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**Sticky doors and crusty floors: Zooming in on messiness and
parenthood in virtual work meetings**

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Abstract

This study examines how the condition of an employee's home background setting (messy vs. tidy) and the presence of a child on screen (present vs. not present) impact observer judgments of the target's professionalism, competence, and career success. Participants (N=711) were randomly assigned to one of 16 experimental conditions with two levels for performance (high or low), target gender (male or female), background (messy or tidy), and child (present or not present). The results show that messiness alone results in less favorable perceptions of the target employee's professionalism and career outcomes, but not competence. Having a child present did not impact any of the dependent variables. The study's most consistent finding was that individuals with a messy background experience a buffer effect if they have a child present. That is, individuals with a messy background were rated higher in professionalism, competence, and career outcomes when they had a child present than when there was no child present.

Keywords: Videoconferencing; Virtual meetings; Remote work; Parenthood, Messiness

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“When video is done poorly, it not only fails to be a suitable replacement to face-to-face meetings, but it becomes a window into the shared chaos of our new virtual lives.”

(Reed & Allen, 2021, p. 70)

Although the end of the COVID-19 pandemic has brought many employees physically back into the workplace, there are a significant number of employees who prefer the flexibility of working remotely and, when given the choice, have opted to continue working from home (WFH). Many like the autonomy and flexibility of remote work, as well as the possibility to better balance the various roles in their professional and personal lives (Chambel, et al., 2022). A recent Gallup survey showed that 67 percent of U.S. employees in white-collar jobs reported working from home either exclusively or part of the time (Saad & Wigert, 2021) and a survey of employees in Europe showed similar findings (European Union, 2020). Thus, many organizations now have multi-located employees (some in office, some hybrid, and some working full-time remotely). Because of this, videoconferencing remains widely used as a standard means of communication in the workplace (Sergy, 2021; Standaert et al., 2021).

Given the widespread use of remote work and videoconferencing during and after the pandemic, many researchers are interested in how this new mode of work is impacting employees. Some have examined issues of Zoom fatigue (Bennett et al., 2021; Fauville et al., 2021a, 2021b), while others have looked at employee struggles with productivity (Okabe-Miyamoto et al., 2021) and work-life boundary management (Rothbard, 2020; Wethal, et al., 2022). Although the popular press was full of stories during the pandemic of videoconferencing “faux pas” and complaints about how employees were behaving or presenting themselves in

virtual meetings, it is only recently that the perceptions of others became a focus of study (Karl, Peluchette, & Aghakhani, 2022). Research is showing that some of these rude or inappropriate behaviors have potential consequences for individuals' professionalism and career success. For example, a recent study found that eating during a virtual meeting negatively impacted observers' perceptions of the professionalism of the person eating, as well as their perceptions of the person's competence, promotability, and likelihood of being recommended for specialized management training (Karl, Peluchette, & Evans, 2022).

One of the consequences of using videoconferencing for work meetings is that these meetings often take place in remote workers' private spaces (e.g., living rooms, kitchens, bedrooms), thereby blurring the private and professional domains (McIntyre et al., 2021). Given the increase in remote work, it is important to understand how observations of employees' private domains, including their living spaces and their family members, could impact observer perceptions and workplace outcomes. To date, this aspect of videoconferencing has not been investigated and we believe that this warrants attention. Negative perceptions of employees' living spaces and the presence of their children on screen during virtual workplace meetings may have consequences that could have implications for employees' current and future career success. This is especially important given the number of working mothers and parents who wish to continue working remotely and who value the flexibility to accommodate their family needs (Agovino, 2022).

Drawing from the social cognition and impression management literature, we consider how the condition of an employee's home background setting (messy vs. tidy) and the presence of a child on screen (present vs. not present) impact observer judgments of the target's professionalism, competence, and career success. We also utilize social role and role congruity

theory to examine how the gender of the target and the perceiver influence these perceptual judgments. Finally, we conclude with suggestions for future research and practical recommendations for training.

Theoretical Foundations

Background Setting and its Influence on Work-related Perceptions

Based on the large number of articles in the popular press providing tips or rules for proper Zoom etiquette, it is evident that many video conference users are seemingly unaware of the impact of visual cues on impression formation. For example, Oliver (2021) indicates that “the state of your workspace says more about your professional persona than the ideas you offer” and advises people to remove clutter to present a neat, orderly working space. Aruda (2020) also recommends that users avoid sending a messy message (e.g., dishes piled on the counter) and argues that individuals must be thoughtful about what their background says about them if they hope to deliver a compelling message. Likewise, Sergy (2021), claims “everything people see on camera carries a message” (p. 46) and she strongly recommends against backgrounds showing a bed or portion of a bed, a toilet bowl, questionable wall art or décor, and anything messy or disorganized such as laundry baskets, toys, or books and papers haphazardly stacked.

The social cognition literature supports these claims that a person’s background setting plays a large role in how he/she is perceived by others. People interpret information in their social environment (e.g., behavioral cues, visual cues, and physical cues such as office décor and aesthetics) as evidence of other’s traits and identities (Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Goffman, 1959; Macrae & Bodenhausen, 2000). Individuals also use a process of mental categorization to further organize this information, forming the basis of their judgments of others (Kunda, 2000). This cognitive categorization increases our ability to anticipate others’ traits and behaviors by

allowing us to make inferences, attributions, and stereotypes that influence how we view others. Our judgments of others are also impacted by social norms of what are acceptable behavior or practices. Additionally, observers recognize that people have control over their personal spaces and use them as a means of expressing themselves, especially spaces that are highly central or important to their lives (e.g., home, office) (Altman, 1975; Brown, 1987). Thus, observers are likely to conclude that individuals are intentional in how these spaces appear. In virtual meetings, some individuals have positioned themselves in locations of their home that Goffman (1959) would refer to as ‘backstage’, or private areas that an average guest to one’s home would not typically see (e.g., bedroom), thereby creating a negative impression and discomfort for the viewer (Darke & Gurney, 2010). In other instances, individuals may have a background setting that is considered appropriate (e.g., living room, home office), but its condition or certain artifacts may not be.

In studies of both home and workplace environments, one of the most consistent findings is that untidiness leaves a negative impression on others. For example, Gosling et al. (2002) found that an untidy, disorganized, and cluttered office led observers to view the owner of that office as low in conscientiousness. Similarly, Harris and Sachau (2005) found that observers of a messy apartment (compared to a tidy one) believed the owner to have lower agreeableness and conscientiousness, and higher neuroticism. These findings were replicated by Horgan, et al. (2019) for observers of messy and tidy research offices. Negative impressions about untidiness can also extend to judgments of professionalism and the probability of career success. For example, Elsbach (2004) found a messy office was viewed by others as unprofessional and was also indicative of one’s status. One participant noted, “it says something about who you are. I mean, on the downside, my messy office is on the office tour, so it’s a constant reminder to other

managers that I'm not a mover and shaker" (p. 110). Another participant gave the following impression of a co-worker's office: "There's not a horizontal surface that doesn't have something on it..... I thought, boy this guy is so disorganized, he's never going to make it in this organization" (p. 117).

Negative impressions of untidiness are rooted in social and cultural norms of cleanliness and tidiness which evolved during the industrialization and urbanization of the Western world (Crook, 2008; Dion, et al., 2014; Shove, 2003). These norms were reinforced by institutional power structures as standards of worth, separating the bourgeoisie from the working class. Since then, the proliferation of media associated with standards for living space decoration has promoted tidiness and cleanliness as an important value (Harris & Sachau, 2005). As a result, untidiness creates what Douglas (1967) refers to as "symbolic pollution" which emerges when things are "out of place" or violate systems of classification or order. Transgressions of these standards are regarded as wrong and potentially harmful to one's image. It is important to note that untidiness can also be referred to as clutter (often linked to a more extreme problem of hoarding) which is seen in society as a moral failing of an individual's responsibility to deal with it (Lauster et al., 2016; Woodward, 2021). A recent study by Thebaud et al. (2021) shows that a messy room activates negative social and cultural stereotypes, regardless of whether the room occupant is male or female. Therefore, we believe that these social norms of cleanliness and tidiness will extend to how individuals perceive others and their settings in a virtual environment, such that those with a messy background setting during a virtual work meeting will be perceived more negatively in terms of professionalism, competence, and career success as opposed to those with a tidy background setting. Thus, we propose:

Hypothesis 1: Respondents will have less favorable impressions regarding the target's professionalism, competence, and career success for those with a messy environment.

Parenthood and Its Influence on Work-Related Perceptions

A *Wall Street Journal* article focusing on workplace Zoom etiquette advised Zoom participants to “arrange for family to stay out of the way” (Morris, 2020). When a link to the article was posted to LinkedIn, some members supported the author’s advice, saying that children were a distraction and not appropriate for a professional office setting. Others disagreed, seeing children on screen as refreshing and making the workplace more human. Research also shows work-related perceptions are affected by an employee’s parental status. For example, working mothers are perceived as less competent and of less value to the organization than childless women (Cuddy et al., 2004; Ridgeway & Correll, 2004). Additional studies demonstrate the existence of a fatherhood “bonus” and a motherhood “penalty” such that fathers experience advantages over childless men in hiring, salary, and promotion opportunities while working mothers are disadvantaged in comparison to childless women (Aranda & Glick, 2014; Budig & England, 2001; Correll, et al., 2007; Cuddy et al., 2004; Fuegen et al., 2004; Heilman & Okimoto, 2008; King, 2008).

Applying social role theory (Eagly, 1987; Eagly & Wood, 2012) and the concept of the “ideal worker”, Bear and Glick (2017) suggested that the motherhood penalty and fatherhood bonus is better described as a caregiver penalty and breadwinner bonus. According to social role theory, gender role expectations and norms are socially imposed on both men and women such that men are expected to focus on work and support their families financially while women are expected to focus on family and home maintenance. Thus, women with children are expected to be less committed to work, whereas men with children are expected to have greater work commitment (Aranda & Glick, 2014; Correll et al., 2007). Additionally, many workplaces still endorse the traditional ideal worker norm which defines ideal employees as those who are

always available and prioritize work above all other matters in their lives (Acker, 1990; Reid, 2015). Additionally, the Protestant Relational Ideology, the belief that affective and relational concerns are inappropriate for the workplace has significantly impacted contemporary work values of the United States (Sanchez-Burks, 2002; Williams & Ceci, 2012).

Traditionally, men with stay-at-home wives were believed to be the most ideal workers because they were unencumbered by family responsibilities. Likewise, childless single women who are fully devoted to their work have also been considered ideal workers (Dumas & Sanchez-Burks, 2015). Mothers can also experience a breadwinner bonus in salary and leadership training offers if they present themselves as family breadwinners while a caregiver penalty can decrease salary for both sexes (Bear & Glick, 2017). Similarly, Steffens et al. (2019) found a caregiver penalty for single fathers such that they were perceived as less competent and less committed to their jobs than married men or childless men. Research has also shown that men who share caregiver responsibilities and work reduced hours are evaluated less positively than full-time working fathers (Vinkenburg et al., 2012).

Presence of a child on-screen during a virtual work meeting is a visual cue reflecting parental status and could negatively influence observers' work-related perceptions of that employee. Social norms regarding appropriate work behavior are also likely to influence observers' perceptions. Consistent with the concept of the ideal worker and traditional norms regarding separation of one's personal life from one's professional life (Dumas & Sanchez-Burks, 2015), research shows that non-work role referencing can negatively affect others' judgments about an individual's professionalism. For example, Döring and Willems (2021) found that perceived professional image was negatively affected by non-work objects present in an employee's workspace including several family photos and a child's artwork. The presence of

a child in a work-related virtual meeting has also been found to negatively impact observers' perceptions. In 2017, the video of the BBC Zoom interview by Professor Robert Kelly whose children interrupted his live interview went viral, and many commenters were critical of his failure to effectively separate work from home life (Zeavin, 2021). McIntyre et al. (2021) argues that the presence of a child in work-related Zoom calls provokes anxiety for those viewing the situation because of the collision of professional and domestic identities.

While the above example reflects a situation where the on-screen presence of a child was an unexpected intrusion, there have been other instances where the on-screen presence of children is more intentional. For example, parents on social media sites have been criticized for oversharing posts about their children and selectively posting pictures of the family as “happy” to present themselves as “good” parents (Lazard et al., 2019). Known as “sharenting”, this behavior is considered bragging or showing off in a manner that is self-serving and annoying to the audience. It is now viewed as a form of digital narcissism because of its grandiosity and self-absorption (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017; Lazard, 2022). Because videoconferencing has similar characteristics to platforms associated with social media (e.g., FaceTime), we believe that such behavior could spill over into other digital or virtual forums and that those who engage in sharenting or have interruptions by their child during workplace virtual meetings would be viewed negatively by observers. Thus, we predict:

Hypothesis 2: Respondents will have less favorable impressions regarding the target's professionalism, competence, and career success when the target has a child present on screen.

Gender Differences in Household and Parental Responsibilities

Women typically engage in more household chores and accept more parental responsibility compared to men in heterosexual relationships (Carlson et al., 2021). While

overall hours devoted to housework has decreased over time (Bianchi et al., 2012), gender is one of the strongest predictors of how much housework a person does, with women continuing to do a disproportionate amount of the housework in most households at all stages of life (Fetterolf & Rudman, 2014; Horne et al., 2018). Although evidence shows that fathers increased their level of contribution to housework during the COVID-19 pandemic, mothers continued to bear the primary responsibility for housework during that period (Dunatchik et al., 2021).

Studies of perceptions regarding who is responsible for cleanliness and tidiness show that this generally falls to women. Darke and Gurney (2010) argue that, even if a married woman is working, others assume it is her responsibility to oversee this chore (or to assign tasks to others who may help with this). In addition, findings show that it is she who is to blame if the presentation of the home falls short of the ideal. Similarly, in their study of gender and housework norms, Thebaud et al. (2021) found that respondents were more likely to think that women are responsible for housework than men, regardless of a woman's marital, parental, and employment status. In addition, these respondents also believed that "most others" would hold women more accountable for cleanliness/tidiness than men. Therefore, we believe that these gender stereotypes regarding cleanliness and tidiness would influence observers' perceptions of others' home environments during workplace virtual meetings. This leads to the following hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: There will be a significant interaction between home background and gender such that a messy house will have a greater negative impact on observers' perceptions of female targets than male targets.

Regarding parental responsibilities, women also carry the primary responsibility for childcare in the household (Carlson et al., 2021; Fetterolf & Rudman, 2014), even though men have increased their involvement in childrearing activities over time (Bianchi et al., 2012).

Studies show that, although fathers did share some of the responsibility for childcare during the pandemic, much of the responsibility for childcare and schooling fell on mothers (Clark et al., 2021; Dunatchik et al., 2021; Shockley et al., 2021). This burden of responsibility does have implications for women's career success. Heilman and Okimoto (2008) found a bias against caregivers such that subjects anticipated lower job commitment, achievement striving, and dependability for parents compared to non-parents. Of particular concern, however, was that mothers were viewed as less competent and less likely to be recommended for advancement than either fathers or women without children. Research by King (2008) also found that mothers lagged fathers regarding income and expected advancement in academia. More recent research shows similar findings in that women who opted to take maternity leave were viewed as prioritizing family over work and suffered negative perceptions of their competence in workplace evaluations (Morgenroth & Heilman, 2017). Therefore, like the prior arguments regarding household work, we suggest that mothers are likely to be viewed less favorably than men in terms of work outcomes (e.g., competence, professionalism, career success) given widespread assumptions that women have primary responsibility for their children. This suggests the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 4: There will be a significant interaction between child presence and gender such that having children present will have a greater negative impact on observers' perceptions of female targets than male targets.

Recent empirical research has tried to ascertain the relative contribution made by the target and the perceiver in impression formation. Some impressions of targets can be formed quite consistently across various groups of perceivers (i.e., target-driven) (Hehman et al., 2017) while other impressions of targets are influenced more by perceiver-driven differences (e.g., gender, race) (Bowdring et al., 2021; Chan et al., 2011). Xie et al. (2019) found that appearance

was more critical in impression formation for women perceivers than men perceivers. Other studies have also shown that women are more critical than men in how they evaluate certain settings, such as hotel room condition and cleanliness (Lockyer, 2003), restaurants with visible kitchens (Alonso & O'Neill, 2010) and office environmental quality (e.g., lighting, layout, cleanliness, furnishings) (Kim et al., 2013). Because research shows that others hold women to higher standards of tidiness and cleanliness than men (Thebaud et al., 2021), we contend that women will be sensitive to this. Thus, we believe that women will be more critical than men in their judgment of others with messy environments during virtual work meetings.

Similarly, it is likely that women may be more sensitive to the presence of a child on-screen during a virtual work meeting realizing that most people would perceive it as is a form of non-work referencing and a failure to separate one's personal life from professional life (Döring & Willems, 2021; Dumas & Sanchez-Burks, 2015). In support, research by Kossek et al. (2021) found that most of the working women in their study, particularly those who were career-invested, were aware of the need to manage others' perceptions and therefore concealed aspects of their personal lives during virtual work meetings to ensure their careers success. Because this study shows that women are likely to be more aware of the non-work referencing norm than men, we believe that women would be more critical than men in their perception of the presence of a child on-screen during a virtual work meeting. Whether the presence of the child on-screen was viewed as an interruption or intentional, we contend that women would see this as a violation of the non-work referencing norm. Thus, this leads to the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 5: Women, compared to men, will have less favorable impressions of the target's professionalism, competence, and career success for those with a messy environment.

Hypothesis 6: Women, compared to men, will have less favorable impressions of the target's professionalism, competence, and career success for those with a child present.

Method

Sample

Our respondents consisted of 711 graduate and undergraduate students recruited from business courses at two medium-sized universities, one located in the southeast and the other in the Midwest. IRB approval was received before administering the survey. The sample consisted of 359 females (50.5%) and 352 males (49.7%). The average age was 25.73 (sd=6.56). Most were white/Caucasian (74.8%, N=532), the remaining were Black/African American (11.7%, N=83), Hispanic/Latino (6%, N=43), Asian or Pacific Islander (5%, N=35), or other (2.5%, N=18).

Experimental Design and Procedure

This study included 16 experimental conditions with two levels for performance (high or low), target gender (male or female), background (messy or tidy), and child (on camera or not on camera). Participants were randomly assigned to one of the 16 conditions through an online survey platform. The electronic questionnaire began with a letter of consent including the IRB approval number, followed by a scenario explaining that six accountants at the Green Hills Accounting firm are working from home and are meeting with their manager via Zoom to discuss some work-related issues. They were then told the manager will be making a decision soon on which employees to recommend for a special management training program for employees with high leadership potential.

The scenario was followed by a photo of a computer screen showing six employees participating in a meeting via Zoom. The photo shown to each participant varied according to the experimental condition. See Figure 1. Participants were asked to focus on Gabrielle Williams [or James Williams in the male target condition] and Linda Anderson. All participants

provided ratings of two employees, instead of just the experimentally manipulated target, to help disguise the focus of the study.

After completing two attention check questions (“In what position on the screen is Gabrielle [or James] Williams?” and “In what position on the screen is Linda Anderson?”), participants read the following: “The manager just completed the performance evaluations for Gabrielle [or James] and Linda today. After viewing their evaluations on the next couple screens, you will be asked to provide your evaluation of these two software developers.” This was followed by a close-up photo of Gabrielle (or James) Williams and a summary of the performance evaluation for Gabrielle (or James) Williams. For example, in the high-performance condition, the performance information provided for the male employee was as follows:

Of the 10 performance criteria that James Williams was evaluated on, he received an average rating of 4.67 on a 5-point scale where a 5=outstanding (extraordinarily high performance), 4 = very good (performance exceeds expectations), and 3 = meets expectations. The comment section read: ‘Achieved all 3 goals set in the previous review’ and ‘James exceeds expectations in all his assigned duties and his interpersonal relationships with internal and external customers; he is a viable candidate for leadership within the next 5 years.’

Participants then answered two attention check questions regarding the performance information provided including, “What was the average performance rating received?” and “Gabrielle’s (or James) supervisor provided which of the following comments in the comment section?”

The next screen presented the image of the Zoom meeting once again containing all six employees with the following instructions: “Recall that the manager will be making a decision soon on which employees to recommend for a special management training program for

employees with high leadership potential. With that in mind, please answer the questions below.”

Participants were then asked to rate Gabrielle (or James) Williams on several criteria. The same series of screens and procedure was followed for the employee named Linda Anderson. The final screen included demographic questions (age, gender, race).

Measures

Dependent Variables. The dependent variables consisted of three measures: professionalism, competence, and career outcomes. All items were rated using a 6-point scale (strongly disagree=1, strongly agree=6). We used the 4-item measure developed by Koval and Rosette (2021) for professionalism (polished, refined, professional, respectable) and competence (qualified, competent, effective, good at the job). The career outcomes measure consisted of four items: “[Name of employee] should be considered further for the training opportunity (i.e., the special management training program for employees with high leadership potential)”, “I am confident that sending [name of employee] to the training is a wise investment for the organization”, “It is likely [name of employee] will be promoted to a higher position sometime during her [his] career with the company”, and “It is likely that [Name of employee] will receive a performance bonus this year.”

Control variables. Because attractiveness has been found to affect evaluations of others (Hosoda et al., 2003; Judge et al., 2009; Morrow et al., 1990) we measured respondents’ perceptions of the attractiveness of the candidates as a control variable. This measure consisted of two items: attractive and good looking. The performance manipulation was also used as a control variable as our goal was to determine whether gender, a messy background or having a child on camera would affect ratings over and above that of the target’s performance.

Results

Table 1 reports descriptive statistics including the means, standard deviations and intercorrelations for the measured variables. Cronbach alpha estimates are provided in parentheses along the diagonal. Consistent with previous research (e.g., Hosoda et al., 2003), attractiveness was significantly related ($p < .001$) to all three dependent variables ($r = .35, .33$, and $.30$ for professionalism, competence, and career outcomes, respectively). Performance level was also significantly related ($p < .001$) to all three dependent variables ($r = .68, .84$, and $.83$ for professionalism, competence, and career outcomes, respectively). To test our hypotheses, we conducted an ANCOVA on each of our three dependent variables (professionalism, competence, and career success) with attractiveness and performance entered as covariates and target gender, participant gender, background, and child entered as the independent variables. See Table 2.

Having a messy background was found to have a significant negative impact on observer perceptions of the target's professionalism [$F(1, 693) = 77.04, p < .001$] and career outcomes ($F(1, 693) = 4.15, p < .05$), but it did not have a significant impact on observer perceptions of the target's competence [$F(1, 693) = .95, ns$]. Thus, hypothesis 1 was partially supported. Having a child present did not impact any of the dependent variables, thus hypothesis 2 was not supported. In hypothesis 3 and 4, we predicted that having a messy background (hypothesis 3) and having a child present (hypothesis 4) would have a greater negative impact on observer perceptions of female targets than male targets. However, no significant interactions were found for any of the three dependent variables, thus hypotheses 3 and 4 were not supported.

In hypothesis 5, we predicted that women would be more critical of messy environments and thus, would have less favorable impressions of the target's professionalism, competence, and career success than men. As predicted, the interaction between participant gender and messy

background was significant [$F(1, 693) = 13.48, p < .001$] for observer perceptions of professionalism. Women were more critical of the target's professionalism than men. See Figure 2. We found no significant interaction between participant gender and messy background for competence or career outcomes. Thus, hypothesis 5 was only partially supported.

In hypothesis 6, we predicted that women, compared to men, would be more critical of targets with a child present. However, no significant interactions were found between participant gender and child presence for any of the three dependent variables, thus hypothesis 6 was not supported. Contrary to our prediction, we found a significant three-way interaction between target gender, presence of child, and participant gender [$F(1, 693) = 4.44, p < .05$] on ratings of career outcomes. For female participants, having a child present had a positive effect on their ratings of female targets' potential career outcomes but little impact on their ratings of male targets. Similarly, for male participants, having a child present had a positive effect on their ratings of male targets' potential career outcomes but little impact on their ratings of female targets. See Figure 3.

Although we did not predict an interaction between messiness and child presence, we found this interaction for all three of our dependent variables including professionalism [$F(1, 693) = 35.98, p < .001$], competence [$F(1, 693) = 8.67, p = .003$], and career success [$F(1, 693) = 14.55, p < .001$]. As shown in Figure 4, having a child present tends to buffer the negative impact of a messy background on observer's perceptions of the target. Individuals who had a messy background and a child present were rated higher on professionalism, competence and career outcomes (EMM = 3.74, SE = .07, EMM = 4.08, SE = .06, and EMM = 3.87, SE = .06, respectively) than those with a messy background and no child present (EMM = 3.30, SE = .07, EMM = 3.85, SE = .06, and EMM = 3.51, SE = .07, respectively). Another unexpected

result was a significant interaction between target gender and child presence [$F(1, 693) = 4.19, p < .05$] such that female targets, compared to male targets, were rated higher on professionalism when there was no child present ($EMM = 3.91, SE = .07$ versus $EMM = 3.67, SE = .07$ for females and males, respectively).

Discussion

This study examined the extent to which an employee's messy (or tidy) living space and the presence of a child on screen during virtual workplace meetings impacted observers' perceptions of the employee's professionalism, competence, and potential career outcomes. The results show that messiness alone results in less favorable perceptions of the target employee's professionalism and career outcomes, but not competence. Thus, it appears most individuals believe that messy people appear less professional and may experience less career success; however, messy people can still be competent.

The most consistent finding of this study was that individuals with a messy background experience a buffer effect if they have a child present. That is, individuals with a messy background were rated higher in professionalism, competence, and career outcomes when they had a child present than when there was no child present. This is consistent with attribution theory (Weiner, 1986) such that perceivers make internal attributions about those who are messy as perhaps a character flaw or they assume targets possess one or more negative personality traits (such as lower levels of agreeableness and conscientiousness and higher levels of neuroticism) (Horgan et al., 2019). However, once a child is present and provides an alternative explanation for the messiness, perceivers may make an external attribution about the cause of the messiness. When considering the constraints and limitations of others such as child rearing, individuals are typically more understanding and give them the "benefit of the doubt." These results are

particularly encouraging for parents given that perceivers do potentially make external attributions about messiness with more favorable perceptions of competence and career outcomes for those who have children. In the paragraphs that follow, we discuss the study's limitations as well as what our findings mean for researchers and practitioners.

Limitations and Implications for Future Research

This study is not without limitations. Our sample was comprised mostly of young adults with limited work experience, so it is important that future studies utilize an older more diverse sample. Another limitation is that the photos presented to our participants (showing a computer screen with six employees participating in a meeting via Zoom) were still shots and did not include any movement or audio. Further, in the child present condition, the child in the photo appeared to be sitting quietly and smiling, with the meeting participants in the photo also smiling. Thus, one explanation as to why targets with a child present were not viewed more negatively than those without a child is that observers may not have interpreted the child's presence as an intrusion. Very different results may likely have occurred if the child was talking, yelling, crying, or running around and if the meeting participants had annoyed expressions on their faces. Future research should examine these additional factors.

Based on literature suggesting that female observers tend to be more critical in their impressions of others than men (Xie et al., 2019), we predicted women, compared to men, would view the targets with messy environments more negatively. These results were found for observers' perceptions of the target's professionalism but not competence or career outcomes. It is possible that female observers viewed a messy environment during a meeting with coworkers as reflecting negatively on the target's professionalism but not necessarily their

competence or career success as the work of an accountant is often performed alone at a computer and he or she could change his or her environment before meeting with clients.

We also found some unexpected interactions. For example, female targets were rated higher on professionalism than males in the no-child condition. It is possible that unmeasured factors may have impacted this result. While we controlled for attractiveness, the male and female targets were not identical in terms of attire and the male target had a trace of a beard. These differences could have led participants to rate the female target higher than the male target. Future research controlling for attire and other appearance factors would be beneficial. Also unexpected was the three-way interaction between target gender, presence of child, and participant gender on ratings of career outcomes. It is interesting that having a child present had a more positive impact on both male and female observer ratings of career outcomes for targets of their same gender but little impact on those of the opposite gender. One possible explanation is that “career outcomes” is more of a long-term measure of success, thus, it is possible that males and females believe that having a child or family is an important aspect of life and can allow others to view a person as more well-rounded, thereby complementing one’s career success. However, given the age of our sample, it may be that they feel more comfortable making this judgment about those of their same gender but less so for those of the opposite gender. Future research should examine this more closely.

Finally, while our research contributes to the literature by being the only study to date to examine the effects of a messy home environment and child presence on others’ perceptions during virtual work meetings, there are still many questions that remain. For example, how might perceiver differences in parental status or messiness/tidiness affect their perceptions of others? Because individuals are more likely to form social relationships based on homophily or

similarity (Rogers & Bhowmik, 1970), parents may perceive other parents more favorably than those who are not parents. Likewise, perceivers who consider themselves messy might be less likely to be critical of targets who are messy. It would also be interesting to note if individuals who identify as parents are more likely to stereotype their non-parent colleagues. Additionally, do messy individuals stereotype their neater counterparts? This would be representative of heterophily, or the degree to which these individuals are different.

Future research should also examine degree of messiness or child presence as both variables may be better represented on a spectrum rather than a dichotomous choice. There are many different degrees of messiness (e.g., individuals who are hoarders versus individuals with clutter). With parenting, there may be one child versus several children, or the age of the children may be relevant (e.g., infants, toddlers, versus middle school teenagers). Additionally, this study used the job of an accountant as the target's job, which according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, is held predominately by women (62%; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Future research should examine additional job types including male-dominated jobs. Finally, cross-cultural work would be particularly useful.

Implications for Practice

Our findings show that stereotypes do indeed exist and influence the way in which individuals perceive others in virtual meetings. Just as in face-to-face interactions, any aspect of the context of communication can influence others' perceptions. It is therefore important for organizations to provide individuals with training on virtual meetings. Because the switch to remote work during the pandemic lockdown happened almost overnight, advanced training was not an option. Now, there is an opportunity to train individuals, not only on the proper use of the technology, but also the nuances of self-presentation in virtual meetings and its implications for

career success (Sergy, 2021). Employees appear largely unaware of the effects of how people and objects in one's virtual background can affect observers' perceptions. Training should include examples of both perceptual biases as well as guidance on how to project a positive image to others. As indicated by Sergy (2021), "videoconferencing skills are no longer a nice-to-have; they're a need-to-have, and at this stage there's no excuse not to develop some skill with it" (p. 18).

It is also important to note that stereotypes can change and evolve over time. As discussed earlier, some research suggests that women have less traditional stereotypes about other women and/or also expect more masculine traits from women (Koch et al., 2015) so it is possible that stereotypes around messiness and parental status may be changing too. Perhaps one ambiguous impact of COVID has been the collision of personal and professional lives for many. While the pandemic created a lot of hardships for families with limited space and access to resources, this experience caused many to reconsider not only their own current job and/or organization but has also challenged their assumptions about competence and career outcomes in others. That is, after watching parents struggle with having children interrupting their work meetings and dealing with disorganized home backgrounds, it appears that we may have more tolerance and understanding than before. Although individuals in messy environments and those dealing with children in such settings may be deemed less professional than those in tidy environments, it does not seem to affect perceptions of their competence and career outcomes. Making more external attributions and demonstrating less stereotyping of others is movement in the "right" direction (Wenham et al., 2020).

Conclusion

In this paper, we find that a messy environment with a child present affects how individual perceivers view targets. With that finding, it suggests that targets may want to think more carefully about how they are perceived in a work setting. This is particularly important when one's primary means of communicating for work is through virtual meetings. Likewise, perceivers may want to think more carefully about how they perceive others based on certain characteristics. This suggests that we have much more work to do regarding our determination of individuals' values and goals and supporting workers as they prioritize them. Further, we need to recognize that there are biases we hold that affect those around us (and ourselves) in infinite ways. How can we help people become the best version of themselves? How do we promote cultural and societal norms that matter most? How do we accept individual differences that move us forward as organizations and as a society as a whole?

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Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, and Cronbach Alpha Reliabilities

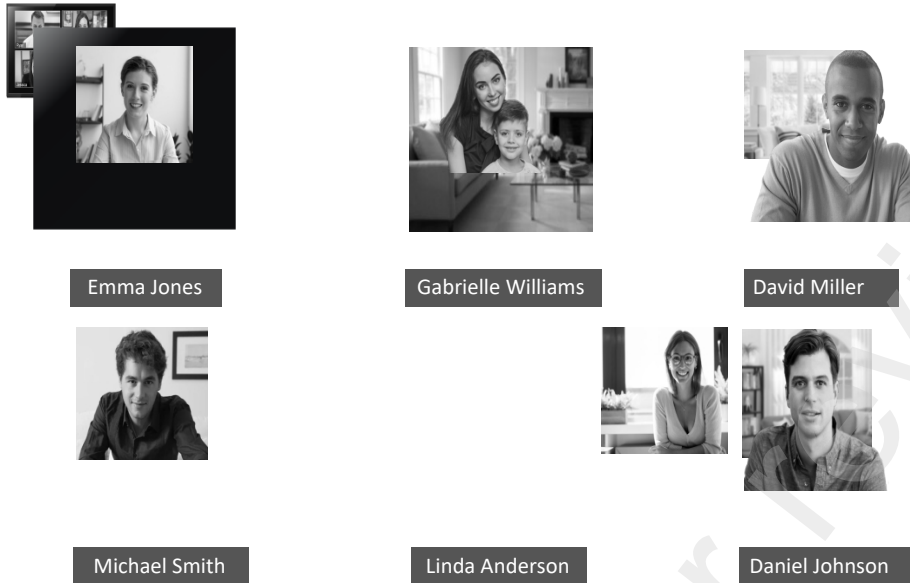
Variables	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Target Gender	.49	.50	---								
2. Participant Gender	.50	.50	-.07	---							
3. Child Present	.51	.50	.01	.01	---						
4. Messy Background	.49	.50	-.01	.00	.04	---					
5. Performance	.48	.50	-.01	-.02	-.04	-.00	---				
6. Attractiveness	4.31	1.06	-.16***	-.05	-.04	-.02	.27***	(.91)			
7. Professionalism	3.82	1.33	-.07	-.04	-.03	-.22***	.68***	.35***	(.93)		
8. Competence	4.0	1.43	-.05	-.01	-.02	-.02	.84***	.33***	.80***	(.96)	
9. Career Outcomes	3.77	1.53	-.05	.00	-.00	-.04	.83***	.30***	.76***	.87***	(.93)

Note: Target Gender = 0 female, 1 male; Performance = 0 low, 1 high; Background = 0 tidy, 1 messy, Child = 0 no child, 1 child present; * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 2. ANCOVA Results

	Professionalism F (1, 693)	Competence F (1, 693)	Career Outcomes F (1, 693)
<i>Control Variables</i>			
Performance	608.08***	1564.19***	1456.30***
Target Attractiveness	36.20***	23.38***	13.85***
<i>Main Effects</i>			
Target Gender	2.54	1.34	1.26
Messy Background	77.04***	.95	4.15*
Child Present	.43	1.11	3.65
Participant Gender	.52	.04	.49
<i>Interaction Effects</i>			
Target Gender x Messy Background	1.98	3.20	.49
Target Gender x Child Present	4.19*	.15	.36
Target Gender x Participant Gender	.10	3.16	2.64
Messy x Child Present	35.98***	8.67**	14.55***
Messy x Participant Gender	13.48***	1.00	.13
Child Present x Participant Gender	.40	.23	.00
Target Gender x Messy Background x Child Present	.42	1.54	.16
Target Gender x Messy Background x Participant Gender	1.63	.57	3.58
Target Gender x Child Present x Participant Gender	.15	2.53	4.44*
Messy Background x Child Present x Participant Gender	.07	.05	.16
Target Gender x Messy Background x Child Present x Participant Gender	.00	.13	.51

Figure 1: Examples of Photos Used in Two Experimental Conditions



Female target (Gabrielle Williams) with child and tidy background.



Male target (James Williams) with no child and messy background.

Figure 2. Interaction between messy background and participant gender on professionalism.

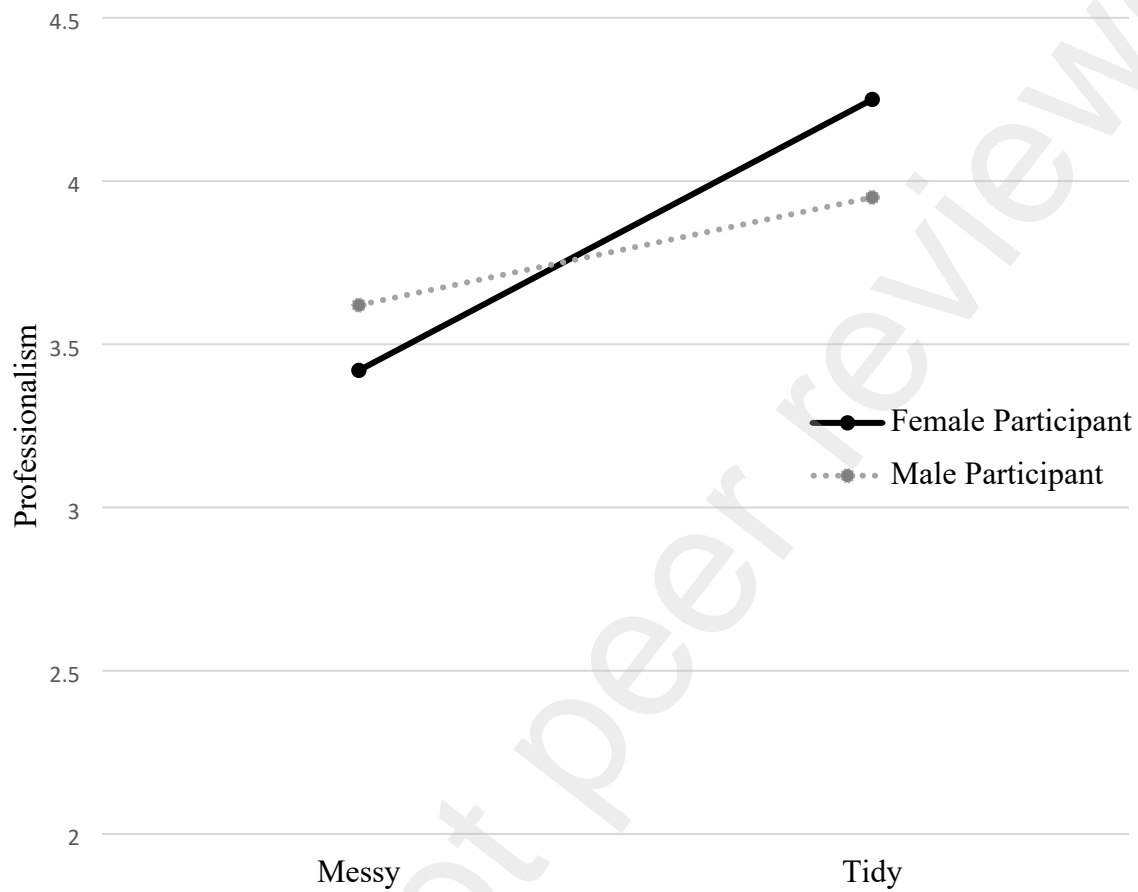
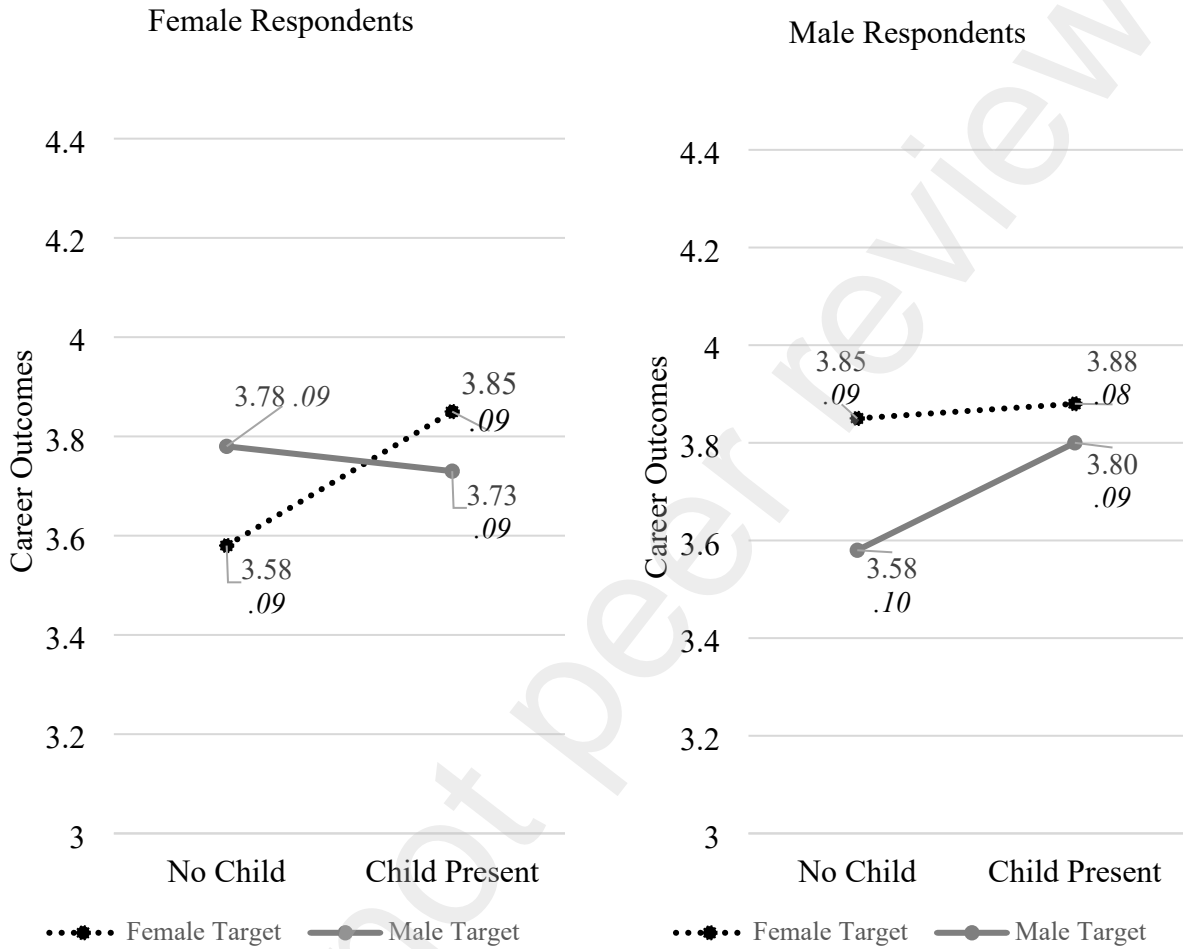


Figure 3. Three-way interaction between target gender, participant gender and child present on career outcomes



Note: Estimated marginal means and standard error terms are shown on each graph.

Figure 4. Interaction between messy background and child present on ratings of professionalism, competence, and career outcomes.

