The hidden bias:
Singles in family-friendly work culture

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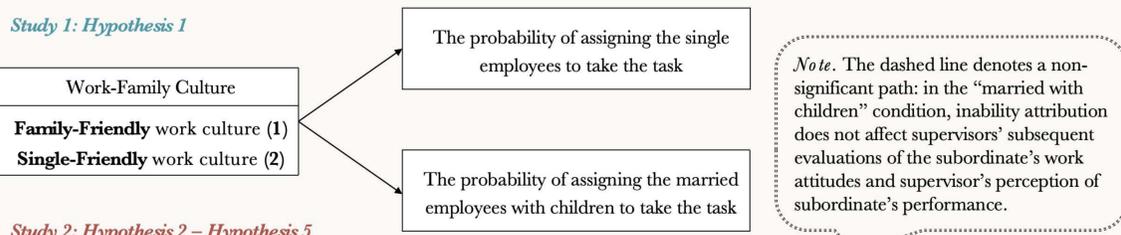Macau University of Science and Technology, Macao, China
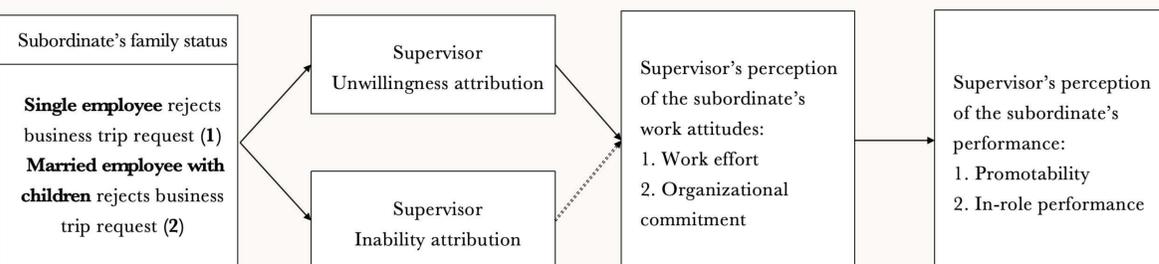
#BreakTheBias

01 Introduction

Study Purpose: This study investigates **cognitive biases** embedded in a family-friendly work culture and supervisor's stereotypes toward single employees. These factors will lead to the negative and prolonged effect on **single employees' career development**.

Study Description: We design two experimental studies and examined two supervisors' attribution styles. In Study 1, we recruited 117 hotel supervisors to assess their likelihood of assigning overtime to a single employee versus a married employee with children. In Study 2, we further examined how supervisors attribute subordinates' reasons for rejecting overtime requests based on the their marital or family status. We recruited 249 supervisors and assessed their perceptions of single employees and married employees with children who declined overtime requests.

02 Research Questions

(1) Are supervisors more likely to assign overtime to single employees (vs. married employees with children) under a family-friendly work culture?
(2) Will a single employee's career be affected if they refuse to work overtime when asked, and will the consequences be different for married employees with children who refuse the same request?

03 Research Model

Study 1: Hypothesis 1

Work-Family Culture
Family-Friendly work culture (1)
Single-Friendly work culture (2)

→ The probability of assigning the single employees to take the task

→ The probability of assigning the married employees with children to take the task

Note. The dashed line denotes a non-significant path: in the "married with children" condition, inability attribution does not affect supervisors' subsequent evaluations of the subordinate's work attitudes and supervisor's perception of subordinate's performance.

Study 2: Hypothesis 2 – Hypothesis 5

Subordinate's family status
Single employee rejects business trip request (1)
Married employee with children rejects business trip request (2)

→ Supervisor Unwillingness attribution
→ Supervisor Inability attribution

→ Supervisor's perception of the subordinate's work attitudes:
1. Work effort
2. Organizational commitment

→ Supervisor's perception of the subordinate's performance:
1. Promotability
2. In-role performance

04 Methodology

Study 1 included two work-family culture conditions (family-friendly vs. inclusive nonwork-supportive) and a task-assignment scenario. The family-friendly work culture scenario was developed based on items from Thompson et al. (1999), whereas the inclusive nonwork-supportive culture scenario was adapted from Casper et al. (2007).
Study 2 included a company background scenario and two overtime-refusal scenarios (single employee vs. married employee with children). After reading the scenario, participants reported their attributions and perceptions of the subordinate's work attitude and their performance.

05 Results

All hypotheses were supported. Supervisors in organizations with a family-friendly work culture were more likely to ask single employees, rather than married employees with children, to work overtime.

In addition, supervisors' social role expectations for both single and married subordinates were confirmed or reinforced when subordinates declined overtime requests, which in turn influenced supervisors' perceptions of the work-related outcomes of those who refused. Notably, these social role expectations negatively affected only single subordinates, whereas married subordinates were not adversely affected.

06 Implications

This work is among the few to examine this issue from the supervisor's perspective and to provide empirical evidence of (a) supervisor decision-making bias within a family-friendly work culture and (b) the reinforcement of supervisor stereotypes toward single employees during task negotiation.

Using attribution theory as an overarching framework, this research explains why single employees may experience unfair treatment and be viewed less favorably by supervisors due to biased attributions of their behavior.

We further highlight that hotel organizations should create a more responsive and supportive environment that acknowledges the unique challenges faced by single employees, and that supervisors should be trained to recognize and mitigate unconscious biases.

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Pan, S. Y., & Wang, Y. (2026). The hidden bias: singles in family-friendly work culture. *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 38(1), 310-327.

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