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Cultural Conservatism and Perceptions of Women and Men Returning to Work After Parental Leave

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Abstract

Objective: The study aimed to determine how the decision to take or forgo parental leave affects social perceptions of women and men returning to work after the birth of a child, and whether these evaluations vary with participants' level of cultural conservatism. Drawing on social role theory and role congruity theory, we examined differences in perceived selfishness, antisociality, and agency.

Method: The study involved 138 participants randomly assigned to one of four groups that differed in the gender of the person described and that person's decision regarding parental leave. Participants evaluated the individuals presented using adjective rating scales and completed a measure of cultural conservatism.

Results: Women who forwent parental leave were rated as more selfish and antisocial than women who took leave. Higher cultural conservatism among participants was associated with higher perceived antisociality of women who forwent leave, while a nonsignificant trend in the same direction was observed for selfishness. Fathers who forwent leave were evaluated less favorably than fathers who took it. For perceived selfishness, a nonsignificant trend indicated an association between lower cultural conservatism among

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participants and harsher evaluations of fathers who forwent leave. In addition, women who forwent leave were perceived as more agentic than men who made the same decision.

Conclusion: The findings highlight the importance of gender roles and ideological orientations in shaping social evaluations of parenting decisions. They may provide an important reference point for organizational policies and measures that promote an equal division of caregiving responsibilities in the workplace.

Keywords: *gender roles, conservatism, parental leave, social role theory, role congruity theory*

Social Role Theory and Attitudes Toward Women and Men

Social role theory is one approach to explaining differences and similarities in the behavior of women and men (Eagly & Wood, 2012). It proposes that observed gender differences arise from the different social roles that women and men occupy, as shaped by socialization and cultural expectations. As a result, the behavior of women and men both reflects and reinforces the existing division of social and occupational roles.

In many countries, women are still primarily expected to care for children and the home, whereas men are expected to provide for the family and engage in paid employment (Eagly & Wood, 2012; OECD, 2023, 2025). Data from the International Labour Organization (2024) show that, in 2023, the employment rate was 48.7% for women and 73% for men. Women accounted for as many as 66% of the 2.4 billion people outside the labor force, and almost half of these women (45%) cited caregiving as the main reason for their inactivity; the corresponding figure for men was only 5%. In Poland in 2023, 9.6% of women and 1.3% of men reported being outside the labor force because of caregiving responsibilities.

According to Eagly et al. (2012), gender roles are defined by two main dimensions: communion and agency. Communal traits, such as kindness, caring, and emotional expressiveness, are more often attributed to women, whereas agentic traits, such as assertiveness, independence, and competence, are more often attributed to men. However, social pressure to conform to these roles is asymmetric: women face greater pressure to behave communally than men do to behave agentically. Women are also penalized for displaying agency, whereas men generally avoid penalties for displaying communion and are sometimes even rewarded for it (Wojciszke, 2012).

Role congruity theory extends social role theory by specifying how people who depart from their prescribed social roles are evaluated. It proposes that individuals are evaluated positively when their traits and behavior match the expectations associated with their social role, and negatively when they do not (Diekman & Goodfriend, 2006). Research by Heilman et al. (2004) showed that women who succeed in domains regarded as masculine elicit negative emotions more often than women who succeed in traditionally feminine or gender-neutral domains. This effect occurs regardless of the evaluators' gender, suggesting that

both women and men internalize the same gender stereotypes. This phenomenon illustrates how deeply rooted cultural expectations concerning women's and men's roles are, and how often people who depart from them encounter social disapproval.

Social role theory and role congruity theory suggest that women who forgo parental leave will be evaluated less positively than those who take it, because their decision departs from the traditional caregiving role. Men who decide to take parental leave, in turn, may encounter negative evaluations because this behavior conflicts with the established breadwinner role and challenges social norms of masculinity.

Whether women's and men's behavior is evaluated as consistent or inconsistent with their prescribed roles depends on social beliefs and expectations, making attitudes toward these groups particularly important. In this article, attitudes toward the individuals described are understood as explicit evaluations of the traits attributed to them, shaped by social beliefs and expectations (Wojciszke, 2012).

Cultural Conservatism and Attitudes Toward Gender Roles

Ideological orientation is one factor that differentiates attitudes toward gender roles. The liberalism–conservatism dimension describes differences in attitudes toward the existing social order: conservatism is associated with stronger support for maintaining it, whereas liberalism is associated with greater willingness to modify it in response to perceived inequalities (Wojciszke, 2012). These orientations also differ in their predominant moral motivations: protecting society from threats in the case of conservatism, and seeking to improve the well-being of its members in the case of liberalism (Janoff-Bulman, 2009).

The *Political Beliefs Questionnaire* (KPP, from the Polish *Kwestionariusz przekonań politycznych*) distinguishes two dimensions of ideology: economic and cultural (Czarnek et al., 2017). On the cultural dimension, left-wing views emphasize social liberalism, openness to diversity, and a secular state, whereas right-wing views emphasize attachment to tradition and to national and religious communities, and acceptance of the Church's influence on public life (Wojciszke, 2012).

People high in cultural conservatism identify strongly with traditional values and social norms (Van Hiel & Mervielde, 2004). In their view, women should fulfill traditionally prescribed roles, such as caring for children (Middendorp, 1978, as cited in Van Hiel & Mervielde, 2004). Higher cultural conservatism should therefore be associated with negative attitudes toward women who do not fulfill their prescribed social roles, for example by forgoing parental leave.

Gender Differences in the Use of Leave Available to Parents

Decisions about parental leave are one area in which gender norms and related attitudes may be particularly evident. In Poland, as in many Western

countries, leave for parents is a key component of family policy. It rests on two pillars: job protection and financial support for parents (Lalive et al., 2014). Such leave is intended to cushion the economic consequences of a career break, support women's labor force participation, and reduce financial stress in families after the birth of a child. According to the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy (2018, 2023a, 2023b, 2024), employees in Poland are entitled to maternity, paternity, and parental leave following the birth of a child. Table 1 presents the characteristics of these types of leave.

Table 1

Characteristics of Leave Available to Employees Following the Birth of a Child

Type of leave	Duration	Specific provisions	Benefit amount
Maternity	20–37 weeks (depending on the number of children born)	At least 14 weeks; the remaining portion may be taken by the father	100% of the benefit calculation base
Paternity	2 weeks	Entitlement cannot be transferred to the mother	100% of the benefit calculation base
Parental	41–43 or 65–67 weeks (depending on the health and number of children born)	9 weeks of nontransferable leave for each parent	70% of the benefit calculation base

Note. Prepared by the authors based on information from the Ministry of Family, Labour and Social Policy (2018, 2023a, 2023b, 2024).

Changes in women's and men's social roles are reflected in women's increasing participation in paid employment, from 31% of women in 1950 to 51.5% in 2024 (Statistics Poland, 2024). Changes concerning men, however, have been much less pronounced (Diekman & Goodfriend, 2006). Gender differences are also evident in the use of these types of leave. According to a Pracuj.pl report (2018), only 10% of women take no form of leave, compared with 30% of men. Most women (67%) take leave lasting 6–12 months, whereas only 1% of fathers opt for such a long break. The most common form of leave among men is two weeks of paternity leave, and only approximately 25% share parental leave.

Against the background of these differences, fathers' involvement in childcare is increasing, although it continues to coexist with the traditional expectation that men should be family breadwinners (Daly & Palkovitz, 2004, as cited in Solomon, 2014; Włodarczyk, 2014). Research indicates that fathers who take parental leave develop stronger bonds with their children and participate more often in daily care, such as feeding and changing diapers (Duvander & Jans, 2009; Huerta et al., 2014). Paid paternity leave reduces parents' stress and fatigue and lowers the severity of postpartum depression in mothers (Cardenas et al., 2021; O'Hara & Swain, 1996).

For women, taking parental leave remains consistent with their traditional social role, which centers on care and communion. Mothers who stay with their children are evaluated more positively than those who forgo leave and thereby violate gender norms (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2005). When their decision aligns with cultural expectations, women are protected from stigmatization and experience greater acceptance and belonging, which benefits their psychological well-being.

Research indicates that maternity leave policies support mothers' health both shortly after childbirth and later in life (Avendano et al., 2015). Women who take longer leave have better well-being, higher-quality relationships with their children, and higher rates of breastfeeding (Staehelin et al., 2007). Extending paid, job-protected leave is also associated with lower infant mortality (Tanaka, 2005).

Study Objective

Based on the theories and evidence on parental leave use presented above, decisions to take or forgo such leave can be expected to be interpreted through the lens of gender norms. Despite the extensive literature on mothers' and fathers' roles and the expectations placed on them, we found no studies showing how specific leave decisions translate into attitudes toward parents.

The aim of the study was therefore to determine how the decision to take or forgo parental leave affects social perceptions of women and men returning to work after the birth of a child. We examined these individuals' perceived selfishness, antisociality, and agency, as well as the association between participants' cultural conservatism and their self-reported attitudes toward the women and men described. On the basis of the theoretical frameworks presented above, we formulated the following hypotheses.

Research Hypotheses

H1: A woman who forgoes parental leave will be rated as more antisocial and selfish than a woman who takes parental leave.

H2: Higher levels of participants' cultural conservatism will be associated with higher ratings of antisociality and selfishness, and lower ratings of agency, for a woman who forgoes parental leave.

H3: Higher levels of participants' cultural conservatism will be associated with lower ratings of selfishness and higher ratings of agency for a man who forgoes parental leave.

H4: A man who takes parental leave will be rated as more antisocial and selfish than a man who forgoes parental leave.

Method

Participants

The questionnaire was available on Qualtrics from December 16, 2024, to February 26, 2025. Of the 193 participants, 138 were included in the analysis after incomplete and invalid responses had been excluded. Participants were randomly assigned to four experimental conditions, with 40, 30, 37, and 31 participants, respectively. Group sizes did not differ significantly, $\chi^2(3) = 2.00$, $p = .572$. The sample comprised 98 women and 40 men aged 19–58 years ($M = 30.31$, $SD = 10.68$). Most participants had a university degree (46.4%) or were currently studying at university (46.4%); the remaining participants had completed secondary education. Table 2 presents the distribution of participants' places of residence.

Table 2

Distribution of Places of Residence in the Final Sample

Category	Number	Percentage
Rural area	13	9.4%
Town or city with up to 50,000 inhabitants	10	7.2%
City with 50,000–150,000 inhabitants	6	4.3%
City with 150,000–500,000 inhabitants	12	8.7%
City with over 500,000 inhabitants	97	70.3%

The sample size was comparable to those used in experimental studies of social evaluations of mothers and fathers and the consequences of violating traditional parenting roles (e.g., Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2005; Heilman & Okimoto, 2008). In addition, an a priori power analysis was conducted in G*Power, assuming a medium effect size ($d = 0.50$), $\alpha = .05$, and power of $1 - \beta = .80$, which indicated a required sample of $N = 102$. The final sample ($N = 138$) provides power of .84, which we consider acceptable for exploratory research.

Materials and Measures

Parent Vignettes

Each participant was presented with one of four descriptions of a parent. The descriptions consisted of brief, parallel scenarios concerning a woman or a man in a managerial position who, after the birth of a child, either takes the parental leave to which they are entitled or forgoes it. The full texts of the vignettes are provided in Appendix 1.

Evaluations of Parents Using Adjective Rating Scales

Participants were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with 20 statements about the person whose description they had read. Responses were given on a five-point Likert scale (1: strongly disagree; 5: strongly agree). The adjectives included, among others, responsible, aggressive, and ambitious.

To assess the internal structure of the instrument, principal components analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation and Kaiser normalization was conducted on the sample of 138 participants. The number of components was determined using eigenvalues greater than 1.5, and items meeting the .595 component-loading criterion were included in the interpretation. The analysis yielded three components that jointly explained 59.99% of the variance, labeled antisociality (6 adjectives), selfishness (4 adjectives), and agency (6 adjectives). The scales included 15 of the 20 adjectives; five items ("reckless", "trustworthy", "greedy", "submissive", and "warm") did not meet the component-loading criterion. The item "selfish" was included in both scales because it had similar loadings on the antisociality and selfishness components. Scale reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, which was .87, .81, and .83, respectively, confirming the instrument's high internal consistency. Scores on each scale were calculated as the sum of the items assigned to the corresponding component. The rotated component matrix is presented in Appendix 2.

Political Beliefs

Political beliefs were measured using the *Political Beliefs Questionnaire* (KPP) developed by Bogdan Wojciszke. The instrument measures beliefs along the right–left dimension and covers two main dimensions: cultural (religious fundamentalism and xenophobia) and economic (acceptance of capitalism and anti-welfare attitudes). The questionnaire consists of 19 items rated on a five-point Likert scale (1: *strongly disagree*; 5: *strongly agree*). Higher scores on the individual subscales indicate more right-wing beliefs in the relevant domain. Cultural conservatism was treated as a continuous variable in the analyses.

The KPP has a four-factor structure confirmed by confirmatory factor analysis, with good fit (CFI = .92, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .06) and satisfactory reliability (α = .90 for cultural beliefs and .83 for economic beliefs; test–retest $r > .80$). Its construct and criterion-related validity are supported by correlations with the need for cognitive closure, right-wing authoritarianism, social dominance orientation, and religiosity, as well as by the finding that KPP scores predict self-reported party preferences (Czarnek et al., 2017).

Procedure

The study was conducted online using Qualtrics. The survey link was distributed through the SONA system and Messenger. After following the link, participants read an informed consent form containing information about the

voluntary and anonymous nature of participation, their right to withdraw, and the researchers' contact details.

The procedure comprised three parts. In the first, participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions that differed in the gender of the person described and that person's decision regarding parental leave. They then read a description of the parent and rated the person on a Likert scale using a set of adjectives; this part also included two check questions. In the second part, participants completed Bogdan Wojciszke's Political Beliefs Questionnaire (KPP), and in the third, they completed a demographic questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Statistical analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 29). The significance threshold was set at $\alpha = .05$, while results in the range $.05 < p < .10$ were treated as indicating a statistical trend.

Before conducting the analyses, we assessed whether parametric tests were appropriate. All experimental groups comprised at least 30 participants and were similar in size. Detailed descriptive statistics are presented below in Table 3. For the *t* tests, homogeneity of variance was additionally assessed using Levene's test.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for the Dependent Variables by Experimental Group

Group	Variable	Min	Max	*M*	*SD*	Skewness	Kurtosis
Woman taking parental leave (n = 40)	Participants' cultural conservatism	1.00	4.75	2.08	0.91	1.01	0.72
	Antisociality rating (sum)	6.00	20.00	12.03	4.06	0.03	−1.00
	Agency rating (sum)	18.00	30.00	24.00	4.01	0.03	−1.20
	Selfishness rating (sum)	3.00	15.00	5.55	2.45	1.65	4.34
Woman forgoing parental leave (n = 30)	Participants' cultural conservatism	1.00	4.75	2.16	0.96	0.99	0.40
	Antisociality rating (sum)	6.00	26.00	16.27	5.34	−0.15	−0.24
	Agency rating (sum)	10.00	30.00	24.83	4.14	−1.70	4.58
	Selfishness rating (sum)	4.00	14.00	8.93	2.70	0.11	−0.60
Man taking parental leave (n = 37)	Participants' cultural conservatism	1.00	4.00	2.15	0.75	0.63	0.30
	Antisociality rating (sum)	6.00	18.00	12.03	4.19	−0.20	−1.45
	Agency rating (sum)	16.00	30.00	24.41	3.64	−0.55	−0.13
	Selfishness rating (sum)	3.00	10.00	5.14	1.77	0.55	−0.04
Man forgoing parental leave (n = 31)	Participants' cultural conservatism	1.00	4.67	2.53	0.83	0.36	0.27
	Antisociality rating (sum)	8.00	23.00	15.52	4.17	−0.02	−1.10
	Agency rating (sum)	13.00	29.00	22.81	3.48	−0.85	0.78
	Selfishness rating (sum)	5.00	14.00	9.19	2.52	0.41	−0.56

Although the study had a 2 × 2 design (four groups), the hypotheses concerned specific, preplanned comparisons between two selected groups. Independent-samples *t* tests were therefore used as the simplest and most appropriate method for testing them. Associations between cultural conservatism and evaluations of interpersonal traits were examined using Pearson correlations, which are appropriate for assessing linear relationships between continuous variables.

Results

Differences in Evaluations of Women Who Forgo and Take Parental Leave

Hypothesis H1 predicted that a woman who forwent parental leave after the birth of a child (Group 2) would be perceived as more antisocial and selfish than a woman who took such leave (Group 1).

Independent-samples *t* tests supported these predictions. Women who forwent leave were rated as more antisocial ($M = 16.27$, $SD = 5.34$) than women who took leave ($M = 12.03$, $SD = 4.06$), $t(68) = 3.78$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.91$. A similar effect was found for selfishness: women who forwent leave received higher ratings ($M = 8.93$, $SD = 2.70$) than women who took leave ($M = 5.55$, $SD = 2.45$), $t(68) = -5.47$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.32$.

Association Between Cultural Conservatism and Evaluations of Women Who Forgo Parental Leave

Hypothesis H2 predicted that higher levels of participants' cultural conservatism would be associated with higher perceived antisociality and selfishness, and lower perceived agency, of a woman who forwent parental leave (Group 2). Three Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to test this hypothesis. The analysis revealed a significant positive association between cultural conservatism and the perceived antisociality of a woman who forwent leave, $r = .36$, $p = .049$, indicating a weak to moderate association. For selfishness, the association did not reach statistical significance but met the study's criterion for a statistical trend, $r = .34$, $p = .067$, also indicating a weak to moderate association. No significant correlation between agency and cultural conservatism was found, $p = .333$.

Association Between Cultural Conservatism and Evaluations of Men Who Forgo Parental Leave

Hypothesis H3 predicted that higher levels of participants' cultural conservatism would be associated with lower perceived selfishness and higher perceived agency of a man who forwent parental leave (Group 4). Two Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to test this hypothesis. The analysis revealed

a negative association between cultural conservatism and the perceived selfishness of a man who forwent leave, which did not reach statistical significance but met the study's criterion for a statistical trend, $r = -.35$, $p = .057$, indicating a weak to moderate association. No significant correlation between agency and cultural conservatism was found, $p = .379$.

Differences in Evaluations of Men Who Take and Forgo Parental Leave

Hypothesis H4 predicted that a man who took parental leave after the birth of a child (Group 3) would be perceived as more antisocial and selfish than a man who forwent leave (Group 4). To test this hypothesis, two independent-samples t tests compared perceived antisociality and selfishness between the groups. The results did not support the hypothesis. Men who took leave were rated as less antisocial ($M = 12.03$, $SD = 4.19$) than men who forwent it ($M = 15.52$, $SD = 4.17$), $t(66) = -3.43$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.84$. Similarly, they received lower selfishness ratings ($M = 5.14$, $SD = 1.77$) than men who forwent leave ($M = 9.19$, $SD = 2.52$), $t(66) = -7.78$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.89$.

Additional Analyses

Perceived Agency and the Gender of the Person Forgoing Parental Leave

An independent-samples t test was conducted to examine differences in perceived agency between women (Group 2) and men (Group 4) who forwent parental leave. The results, $t(59) = -2.07$, $p = .042$, $d = 0.53$, indicate that men who forgo leave are perceived as less agentic than women who make the same decision.

Discussion

The study aimed to examine differences in perceptions of women and men who take or forgo parental leave, and the association between these evaluations and participants' cultural conservatism.

Consistent with the hypotheses, women who forwent parental leave were rated as more antisocial and selfish than women who took it. These findings support role congruity theory, according to which behavior consistent with social role expectations (e.g., caring for a child) is rewarded, whereas inconsistent behavior is evaluated negatively (Diekman & Goodfriend, 2006; Eagly et al., 2012).

Attitudes toward men who forwent parental leave were markedly more negative than attitudes toward men who took it, particularly in terms of perceived selfishness. This finding is inconsistent with social role theory and role congruity theory, which suggest that negative evaluations should instead be directed at men who take leave and thereby violate the traditional breadwinner role (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2005; Diekman & Goodfriend, 2006; Eagly & Wood, 2012).

One possible explanation for this effect is the absence of information that the leave was paid, which may have led participants to perceive fathers who took it as fulfilling both their occupational and caregiving roles. Men are less often penalized for communal behavior, which includes caring for children (Eagly & Wood, 2012; Wojciszke, 2012), and may even be rewarded for it (Wojciszke, 2012). Consequently, fathers who forwent leave may have been evaluated less favorably because they departed from this modern norm.

The analyses showed that women who forgo parental leave are perceived as more agentic than men who make the same decision. Descriptive statistics also indicated higher mean agency ratings for men who took leave than for those who forwent it. Agency refers to the capacity for intentional self-determination and control over one's actions (Sokol et al., 2015; Virenque & Mossio, 2024). Behavior that departs from a prescribed gender role requires greater autonomy and may therefore be perceived as an expression of agency (Eagly & Wood, 2016). By breaking traditional gender patterns, a female manager and a father who takes leave are thus perceived as more independent in their decisions. By contrast, a man who forgoes leave and maintains the traditional breadwinner role at the expense of caregiving appears less agentic. These results support the explanation that violating gender norms can be interpreted as an expression of autonomy and intentional action.

The analyses showed that higher cultural conservatism among participants was associated with higher perceived antisociality of women who forwent parental leave, while a nonsignificant trend in the same direction was observed for selfishness. Both associations were weak to moderate. This pattern of results may reflect the stronger attachment of people higher in cultural conservatism to traditional gender norms, according to which a woman's departure from the caregiving role may be perceived as a violation of the expected order of social roles (Middendorp, 1978, as cited in Van Hiel & Mervielde, 2004).

For men who forwent parental leave, the association tended in the opposite direction: higher cultural conservatism among participants was associated with lower ratings of these men's selfishness. The association was weak to moderate but did not reach statistical significance. This direction may reflect stronger attachment to norms that emphasize men's responsibility for financially supporting the family. From this perspective, continuing to work after the birth of a child may be viewed as fulfilling obligations to loved ones rather than as an expression of selfishness (Eagly & Wood, 2012).

The analyses did not support the hypotheses concerning the association between cultural conservatism and the perceived agency of women and men who forgo parental leave. Higher cultural conservatism among participants was expected to be associated with higher agency ratings for men who forwent leave and lower agency ratings for women who forwent leave. No significant associations were found, which may reflect the small sample size and the predominance of participants with liberal views.

The study provided valuable information on perceptions of parents who take or forgo parental leave in relation to cultural conservatism, but it also revealed several limitations that should be addressed in future research.

The main limitation was the size and homogeneity of the sample: most participants were university-educated people from large cities with liberal views, which limits the generalizability of the findings. Another limitation was the exclusive measurement of explicit attitudes, which are susceptible to social desirability bias. The use of an instrument developed by the authors, whose structure and validity have not yet been verified in independent samples, is a further limitation. Future research should therefore both use methods that measure implicit attitudes and further validate the instrument.

The interpretation of the results may also have been affected by omissions in the descriptions of the individuals being evaluated: no information was provided about their life circumstances or the amount of leave benefits. Adding this information would allow the context of parenting decisions to be captured more fully. It would also be useful to examine whether the parent's occupation (e.g., stereotypically masculine versus feminine) modifies the evaluations.

In summary, future research should include larger and more diverse samples, consider both explicit and implicit attitudes, and account for the socioeconomic circumstances of the individuals described. This approach would help explain how ideology and gender roles shape social perceptions of parenting decisions.

Having discussed the limitations and directions for future research, we now turn to the practical implications of the findings. The study deepens our understanding of how social evaluations are formed in the context of gender roles and parenting decisions and identifies areas in which this knowledge may be applied, both in social life and in the further development of research.

The findings support efforts to promote fathers' use of parental leave. Men who chose to take leave were evaluated more positively than those who forwent it, contradicting the belief that fathers involved in childcare are socially devalued. This knowledge may inform campaigns supporting an egalitarian family model and contribute to reducing the gender pay gap.

At the same time, the study confirmed that women who forgo parental leave are evaluated more negatively than those who take it, indicating that gender stereotypes persist despite formal gender equality (Diekman & Goodfriend, 2006). These findings may inform efforts to ensure equal treatment of women regardless of their parenting decisions and to counter social pressure and exclusion.

The intensity of these negative evaluations varied with cultural conservatism: higher levels were associated with higher ratings of antisociality, while a nonsignificant trend in the same direction was observed for selfishness. This suggests a need to direct educational and anti-discrimination campaigns specifically toward conservative communities. This knowledge may also support women themselves by helping them recognize that criticism of their choices often stems from the evaluators' ideological beliefs rather than from their own competence or decisions.

In summary, the findings may serve as a starting point for social initiatives promoting family models based on equal partnership, gender equality, and engaged fatherhood, while also supporting efforts to reduce the gender pay gap.

The study is one of the first attempts to examine attitudes toward parenting decisions empirically in the Polish cultural context. It addresses a research gap

by providing data on evaluations of women and men making different parenting decisions and on the role of cultural conservatism in shaping these attitudes. Although the small, predominantly liberal sample limits the generalizability of the findings, the study offers a valuable starting point for further analyses and may inform broader research projects.

The study also developed an original research instrument for measuring attitudes toward parenting decisions and perceived traits such as antisociality, selfishness, and agency. The questionnaire's high internal consistency, as assessed by Cronbach's alpha, indicates its research potential, although it requires further validation, including confirmation of its structure and validity in independent samples.

Addressing the limitations identified in this study in future projects would deepen our understanding of the mechanisms shaping attitudes toward parents and help determine the sociocultural contexts in which these differences are most evident.

In summary, this study provides new empirical data and a reliable research instrument, offering a starting point for further, representative analyses of the social determinants of parenting decisions in Poland.

Declarations

Declaration of conflict of interest
The authors declare that none of them has any potential conflict of interest concerning the research, authorship, or publication of this article. The authors have no relevant financial or nonfinancial interests to disclose and no competing interests related to the content of the article. They also confirm that they are not affiliated with or involved in any organization or entity that could have a financial or nonfinancial interest in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

Entities that contributed to the publication and their contribution
Not applicable

Ethical approval
The study did not receive approval from an ethics committee. It was conducted as part of a master's thesis, for which the thesis supervisor is responsible for research ethics.

Data availability statement
The data have not been deposited in a repository and are not available upon request from other researchers. Participants were informed that the data would be shared only in aggregate form (e.g., in this publication).

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Statements and declarations regarding the use of AI
During the preparation of this article, the authors used an artificial intelligence tool (ChatGPT) to structure the text, improve its clarity, and assist with English translation and language editing. The authors take full responsibility for the final content of the manuscript.

Declaration of authors' contributions to the manuscript
Krzysztof Lew Kruszewski: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Methodology; Project administration; Validation; Visualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review and editing.

Magdalena Gąsiorowska: Conceptualization; Methodology; Project administration; Resources; Supervision; Writing – review and editing.

Zuzanna Mikosza: Conceptualization; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Visualization; Writing – original draft; Writing – review and editing.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. Study procedure – Parent vignettes

Woman taking parental leave

"Ania has worked in a managerial position at Company X for 5 years. She performs well at work and is regarded as a good employee. She had a child a year ago. Ania decided to take the one year of parental leave to which she was entitled. She is now returning to her previous position."

Woman forgoing parental leave

"Ania has worked in a managerial position at Company X for 5 years. She performs well at work and is regarded as a good employee. She had a child a year ago. Ania decided to forgo the one year of parental leave to which she was entitled. She continues to work in her position."

Man taking parental leave

"Paweł has worked in a managerial position at Company X for 5 years. He performs well at work and is regarded as a good employee. He had a child a year ago. Paweł decided to take the one year of parental leave to which he was entitled. He is now returning to his position."

Man forgoing parental leave

"Paweł has worked in a managerial position at Company X for 5 years. He performs well at work and is regarded as a good employee. He had a child a year ago. Paweł decided to forgo the one year of parental leave to which he was entitled. He continues to work in his position."

Appendix 2. Adjective rating scales – Rotated component matrix

Adjective rating scales – Rotated component matrix

Item	Antisociality	Selfishness	Agency
Aggressive	.60		
Cold	.61		
Conceited	.80		
Quarrelsome	.80		
Arrogant	.80		
Selfish	.61	.60	
Responsible		−.72	
Assertive		−.73	
Caring		−.80	
Ambitious			.72
Hardworking			.78
Competent			.66
Lazy			−.61
Strong			.74
Self-confident			.68