

The “Motherhood Penalty” in artistic production: Historical evidence from American authors, 1800-1999

Sara Mitchell
University of Southern Denmark

Christiane Hellmanzik
Technical University of Dortmund

Lukas Kuld
University of Limerick

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This paper utilises historical data to explore the existence of a child penalty in authorship and to determine whether female authors were disproportionately affected. We use a novel dataset of 472 eminent American writers (born 1800-1949) that includes yearly residence, the year in which their children were born, and data on career success (including publications, critical acclaim, and market success data). We investigate the productivity of male and female authors following the birth of a child. We find significantly lower rates of publication for female authors for the first 10 years following the birth of a child. We do not observe a similar reduction in productivity for male authors. We confirm these findings using the general fertility rate, age, and gender as an IV for probability of motherhood. We also explore the long-run trend of this child penalty from a time in which women’s rights were severely restricted through the expansion of women’s rights through the mid-20th century. Furthermore, we explicitly investigate how this “motherhood penalty” evolved post-WWII, when there was a divergence in gender representation in the labour force, a baby boom, and rigid gender roles.