance with their belief that children experience more negative effects from continuous than interrupted maternal employment (Bridges & Orza, 1993), the opportunity for job reentry after childrearing seems to be an important factor affecting their career choice (Bridges, 1989).

This preference for interrupted employment may not reflect social reality; the majority of married mothers of infants are currently in the work force (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993); and, based on the current state of the economy, it is likely that this pattern will continue in the future. In fact, college women have reported that salary, in addition to personal fulfillment, is an important consideration in their career choice (Bridges, 1989). Thus, when the current cohort of college women make their role decisions, many are likely to experience a dilemma; i.e., a conflict between their ideal goal of interrupted employment and economic and/or personal pressures for continuous employment.

In order to better prepare these young women for their future role decisions, it would be helpful to broaden our understanding of the way they perceive the integration of the traditional maternal role and the newer employment role. Similarly, increased knowledge about the attitudes of college men might help predict the reactions these women will experience from their future spouses, friends, and coworkers.

Because it shows the influence of selected factors on attitudes, a commonly used procedure for measuring attitudes toward various social roles has been the examination of perceptions of stimulus persons in these roles (e.g., Bridges & Orza, 1992, 1993; Etaugh & Study, 1989; Russell & Rush, 1987). In fact, numerous studies have examined students' perceptions of mothers as a function of their employment status. However, despite the centrality of the employment-childrearing pattern to college women's own aspirations (e.g., Baber & Monaghan, 1988; Schroeder et al., 1992) and the inconsistency between these aspirations and labor force participation trends (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993), the maternal perception research has ignored the timing of maternal employment (e.g., Bridges, 1987; Bridges & Orza, 1992; Etaugh & Folger, 1990; Etaugh & Nekolny, 1990).

The most consistent finding of these studies has been that employment lowers the attribution of communality (i.e., concern about the welfare of others) to mothers whose children are either infants (e.g., Bridges & Orza, 1992; Etaugh & Folger, 1990; Etaugh & Nekolny, 1990; Etaugh & Study,

1989) or elementary school age (e.g., Bridges, 1987; Etaugh & Study, 1989). Additionally, the research suggests that employment lowers the overall evaluation (i.e., liking and admiration) of mothers of infants (Bridges & Orza, 1992) but not of mothers of elementary school children (Bridges, 1987).

Consistent with college women's own preference for an interrupted work cycle (e.g., Baber & Monaghan, 1988; Schroeder et al., 1992), the one study that did focus on the timing of maternal employment (Bridges & Orza, 1993) found that students perceive mothers who work continuously after a brief maternity leave as less communal and less favorable overall than their counterparts who interrupt or discontinue their employment. Building on this research, in the current study we attempted to explain the more negative impression of continuously employed mothers by examining variables that might moderate or mediate the effects of a mother's employment-childrearing pattern on college students' communal perceptions and overall evaluation of her. Specifically, we integrated previous research findings into conceptual models of perceptions of maternal communality and of overall evaluation of mothers and then tested these models.

### *Model of Perceptions of Maternal Communality*

Our model of perceptions of maternal communality postulated that (1) maternal employment-childrearing pattern would influence perceptions of communality, (2) motive for employment would moderate the effect of employment pattern on communality perceptions, and (3) the effect of employment-childrearing pattern on communality perceptions would be mediated, in part, by perceived maternal role commitment.

The first prediction stems from the evidence that college students devalue the communality of employed mothers (e.g., Bridges, 1987; Etaugh & Study, 1989; Bridges & Orza, 1992), especially if they are continuously employed (Bridges & Orza, 1993). Thus, Hypothesis 1 stated that continuously employed mothers would be viewed as less communal than mothers who interrupted their employment who, in turn, would be seen as less communal than mothers who discontinued their employment after the birth of their child.

The prediction that employment motive would moderate the effects of the employment-childrearing pattern on perceptions of maternal communality is suggested by the work of Eagly and Steffen (1984, 1986). Although they did not focus on perceptions of mothers, these investigators showed that employment motives can affect gender-stereotypic attributions about female and male workers. Further, Bridges and Orza (1992) examined perceptions of employed mothers of infants only and found that these

mothers were perceived as less communal if their reason for employment was personal fulfillment rather than financial need.

Although the effects of motive for maternal employment have not yet been assessed in relation to mothers of elementary school age children, we anticipate that its effect is restricted to mothers of very young children. College women want to work full time once their children are in school (e.g., O'Connell, Betz, & Kurth, 1989; Schroeder et al., 1992). Further, they expect both fulfillment as well as financial rewards from their jobs (Bridges, 1989). Thus, it is likely that interrupted employment is viewed as consistent with the maternal role, regardless of the motive for that employment, and that college students are not likely to use maternal employment motivation as an informative cue about the communality of a mother identified with this employment pattern. Accordingly, Hypothesis 2 stated that continuously employed mothers, but not mothers who interrupted their employment, would be perceived as less communal if they worked for personal fulfillment than if their employment was motivated by financial need.

The third prediction is consistent with Eagly and Steffen's (1986) suggestion that the attribution of role-related traits to an individual in a particular role is affected by the perception of the person's commitment to that role. The motherhood mandate contends that good mothers should stay home to care for their children, especially when they are very young (Russo, 1979). Therefore, we assumed that inferences about a mother's commitment to the maternal role would be influenced by her employment-childrearing pattern. In turn, because communality is central to the domestic role (Eagly & Steffen, 1984), Hypothesis 3 predicted that the effect of a mother's employment-childrearing pattern on her perceived communality would be mediated, in part, by her perceived maternal role commitment.

#### *Model of the Overall Evaluation of Mothers*

Our model of overall evaluation of mothers predicted that (1) employment-childrearing pattern would influence evaluation, (2) maternal employment motive would not moderate this effect, and (3) the influence of employment on evaluation would be mediated, in part, by perceived maternal role commitment and perceived communality.

Based on findings from the previous examination of maternal employment-childrearing patterns (Bridges & Orza, 1993), Hypothesis 4 stated that the evaluation of mothers who interrupted their employment would be more positive than the evaluation of those who were continuously employed but would be similar to the evaluation of mothers who discontinued their employment.

Hypothesis 5 expected that employment motive would not moderate the effects of employment-childrearing pattern on perceptions of overall evaluation. Despite the evidence that continuous maternal employment is not anticipated by the majority of college students (e.g., Baber & Monaghan, 1988) and that attributions are more likely when behaviors are unexpected than expected (e.g., Wong & Weiner, 1981), a previous study (Bridges & Orza, 1992) found no evidence that employment motive is used as a meaningful cue in the evaluation of employed mothers of infants. It seems unlikely, therefore, that evaluation of mothers in the more expected role of interrupted employment, would be affected by maternal employment motivation.

The last part of the model predicted that the effect of employment on evaluation would be mediated, in part, by perceptions of maternal role commitment and communality. As previously discussed, we expected that both of these variables would be influenced by a mother's employment-childrearing pattern. In turn, because the maternal role is highly valued (e.g., Hoffnung, 1989; Russo, 1979), and communal characteristics are central to the traits considered desirable for females (e.g., Bem, 1974; Spence & Helmreich, 1978), Hypothesis 6 predicted that perceived maternal role commitment and perceived communality would serve as mediators of the effects of employment on students' overall evaluation of mothers.

#### *Ascribed Motives for Employment*

In addition to our examination of these conceptual models of perceived maternal communality and evaluation, we assessed college students' attributions about motives for maternal employment when these motives were not provided. According to attribution theory (e.g., Heider, 1958; Jones & Davis, 1965), although information about motives is not always apparent to observers, perceivers try to understand the reasons for behavior; that is, they form their own attributions. Because the only previous study (Eagly & Steffen, 1986) that assessed ascribed motives for employment focused on the reasons for part-time employment and did not specify the worker's parental status, the present study measured attributed motives for mothers' continuous and interrupted employment.

In an earlier investigation, Etaugh and Study (1989) suggested that mothers who resume employment shortly after their child's birth may be viewed as particularly committed to their careers. Additionally, because college students consider child care to be primarily the mother's role (Spade & Reese, 1991) and many career-oriented college women do not want to work full time while their children are preschoolers (e.g., Baber & Monaghan,

1988), college students might assume that most mothers would not resume full-time employment during their child's infancy unless they were under financial pressure. Accordingly, Hypothesis 7 predicted that, when employment motives are not given, both stronger fulfillment and stronger financial motives would be attributed to continuously employed mothers than to those who delayed their employment until their child was in school all day.

In addition to the examination of perceived communality, evaluation, and ascribed motives for employment, this investigation tested the generalizability of its findings. College students are a useful population to study because they are on the threshold of career and family decisions. However, the focus on a single sample can produce results that are sample-specific. Therefore, in order to enhance the external validity of the findings, respondents were drawn from both a New England public and a Midwestern private university.

## METHOD

### *Experimental Design*

The design was a  $3 \times 3 \times 2 \times 2$  between-subjects factorial with the stimulus person's (SP's) employment-childrearing pattern (continuous employment, interrupted employment, discontinued employment) and employment motive (personal fulfillment, financial need, no stated motive) as manipulated variables. Gender of participant and university (New England public, Midwestern private) were the respondent variables. The dependent variables included the following perceptions of the SP: communal traits, overall evaluation, fulfillment motivation, financial motivation, and commitment to the maternal role.

### *Participants*

Participants included 204 students at a New England public university (PUB) and 327 students at a Midwestern private university (PRV). Although socioeconomic and ethnic characteristics were not assessed, the student bodies at both universities are primarily middle class and Caucasian; approximately 11% of the students at PUB and 9% of the PRV students are African-American, Asian, or Hispanic. Participants represented a large variety of majors, including business (31%), the social sciences (11%), education (9%), and engineering (6%), among others. However, to confine the sample to a single cohort of students who have not yet made their

family and career decisions, all students were under the age of 24 ( $M = 19.2$ ).

### Procedure

The study was conducted during the spring semester 1992. No incentives were given for participation, which was on a voluntary basis during class time. The PUB students were tested in lower-division geography classes and the PRV students in lower-division psychology and speech classes. Their participation took approximately 10 minutes.

As a control for possible experimenter-gender effects, one female and one male undergraduate experimenter were present for all testing sessions. In each class the experimenters distributed the booklets so that each of the nine SPs was presented to every ninth female and every ninth male. Written instructions in the booklets indicated that the study dealt with impressions people form of others based on written information. In fact, each booklet described a married mother of a seven-year old child with a prior or present occupation as a newspaper reporter. This occupation was selected because U.S. labor statistics indicate it has a balanced gender composition (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1993). Further, a pretest of 64 female and male introductory psychology students at a different New England public university gave newspaper reporter a mean rating of 3.06 on a scale measuring the perceived proportion of females and males in the occupation, from *mainly females* (1) to *mainly males* (5).

The following are descriptions of the employed SPs (continuous and interrupted employment) with a fulfillment or a financial motive:

Anne is a 30-year old married woman with a seven-year old child. She loves her child very much. Anne is employed full time as a newspaper reporter. She worked as a reporter before her child was born and then resumed working full time at the end of her six-week maternity leave (when her child was in first grade (six years old) and, thus, in school all day). Anne's primary reason for working is that her career is very important to her self-identity; that is, her career is personally fulfilling to her (her salary is financially beneficial to her family; that is, her salary helps her family maintain an acceptable standard of living). Both Anne and her husband work outside of the home from 9:00-5:00.

The first two sentences in the paragraph describing the SPs who discontinued their employment were the same as those for the employed mothers. The remainder of the paragraph was the following:

Anne's husband is employed from 9:00-5:00 outside of the home, and Anne worked as a newspaper reporter before her child was born. Her primary reason for working was that her career was very important to her self-identity; that is it was personally fulfilling to her (her salary was financially beneficial to her family; that is, it was necessary so that her family could maintain an acceptable standard of living). However, Anne stopped working after the birth of her child and plans to stay home with her child throughout the childhood years.

The no-motive descriptions of the employed and currently nonemployed SPs presented the information given in these paragraphs except that no reason for current or previous employment was given.

After reading the description of one of the nine SPs, respondents answered four questions to assess their awareness of the relevant manipulated and controlled role information. First, they indicated SP's marital status, age of her child, her employment status, and, if employed, the age of her child when she resumed employment. Eighteen participants at PUB and 53 at PRV answered at least one question incorrectly and were deleted from the sample. The remaining sample included 92 females and 94 males from PUB and 161 females and 113 males from PRV.

All of the dependent variables were assessed with seven-point rating scales. As the measure of perceived communality, participants rated the SP on seven bipolar scales, used in previous studies (Bridges & Orza, 1992, 1993). For four of these dimensions the favorable pole was rated "1" (sensitive to others, nurturant, warm and dedicated to her family) and for three the unfavorable pole was rated "1" (unsympathetic, selfish, and unaffectionate). Additionally, in order to reduce demand characteristics, this set of ratings included three filler items (responsible, poorly adjusted, and un-influential). A factor analysis in a previous investigation indicated that these seven items comprise a unitary scale (Bridges & Orza, 1992); and, in the current study, Cronbach's alpha, produced a reliability coefficient of .88. Thus, after reverse scoring the four ratings that had a favorable pole of "1," these seven ratings were summed.

The measure of overall evaluation consisted of the sum of the ratings given to three questions used in prior studies (Bridges & Orza, 1992, 1993). Respondents indicated how much they liked and admired the SP, each rated from *very little* (1) to *very much* (7). Also, they rated their overall impression of her, from *very unfavorable* (1) to *very favorable* (7). The internal consistency of these three ratings was high; Cronbach's alpha was .89.

In order to assess attributions regarding the reason for employment, participants indicated the extent, from *definitely not* (1) to *definitely* (7), to which each of three possible factors was SP's major motive. They rated personal fulfillment, financial need, and pressure from family and friends. One purpose of the first two measures was to serve as manipulation checks. Additionally, because college students have indicated that fulfillment and financial rewards are important job consequences (Bridges, 1989), in the no-motive condition, these two ratings served as measures of ascribed motives. The question on pressure was included as a filler so that attributions would not be restricted to the two motives of interest in this study.

Last, three questions assessed perceived commitment to the maternal role. Participants indicated the extent to which the SP enjoys her maternal



Table I. Descriptive Statistics for Perceived Communality and Evaluation<sup>a</sup>

Independent variable	Perceived communality			Evaluation		
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Employment-childrearing pattern						
Continuous	150	31.49 <sub>a</sub>	8.14	151	14.54 <sub>a</sub>	3.62
Interrupted	150	36.11 <sub>b</sub>	6.54	151	15.95 <sub>b</sub>	2.97
Discontinued	156	40.73 <sub>c</sub>	6.68	156	15.67 <sub>b</sub>	3.13
Motive						
Financial	150	36.91	7.35	153	15.33	3.14
Fulfillment	158	35.62	8.44	158	15.49	3.37
No motive	148	36.01	8.38	147	15.34	3.41

<sup>a</sup>Perceived communality scores can range from 7-49; higher means reflect greater perceived communality. Evaluation scores can range from 3-21; higher means reflect a more positive evaluation. Means in the same column that have different subscripts differ at  $p < .05$  in Tukey's post hoc tests.

role, from *very little* (1) to *very much* (7). Additionally, they indicated her commitment to her maternal responsibilities and the importance of her maternal role to her self-concept, each rated from *slightly* (1) to *extremely* (7). Cronbach's alpha produced a high internal reliability coefficient of .90; thus, these items were summed.

## RESULTS

The direct effects of employment-childrearing pattern and the moderating effects of employment motive on the dependent variables were examined with four-way ANOVAS, followed by simple main effects tests for significant interactions. In addition, comparisons of means were examined with Tukey's post hoc test and differences between means at the .05 level or less are reported. Descriptive statistics for perceived communality and evaluation are presented in Table I.

The possibility that any observed effects of employment-childrearing pattern were mediated, in part, by perceived maternal role commitment or perceived communality was examined with a two-step process. The conclusion that an independent variable's effect on a dependent variable is due, at least in part, to a mediator requires evidence that the independent variable influences the mediator and that the mediator influences the dependent variable (Judd & Kenny, 1981). Thus, for each independent variable that showed a significant effect on one of the dependent variables, an ANOVA assessed the effect of that independent variable on the mediating variable(s). Then, the mediator(s) were used as covariates in an

ANACOVA in order to assess their relationship to the dependent measure. Also, the ANACOVA indicated whether or not the statistical control of the potential mediator reduced the effect of the independent variable to zero; a finding which would indicate that the mediator completely explained the effect of the independent variable.

### *Manipulation Check*

ANOVAS yielded significant effects of employment-childrearing pattern on ratings of both fulfillment,  $F(2, 424) = 353.46, p < .0001$ , and financial motivation,  $F(2, 424) = 324.26, p < .0001$ . The SPs who were currently or previously employed primarily for personal fulfillment were given higher ratings on fulfillment motivation ( $M = 6.42$ ) than were the SPs with a financial motive ( $M = 2.64$ ) or no motive ( $M = 4.59$ ). Similarly, the SPs with a financial motive were given higher ratings on financial motivation ( $M = 6.16$ ) than were the SPs with a fulfillment motive ( $M = 2.61$ ) or no motive ( $M = 3.66$ ). Thus, the manipulation of motive was effective.

### *Examination of External Validity*

ANOVAS of the ratings of communality, evaluation, fulfillment motivation, financial motivation, and maternal role commitment yielded no significant interactions between university and any of the independent variables; thus, the findings are generalizable across universities.

### *Model of Perceptions of Maternal Communality*

Hypothesis 1 predicted that continuously employed mothers would be viewed as lower in communality than mothers who interrupted their employment, who, in turn, would be perceived as lower than mothers who discontinued their employment. The ANOVA showed a significant main effect of employment-childrearing pattern,  $F(2, 420) = 67.05, p < .0001$ . Further, as the means in Table I indicate, Tukey's post hoc tests revealed support for the predicted comparisons.

The moderating effect of employment motive on perceptions of continuously employed mothers only was supported. There was no significant main effect of motive on perceived communality but the motive  $\times$  employment-childrearing pattern interaction was significant,  $F(4, 420) = 3.48, p < .008$ . Simple main effects tests showed that employment motive influenced the communality attributed to the mothers who were continuously employed only,  $F(2, 147) = 3.15, p < .046$ . Although Tukey's tests did not reach conventional probability levels, inspection of the means indicate that the continuously employed mother with a fulfillment motive ( $M = 29.2$ )

was seen as less communal than her counterpart with a financial motive ( $M = 33.0$ ). Thus, Hypothesis 2 received support.

Although not relevant to the model, the ANOVA showed that females ( $M = 37.26$ ), compared to males ( $M = 34.83$ ), gave higher communality ratings to the SPs,  $F(1, 420) = 13.33, p < .0003$ .

The third hypothesis predicted that the effect of employment-childrearing pattern on perceived communality would be mediated, in part, by perceived maternal role commitment. An employment-childrearing pattern  $\times$  employment motive ANOVA applied to ratings of maternal role commitment yielded one significant effect, a main effect of employment-childrearing pattern,  $F(2, 446) = 114.42, p < .0001$ . Thus, perceived maternal role commitment was treated as a covariate in a one-way ANACOVA of perceived communality. Although the main effect of employment-childrearing pattern remained significant,  $F(2, 445) = 3.10, p < .046$ , perceived maternal role commitment showed a significant covariate effect,  $F(1, 451) = 238.63, p < .0001$ ; suggesting that it does, in part, mediate the effects of employment-childrearing pattern on perceptions of communality. This mediating role was further explored with Tukey's post hoc tests applied to the adjusted means. These analyses showed that, with statistical control of perceived maternal role commitment, respondents no longer perceived differences between the communality of the mothers who interrupted their employment and those who followed either of the other two types of patterns. The only comparison between perceived communality means that remained statistically significant was the difference between the continuously employed (35.12) and the nonemployed mothers (37.12). Further, comparison of these adjusted means to the means shown in Table I suggest that control of perceived maternal role commitment reduced this difference.

#### *Model of Overall Evaluation*

In support of Hypothesis 4, there was a significant main effect of employment-childrearing pattern on overall evaluation,  $F(2, 422) = 7.82, p < .0005$ . As can be seen in Table I, Tukey's post hoc tests indicated that the continuously employed mothers were evaluated more negatively than the mothers who interrupted or discontinued their employment and the latter two were not evaluated differently from one another.

In addition, it should be noted that there was a significant main effect of gender,  $F(1, 422) = 13.77, p < .0002$ , which was modified by a gender  $\times$  employment-childrearing pattern interaction,  $F(2, 422) = 3.10, p < .046$ . Simple effects analyses, followed by Tukey's tests, showed that females, compared to males, more positively evaluated the continuously employed

mothers ( $M_s = 15.40$  vs.  $13.42$ ) and the mothers who interrupted their employment ( $M_s = 16.59$  vs.  $15.20$ ) but not the nonemployed mothers ( $M_s = 15.83$  vs.  $15.49$ ).

Consistent with Hypothesis 5 that evaluation of employed mothers would not be influenced by their employment motive, there were no significant main or interaction effects involving motive.

The sixth hypothesis predicted that the effect of employment-childrearing pattern on evaluation would be mediated, in part, by perceptions of both maternal role commitment and communality. Because previously-presented analyses showed that both variables were influenced by employment-childrearing pattern, they served as covariates in an ANACOVA of the effect of employment-childrearing pattern on overall evaluation. Both covariate effects were significant;  $F(1, 450) = 36.87, p < .0001$ , and  $F(1, 450) = 26.03, p < .0001$ , for maternal role commitment and communality, respectively. Further, although the main effect of employment-childrearing pattern remained significant,  $F(2, 450) = 13.69, p < .0001$ , Tukey's post hoc tests applied to the adjusted means showed that the less positive evaluation of the continuously employed mothers compared to the other mothers was completely accounted for by perceptions of commitment to the maternal role and communality. Specifically, with statistical control of these variables, evaluation of the continuously employed mothers ( $15.95$ ) was no longer less positive than evaluation of the mothers who interrupted their employment ( $16.00$ ). Additionally, both types of employed mothers were evaluated *more* positively than the nonemployed mothers ( $14.28$ ).

#### *Ascribed Motives for Employment*

There was partial support for the seventh hypothesis that continuously employed mothers would be attributed stronger fulfillment and financial motives than their counterparts who interrupted their employment. ANOVAS based on the ratings in the no-motive condition showed that employment-childrearing pattern had a significant effect on perceived financial motivation,  $F(2, 136) = 14.12, p < .001$ , but not on perceived fulfillment motivation. Tukey's tests indicated that the mothers who were continuously employed ( $M = 4.45$ ), compared to those who interrupted employment until their child was in school all day ( $M = 3.08$ ), were seen as more likely to be employed because of financial need.

In addition, in order to examine the relative weight which this sample gave to the two motives for maternal employment, a repeated measures ANOVA with perceived motives (fulfillment vs. financial) as the repeated factor was performed. This analysis, applied to the ratings in the no-motive condition only, yielded a significant main effect of the repeated factor,  $F(1,$

136) = 29.02,  $p < .001$ . Regardless of employment-childrearing pattern, fulfillment ( $M = 4.59$ ) was seen as a more likely motive than financial need ( $M = 3.65$ ).

## DISCUSSION

The present study replicates the previous finding that college students view mothers who resume paid work during their child's infancy as less communal and less positive overall than mothers who interrupt or discontinue their employment after childbirth (Bridges & Orza, 1993). Moreover, it adds to previous research by showing the effects of both mediator and moderator variables; thereby, providing an explanatory framework for understanding the influence of a mother's employment-childrearing pattern on perceptions of her.

### *Perceptions of Communality*

It appears that perceived maternal role commitment fully explains the greater perceived communality of nonemployed mothers, compared to mothers who interrupt their employment, and of interrupters compared to continuously employed mothers. Further, it partially explains the lower communality attributed to continuously employed mothers in comparison to their nonemployed counterparts. In addition, the data indicate that employment motive moderates the effects of employment-childrearing pattern on perceptions of communality; the perceived communality of continuously-employed, but not other, mothers is lower than when the mother's primary motive for working is personal fulfillment rather than financial need.

A focus on students' perceptions of normative roles and characteristics for women can explain these findings. College women's preference for interrupted employment (e.g., Baber & Monaghan, 1988) suggests that they still accept the societal norm that good mothers stay home with their children, especially when they are young (Russo, 1979). Consequently, college students may assume that continuously employed mothers are the least committed to the maternal role whereas nonemployed mothers are the most committed. Consistent with social role theory's (Eagly, 1987) contention that commitment to a gender role (e.g., the maternal role) influences the attribution of gender-role related traits (e.g., communality), they attribute less communality to mothers who are employed when their child is an infant than to mothers who interrupt their employment and less to the interrupters than to the nonemployed.

In addition, continuous employment for personal fulfillment may be seen as a voluntary violation of the motherhood mandate (Russo, 1979); and, thus, as even more atypical than continuous employment for financial reasons. Consequently, perceivers may view continuously employed mothers who are employed for personal fulfillment as atypical, not only in their employment role, but in their feminine traits.

It is interesting to note that perception of the maternal role commitment of continuously employed mothers' is independent of their motive for employment. Perhaps, students believe that if the mother of an infant is truly devoted to the maternal role she will resist all pressures, including financial, to seek employment.

### *Overall Evaluation*

The data indicate that the more negative evaluation of continuously employed, compared to other, mothers is mediated by perceived maternal role commitment and communality. When these variables are controlled, college students no longer more negatively evaluate mothers who work continuously than those who interrupt or discontinue their employment. Indeed, control of these variables actually leads to a more favorable evaluation of both types of employed mothers than of their nonemployed counterparts. Additionally, consistent with the previous finding that employment motive does not influence evaluation of mothers of infants (Bridges & Orza, 1992), motive does not have a moderating effect on these findings.

As previously discussed, continuous employment may be seen as a non-normative employment-childrearing pattern. Therefore, it may imply less commitment to the traditional maternal role and fewer traditional female personality traits. In turn, college perceivers may have less admiration and liking for a woman who does not show these typical female qualities. Further, because this employment-childrearing pattern is viewed as non-normative, college students may not accept any mitigating factors, such as financial necessity, as justification for it.

It is noteworthy that control of perceived maternal role commitment and communality reverses the favorability direction of continuously employed versus nonemployed mothers. Apparently, it is not employment during a child's infancy per se that depresses college students' evaluation of mothers but the perception that these mothers are low in maternal role commitment and communality.

### *Ascribed Motives*

Consistent with the normative role explanation, the study showed that, when perceivers have no information about a mother's employment motive,

they ascribe a stronger financial need to continuously employed mothers than to mothers who interrupt their employment. Attribution theory (e.g., Wong & Weiner, 1981) contends that perceivers are more apt to wonder about motives for unexpected than expected behaviors; that is, they are more likely to try to explain behaviors that are not seen as normative. In regard to maternal employment, continuous employment may be viewed as less expected than the socially normative role of interrupted employment and, thus, may more strongly require a motivational explanation.

It is interesting that it was the financial motive that was attributed more strongly to continuously employed mothers than to mothers who interrupted their employment. Perhaps because college students are committed to maternal nonemployment during a child's early years, they believe that there must be some external influence on a mother's decision to seek employment at this time. In support of this conclusion, an ANOVA of the filler question regarding social pressure to work indicated an effect of employment-childrearing pattern,  $F(2, 424) = 5.29, p < .005$ . Tukey's test showed that the continuously employed mother ( $M = 2.22$ ), more than her counterpart who interrupted her employment ( $M = 1.80$ ), was perceived as motivated by external pressure from family and friends.

It should be noted, however, that although these students attributed a stronger financial motive to the mothers who were employed during their child's infancy than to the mothers who delayed employment until their child was in first grade, they ascribed a stronger fulfillment than financial motive to all mothers, regardless of the timing of their employment. Possibly, because college women are career-oriented (e.g., Fiorentine, 1988) and expect to receive fulfillment from their jobs (Bridges, 1989) and college men may expect to marry career-oriented women, students are more focused on the personal than the external benefits of employment.

## CONCLUSION

The consistency of this study's findings across samples from two universities points to their robustness and generalizability, at least within similar college populations. Further, in a previous study (Bridges & Etaugh, 1994), we found that Black and White college women did not differ in their communality perceptions or overall evaluation of continuously employed mothers. However, because that study was the only one to investigate non-White women's perceptions, generalization to non-Caucasian students should await further research on ethnically-mixed samples. In addition, because non-college young adults might have a different perspective

from college students, subsequent research should investigate the maternal perceptions of nonstudent samples.

Despite these caveats, this study broadens our understanding of college students' perceptions of employed mothers. Consistent with social role theory's (Eagly, 1987) contention that gender-stereotypic traits are attributed to individuals who engage in gender-typical roles, college students tend to perceive mothers who discontinue or interrupt their employment for childrearing as higher in communality and maternal role commitment than are continuously employed mothers. In addition, they more negatively evaluate continuously employed mothers.

Although we do not know how well current perceptions of others predict future self perceptions, it is possible that, in the future, if economic pressures and/or career goals make it difficult for these college women to leave the workplace for full-time childrearing, they could experience self-doubts, or other negative reactions, such as anger or resignation. In addition, they might be negatively evaluated by future romantic partners and associates. In fact, consistent with men's more traditional views about the family and employment roles (Machung, 1989; Spade & Reese, 1991), the data showed that men reported less admiration and liking for a mother who integrates these roles than women did. Thus, it is possible that the strongest negative reactions these women will experience will be from the significant males in their lives.

Another important finding of this study is that the respondents' lower attribution of gender-stereotypic traits to the continuously employed mothers completely accounted for the students' negative evaluation of them. This has important practical implications in that structural changes, such as expanded on-site daycare and flex time, might not only enable current parents to more effectively combine the employment and parental roles but could decrease the perceived inconsistency between continuous employment and maternal role commitment. This, in turn, might reduce the negative impressions perceivers have of the mothers who are continuously employed. These findings suggest, in addition, that as more mothers of preschool-aged children work (out of choice or necessity), the perception of continuous employment as atypical and less positive than interrupted employment will decline. Thus, college women might become less reluctant to consider this alternative.

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