
Stereotypic Content of Divorced Residential and Nonresidential Parents and Stepparents

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Abstract: This study focused on comparing the stereotypic content of divorced residential (parents with a majority of physical custody), divorced nonresidential (parents with less than 50% physical custody), and step- mothers and fathers. Because stereotypes can influence behavior, it is important to understand the stereotypic content attributed to these parent types. This study asked 268 participants to review common stereotypic content, as identified by previous research, attributed to these three types of parents and to denote the extent to which they believed each characteristic was applicable to each parent type. This was done to allow within and between group comparisons using *t tests*, which was consistent with the method of analysis used (i.e., stereotypic differential). The results empirically supported the notion that divorced residential parents were the most positively perceived, stepparents were viewed neutrally, and divorced nonresidential parents were the least positively perceived. Participants also perceived divorced residential and step- mothers more positively as compared to fathers, but divorced nonresidential fathers were perceived more positively than divorced nonresidential mothers. Implications of the findings are discussed. In summary, the results presented here empirically support the notion that individuals' perceptions of different types of parents depend on their physical presence and marital status. One could also suggest that gender stereotypes of men and women influence intergroup comparisons as well.

Keywords: Parent Stereotypes, Divorce Stereotypes, Stepparent Stereotypes

1. Introduction

Stereotypes are culturally held beliefs about the attributes of individuals or groups [1], which may be somewhat accurate, but might also be based on false or exaggerated information [2]. Stereotypes are helpful because they streamline thought processes, but they can also further negative or inaccurate assumptions about stereotyped groups if they function as preconceived conclusions or rigid judgments about people [3]. Stereotypes, at their base, are controlling, a product of unequal power dynamics [4]. When people are interacted with as if they possessed the stereotyped attributes, whether they do or not, misunderstandings and discrimination are likely to occur. Stereotyping occurs unconsciously and when an individual interacts or sees a member of a stereotyped group. The stereotypes – whether accurate or not – are brought to the forefront [3]. Individuals may even interpret situations differently depending on the types of stereotypes held, and

information inconsistent with the stereotype may even be ignored so that there is no change to firmly held stereotypes [2]. Individuals have some choice in accepting or rejecting their initial stereotypes, however, in that they may interpret a stereotyped person's behavior as inconsistent with their expectations, thus changing or abandoning that stereotype [2, 4]. Theorists note, however, that it can be difficult to change firmly held stereotypes, especially if some members of the stereotyped group act in ways consistent with those stereotypes [2].

Researchers have found that individuals are stereotyped based on personal characteristics, such as gender and parental status [5-8]. Stereotypic content of men generally has not included family-oriented characteristics like kindness, childcare, or warmth [7], finding, for example, that college student participants perceived that men would be likely to choose work over childcare [8], which is quite different compared to how women have been perceived [6, 9]. In a study of children's books, for example, fathers were largely absent from pictures or from the stories, which could

negatively impact the content of father stereotypes [11]. Historically, stereotypes of mothers and women have essentially consisted of overlapping characteristics, meaning that when people perceive mothers and women similarly [9, 11]. Stereotypic content of women generally incorporates caregiving traits in addition to being hard-working. This is in contrast to the divergent sets of stereotypic content attributed to men and fathers [12]. Mothers who depart from traditional notions of motherhood, whether through working outside of the home or by being nonresidential parents, often have been subjected to negative stereotypes [13-14].

In addition to gender and parental status, individuals are also stereotyped based on their marital statuses [9, 15]. In general, married parents are associated with much more positive stereotypic content as compared to other marital statuses; few negative qualities get ascribed to members of intact families [9, 15]. The exception to this may be divorced residential fathers, who retain physical custody of their children and who tend to be viewed positively, as caring, involved, and loving [15]. Researchers have been less likely to delineate between residential and nonresidential divorced mothers, but studies of divorced mothers generally find perceptions about them being failures and more negatively than married women [16]. Divorced nonresidential fathers typically have been perceived as bad parents who are neither physically nor financially involved with their children [15, 17-18]. Stepfathers have been negatively stereotyped as sexually and/or physically abusive [19], though there is evidence that young adults have fairly neutral attitudes regarding them [15] or positive views [20]. Negative perceptions towards stepmothers seems to remain [21]. It may be likely to expect differences in how stereotypes based on marital status differs based on gender, however as is the aim of this study.

2. The Content of Mother and Father Stereotypes

There are several reasons why it is important to identify the content of stereotypes about different types of mothers and fathers, the most important being that stereotypes influence behavior. Stereotyping theorists have found that individuals who behave in ways inconsistent with their gender's stereotypes often are the subject of negative sanctions [22]. Men, for example, who are interested in children and are not career-focused, behaviors inconsistent with masculine stereotypes, have been perceived as insecure and weak [6]. Studies with college student populations have found differences in the content of stereotypes between men and fathers [12, 15], but this may have been due to this generation using their peers when thinking about men. Using an older, more diverse population will allow us to learn the differences, if any, in perceptions of fathers and men. There may be important implications for practitioners if men and fathers are not perceived similarly, as they may need to design parent education specifically targeting men's

transition to parenthood.

Stereotyping theorists propose that those who carry out stereotypic behavior may be rewarded for doing so whereas those who do not may be punished [4]. The term "deadbeat dad" has been around for some time and typically has referred to fathers who do not pay child support, whether following divorce or childbirth outside of marriage. This term seems to have influenced perceptions of never-married and divorced fathers, as college students negatively perceived these fathers as poor providers, parents, and people, or as deadbeats [15]. Divorced nonresidential and never-married fathers, at least among this sample, were perceived to be deadbeat dads likely because of their marital status. Similarly, others have found that college students perceived stay-at-home mothers as committed to motherhood whereas working mothers were assumed to be dissatisfied and selfish [14]. Thus, as individuals move outside accepted roles (e.g., married and/or residential fathers, stay-at-home mothers), they may be the subject of negative stereotypes. Although the number of and research about divorced nonresidential mothers is fairly low, perceptions of these mothers tends to be negative because people believe they have violated motherhood norms [13]. Understanding how stereotypes affect families and family members can aid professionals who work directly with families as well as make us aware of biases held regarding a certain group.

Finally, it is particularly important to understand adults' perceptions of mothers and fathers who are divorced or are in remarriages because stereotypes do not only describe, but also prescribe behaviors or expectations [4]. For example, a qualitative study found that stepmothers believed they were negatively stereotyped by their stepchildren and stepchildren's mothers, and they reported various strategies used to overcome those stereotypes to help with their adjustment to the stepmother role [23]. These negative perceptions could negatively impact stepfamilies and their functioning as well as how social institutions interact with stepparents.

3. The Current Study

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to understand how individuals think about divorced residential (those with majority physical custody of children), divorced nonresidential (those without a majority of physical custody of children), and step- mothers and fathers as well as how those parent groups compare. Previous studies have been done on types of mother stereotypes and father stereotypes, but without an eye towards understanding how gender roles may influence within-group comparisons. It was expected that:

H1: Mothers would be perceived more positively than fathers across each parent group.

H2: Divorced residential parents would be perceived more positively than the other two parent groups.

H3: Divorced nonresidential parents would be perceived more negatively than the other two parent groups.

4. Method

4.1. Sample

The sample consisted of 147 women and 121 men from across the United States. The mean age of the participants was 31 (Range = 18 – 42; $SD = 5.18$). The majority was White (75%), 10% were Black, 7% were Hispanic, 8% identified as other races or of mixed race. Just over half identified as Christian (55%), 30% did not identify with a religion, 14% chose “other,” and 1% was Jewish. Five percent had a high school diploma, 5% had associates’ degrees, 32% had some college, 20% had a Bachelor’s degree, and 38% had a postgraduate degree. Forty percent had a yearly income of \$39,999 or less, 34% earned between \$40,000 - \$99,999, and 23% earned over \$100,000. Participants’ current marital status was: 44% single, 38% married (never divorced), 14% divorced or remarried, 3% other, and 1% widowed. Participants’ were asked about their parents’ current marital status (56% married, 23% widowed, 22% divorced/remarried, 6% other, 4% single) as well as their parents’ marital status when participants were 16 (76% married, 18% divorced/remarried, 4% single, 3% other, 2% widowed). Almost all were heterosexual (95%).

4.2. Procedures

The data were collected online using Qualtrics. Participants were recruited from MTurk. MTurk is an online survey site hosted by Amazon.com and has been used for recruiting participants in social science research [24]. A meta-analytic review of MTurk found that MTurk samples were similar to nationally representative samples in terms of race and gender, but there were some differences in terms of religion; MTurk samples had higher representation of Atheists and Agnostics than national samples typically have [25]. Participants who selected this survey were randomly assigned two parent types to respond to, as chosen by the Qualtrics system. After reading the consent form, participants were taken to a list of 27 characteristics that were generated by reviewing previous research on different types of mother and father stereotypes [9, 15]. Qualities that were associated with both mothers and fathers were combined to create the list of 27 descriptors used in this study. Finally, they answered a series of demographic questions.

Participants were asked to review the list of descriptors and to list a percentage next to each for their specific type of parent they were assigned. These percentages represented the degree to which participants believed each descriptor was characteristic of the particular stimulus. For example, a participant who was asked to respond to STEPMOTHERS would read the following instructions: “Consider each of the following descriptors SEPARATELY. Indicate the percentage (from 0%-100%) of STEPMOTHERS that you believe have each of the following characteristics. For example, if you think all STEPMOTHERS have all of these characteristics, you would put 100% in the blank next to every descriptor. If you think only 20% of STEPMOTHERS have a particular characteristic, you would put 20% next to that descriptor. Do not think of STEPMOTHERS you know, but of STEPMOTHERS in general.”

4.3. Analysis

The data were analyzed using the stereotype differential, which has been used to measure broad categories of people and focuses on the descriptive content of stereotypes [9, 15, 26], which is the primary purpose of this study. The stereotype differential, originally developed to use with the semantic differential scale, is a method of measuring group stereotypes by calculating the extent to which responses to an item (i.e., descriptors) differ from a neutral mean or comparison group mean [26].

Two stereotype differential scores for each descriptor were calculated for this study. The first calculation set 50%, the midpoint on the scale of 0% to 100% that respondents used to rate each descriptor, as the neutral mean. The mean ratings of each descriptor were compared to the neutral mean of 50% using t statistics. Significant differences are denoted by asterisks and were interpreted as the stereotypic content attributed to each of the parent types (see Table 1). For the second stereotype differential score, the mean ratings of each descriptor for each mother type were compared to the descriptor means for each father type using t statistics. Significant differences were denoted by subscripts, as can be seen in Table 1. These scores were used to interpret how the stereotypic content of the mother types compared to the relevant father types.

Table 1. Identified stereotypes for divorced residential, divorced nonresidential, and step parents.

	DRF	DRM	DNRF	DNRM	STPFTHR	STPMTHR
Good Parenting						
Caregiver	56 ^b	74**	39	42	52 ^a	65*
Caring	63*	61	44	33** ^a	60	53
Family Oriented	69*	64*	34*	33*	56	63*
Good Parent	62*	63*	40	41	61	60
Loving	67*	68*	51	44	58	63*
Protective	66*	66*	37*	36*	51	59
Supportive	60 ^a	72*	34*	33*	62*	59
Negative Personal Qualities						
Absent	27**	17**	68*	57 ^a	28*	24**
Irresponsible	47	31** ^a	55	61	38*	27** ^a
Not a Part of the Family	18** ^a	29*	51 ^a	65*	36** ^a	52
Promiscuous	38*	23** ^a	55	43 ^a	34*	24**

	DRF	DRM	DNRF	DNRM	STPFTHR	STPMTHR
Selfish	32*	39	57	58	34*	31*
Work Related						
Busy	78**	84**	49	49	57 ^a	70*
Hard Working	69*	68*	44	48	62*	65*
Overworked	61 ^b	80**	47	48	52 ^a	69*
Positive Personal Qualities						
Admirable	71*	54 ^b	38*	26** ^a	59	61
Brave	62*	66*	38*	37*	55	57
Generous	61	58	36*	34*	58	56
Kind	52	61	41	41	57	58
Open Minded	61	59	45	52	51	52
Responsible	60	64*	42	46	65*	62*
Selfless	53 ^b	71*	30*	32*	46	56
Stable	59	58	36*	32*	62*	56
Strong	61 ^a	73*	41	37*	61	65*
Miscellaneous						
Low Income	25** ^b	52	51	47	33*	33*
Traditional	49	36 ^a	37*	19** ^b	48	42
Tired	68** ^a	81**	43	48	61	70*

Note. Subscript^a denotes descriptor means that are significantly lower than the opposite sex parent ($p < .05$). Subscript^b denotes descriptor means that are significantly lower than the opposite sex parent ($p < .01$). *denotes descriptor means that are significantly higher or lower than the neutral mean of 50% ($p < .05$). ** denotes descriptor means that are significantly higher or lower than the neutral mean of 50% ($p < .01$).

5. Results

This study sought to better understand how divorced residential, divorced nonresidential, and step- mothers and fathers were perceived in American society as well as how perceptions of parents within each marital status compared.

5.1. Divorced Residential

Divorced residential mothers and fathers were associated with good parenting, positive personal, and hard worker characteristics. DRM ratings were significantly more positive than the neutral mean on all but one and DRF ratings on all but two Good Parenting characteristics. DRM and DRF ratings were significantly lower than the neutral mean on all but two Negative Personal qualities: irresponsible (DRF) and Selfish (DRM). With the exception of DRF ratings on overworked, DRM and DRF ratings on Work Related characteristics were significantly above the neutral mean. DRM were significantly above the neutral mean on four and DRF on two Positive Personal characteristics. Finally, DRF ratings were significantly lower than the neutral mean on the low-income descriptor whereas DRM ratings were significantly lower than the neutral mean on the traditional descriptor; both were significantly above on the tired descriptor. These two types of parents significantly differed on 12 of 27 descriptors. DRF were significantly less likely to be seen as caregivers, supportive, not part of the family, overworked, selfless, strong, low income, and tired as compared to DRM. DRM were significantly less likely to be seen as irresponsible, promiscuous, admirable, and traditional as compared to DRF.

5.2. Divorced Nonresidential

Consistent with expectations, divorced nonresidential parents were not seen as positive as divorced residential

parents in terms of parenting, personal, and work qualities. DNRM were significantly lower than the neutral mean on four Good Parenting qualities whereas DNRF were significantly lower on three. Each was significantly above the neutral mean on one Negative Personal quality (Absent: DNRF, Not a Part of the Family: DNRM); no ratings were significantly lower. Neither DNRM or DNRF were rated as significantly higher or lower on Work Related qualities. DNRM ratings were significantly lower than the neutral mean on six, and DNRF on five, Positive Personal qualities; only one characteristic (DNRM's ratings for open minded) was above 50%. Finally, both divorced nonresidential parents were rated as significantly lower than the neutral mean on the traditional item. These two types of parents significantly differed on six of 27 items. DNRM ratings were significantly lower than DNRF on caring, absent, promiscuous, admirable, and traditional; DNRF were significantly less likely to be associated with the not a part of the family item than DNRM.

5.3. Stepparents

Stepparents were generally associated with good parenting and positive personal qualities and not with negative personal qualities. Stepmother ratings were significantly above the neutral mean on three Good Parenting qualities whereas stepfathers were significantly above on one. Stepfathers were rated significantly lower on all Negative Personal qualities and stepmothers, all but one (not a part of the family). Stepmother ratings were significantly above the neutral mean on all Work-Related items, and stepfathers, on one (hard working), and both types were each significantly above the neutral mean on two Positive Personal qualities. Finally, both types' ratings were significantly lower than the neutral mean on being low income, and stepmothers were significantly and strongly associated with being tired. Stepfathers and stepmothers significantly differed on five of the 27 items. Stepfathers were significantly less likely to be associated

with being caregivers, not part of the family, busy, and overworked whereas stepmothers were significantly less likely to be seen as irresponsible.

6. Discussion

The content of parent stereotypes was mostly consistent with expectations, with one exception. Although divorced residential mothers and stepmothers were generally perceived in more positive ways as compared to their respective father counterparts, divorced nonresidential mothers were perceived more negatively than divorced nonresidential fathers. Divorced parents who retain primary physical custody are more positively perceived than stepparents, and divorced parents who do not retain primary physical custody are more negatively perceived than the other parent types in this study.

The first hypothesis stated that stereotypes attributed to mothers would be more positive than those attributed to fathers. Results generally indicate that participants viewed mothers more positively than their male counterparts with the exception of divorced nonresidential mothers. Participants viewed mothers who had less than 50% physical custody of their children as subpar parents and as possessing negative personal qualities. On the other hand, divorced residential mothers were seen rather positively and had fewer negative personal qualities than divorced residential fathers. Finally, despite fairytales that suggest otherwise, perceptions of stepmothers were fairly neutral, though more positive than stepfathers. Researchers have found perceptions of fathers can change much more easily than those of mothers, which was understood to be a factor of gender stereotypes [11]. Thus, stereotypes of women and mothers have typically been positive [9], much more than stereotypes of men [27]. Family scholars should continue to research divorced nonresidential mothers, as this group has typically been negatively perceived over and above the negative perceptions applied to divorced nonresidential fathers [15].

Consistent with expectations, divorced residential parents are viewed more positively than the other groups. Divorced residential parents were generally seen as good parents. In fact, stereotypic content related to divorced residential mothers could suggest that respondents equated these mothers with married mothers in many important ways. They are assumed to be caring parents who are responsible as well as being tired, busy, and overworked, much more often than any other parent in the study. Divorced residential fathers similarly are seen as good parents and people along with being busy and hard-working. An interesting difference between these two groups of parents, however, is that participants were significantly more likely to associate being admirable to divorced nonresidential fathers than mothers. It may be that because being a divorced residential mother is so common that their duties are expected, but divorced residential fathers are rare so that this group of fathers benefits from positive feelings that they are going above and beyond, similar to what others have found [15]. That participants noted the additional stressors being divorced and

having primary physical custody may be an important signal that divorced residential parents, though positively perceived, need additional supports to help manage their varied duties.

Given the positive views of divorced residential parents, it may not be surprising that, consistent with expectations, divorced nonresidential parents are associated with negative stereotype content. Nonresidential parents are assumed to be poor parents perhaps because they are also perceived to be absent and not a part of their families. Divorced nonresidential mothers, in fact, were significantly more likely to be seen as not a part of their families as compared to divorced nonresidential fathers. Again, this could be based in the familiarity with divorced nonresidential fathers, which is the most typical physical custody arrangement; because it is less common for mothers to be nonresidential, they may be the subject of harsher judgements as to why they are in defiance of traditional gender norms that mothers be residential [13]. These parents were seen selfish, irresponsible, without a work ethic, and absent. Thus, parents who do not reside with their children – regardless of reason – may be associated with a host of negative qualities, whether earned or not. These perceptions can influence how others interact with these parents, even as they attempt to see their children [28].

Although there were no hypotheses regarding stepparents, it was assumed stepparents would be somewhat neutral in terms of their stereotypic content, based on previous research [9, 15]. This expectation was supported, though stepparents were associated with some strong positive stereotypic content, like being seen as responsible, hardworking, caring, and supportive. They were not associated with any strong negative stereotypic content. Thus, the participants of this study did not appear to use the “wicked stepmother” or “abusive stepfather” stereotypes in thinking about these parent types. Researchers have found that social stereotypes of married families can negatively impact stepfamily stereotypes [29], yet that was not fully the case in this study. Normalizing stepparents and stepparent relationships can help stepfamilies create new roles and rituals [29] and neutral and positive stereotypes can help in this process.

7. Limitations

As with most studies, this study had limitations. This sample, though diverse in some ways, was predominately made-up of well-educated White individuals. It may be likely to assume that the characteristics generated were ways of describing different types of White fathers. It would be a benefit for future researchers to seek descriptors associated with various races and ethnicities so as to understand the diversity of parenthood. Further, this study presented mean comparisons only without more detailed or more nuanced considerations as to why the ratings were what they were. More detailed investigations into why stereotypes exist, if they change over time, and how individuals’ change would be beneficial to understand the development of parent stereotypes.

8. Conclusion

The results presented here empirically support the notion that individuals' perceptions of different types of parents depend on their physical presence and marital status. One could also suggest that gender stereotypes of men and women influence intergroup comparisons as well. Although the findings are generally consistent with expectations, stereotypic content of mothers without a majority of physical custody of their children was more negative than expected. This study represents a beginning step in the effort to empirically identify the content of parent stereotypes, as they depend on gender and marital status. Because stereotypes inform behavior, greater attention should be paid to studying the stereotypic content of stereotypes related to different types of parents.

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