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Bias in Perceptions of Parenting Roles: Analysis of Gender and Socioeconomic Status

Krislea E. Wegner

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BIAS IN PERCEPTIONS OF PARENTING ROLES: ANALYSIS OF
GENDER AND SOCIOECONOMIC STATUS

by

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A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty

of the

University of North Dakota

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

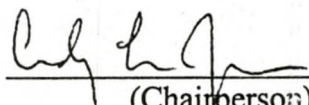
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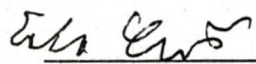
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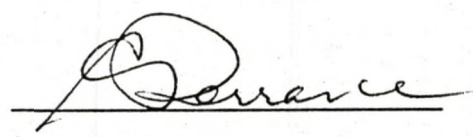
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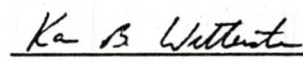
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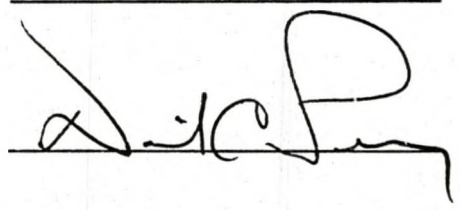


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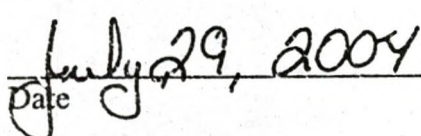




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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES	vi
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vii
ABSTRACT	viii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION	1
History of Child Custody	1
Divorce and Child Custody.....	3
Effect of Social Change on Child Custody	4
Sex-role Stereotypes	5
Sex-role Stereotypes and Child Custody.....	8
Socialization of Gender Differences	11
Division of Labor and Roles within the Family.....	13
Summary of Literature Review	17
Purpose and Hypotheses	18
II. METHOD	20
Participants.....	20
Materials	22
Procedure	25
III. RESULTS	27

IV. DISCUSSION	37
Implications.....	43
Limitations	45
APPENDICES	47
Appendix A Consent Form	48
Appendix B Demographics Form	50
Appendix C Parent Profile/Vignette	51
REFERENCES	54

LIST OF TABLES

Table	Page
1. Mean and (Standard Deviation) of Age and Income by Participant Group	21
2. Pre-post Adjective Bivariate Correlation Results from Pilot Data	23
3. Factor Loadings for Exploratory Factor Analysis on Pilot Data.....	24
4. Factor Loadings for Confirmatory Factor Analysis	25
5. Differences in Ratings of Overall Parenting Skills and PAQ Factors by Group and Vignette Gender	28
6. Summary of Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) on Participant Group and Vignette Gender for the Three Factors with Follow-up Univariate Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) for each Factor	30
7. Means and Standard Deviations by Vignette Gender for PAQ Items.....	31
8. Bivariate Correlations, Means, Standard Deviations and Sample Size for all Dependent Variables, Participant Group and Age for the Male and Female Parent Separately and the Entire Sample.....	34
9. Summary of Multiple Regressions Predicting Overall Parenting Skills, Factors 1, 2, and 3 from Participant Group (Model 1) and Age (Model 2) for Male and Female Parents Separately as well as Combined in the Entire Sample	36

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ABSTRACT

After industrialization in the United States, men primarily moved from the farm to the workplace, leaving women responsible for the children and maintaining the household alone. This arrangement contributed to the so called "tender years" doctrine, which suggested that mothers were better caretakers of the children and should therefore receive sole custody. The preference for mothers continued until the 1960's, after the women's liberation movement, when a large portion of women moved from the home into the workforce. State statutes were later changed to establish gender-neutrality for the purposes of determining custody decisions and suggested the custody of children should be "in their best interests." However, the change of language in the statutes did not change the results of most custody decisions; custody continued to be granted to the mother in most cases. Research suggests there has been a small increase in sharing custody of children but no increase in the number of fathers being awarded sole custody. A prior notion of who should get custody and what defines a good parent is likely wrought with gender stereotypes and bias.

This study examined gender stereotypes related to parenting by sampling three occupational groups: judges, psychologists and college students. The significant discrepancy in the ratings of mothers versus fathers varied based on which occupational group was rating the vignette parent and what aspects of parenting were being rated. All

three groups rated the vignette mother higher on overall parenting skills and empathic parenting behaviors, as compared to the father in the vignette. Also, as the age of the respondent increased, overall parenting skills ratings declined, indicating a more critical evaluation of parents. Evaluating parenting skills appears complex, individualized and partially influenced by sex-role stereotyping. Gender differences that are likely due to vignette characteristics were found, suggesting bias exists in the evaluation of parenting. However, it may not be an intentional bias for or against one gender, instead it is more likely personal perceptions entering into the decision-making process.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The determination of bias in the perceptions of parenting roles and custody decisions is a complex task and requires the incorporation of several topics. Some of these include the social and political history of child custody as well as the dynamics and differences that exist between gender and parenting styles. This study addresses these issues through quantitative analysis of how perceptions of parents differ based upon socioeconomic status, parent gender, occupation and age.

History of Child Custody

Before the Industrial Revolution, in rare cases of divorce, the children were placed with the father since they were viewed as necessary to maintain the farmstead, thus part of his property. After Industrialization of the United States, the men primarily moved from the farm to the workplace, which left the women responsible for caring for the children and maintaining the household. The so-called “tender years” doctrine developed out of this arrangement and promotes mothers as the better caretakers of the children and therefore receive sole custody (Cancian & Meyer, 1998). The overt preference for mothers as the primary caretaker continued until the 1960’s, after the women’s liberation movement, when a large portion of women began moving from the home into the workforce. At this time many states removed the gender preference from their statutes, replacing it with “best interests of the child” language, leaving the courts to

determine who should get custody based on the option that was consistent with the child's best interests (Cancian & Meyer, 1998).

However, the change of language in the statutes did not change the results of most custody decisions; custody continued to be granted to the mother in most cases. A study was conducted in Alabama that compared custody decisions before and after the tender years doctrine was eradicated to determine the impact of this decision. There was not a significant increase found in custody awarded to fathers, nor was there a significant increase in fathers attempting to gain custody (Santilli & Roberts, 1990). Some advocates have argued that following a divorce, the children should be able to spend significant amounts of time with each parent, or "shared physical custody." Even though joint or shared physical custody is a legal option, many states do not believe it is in the best interest of the child, and are thus hesitant to grant it (Cancian & Meyer, 1998).

Cancian & Meyer (1998) looked at specific trends in physical custody after divorce in a sample of 4,073 court cases in 21 Wisconsin counties between 1986 and 1992, and attempted to identify variables linked to the award of custody to mother, father or both. Their results suggested there had been a small increase in sharing custody of children but no increase in the number of fathers being awarded sole custody of their children (Cancian & Meyer, 1998). Most states have changed child-custody laws to treat each parent equally according to policy, but this does not seem to be the case in practice. According to Bennett (1994), the challenge most fathers face in a custody trial is that many older judges retain a positive bias toward the mother from the start and this opinion is difficult to change, unless the mother is obviously abusive or neglectful to her children

in some way. However, according to the state statutes, fathers should only have to prove that they are the more suitable parent, not that the mother is unfit (Bennett, 1994).

Divorce and Child Custody

Over half of U. S. marriages are ending in divorce. Of those involving children custody goes to the mother in approximately 90% of cases (Weissbourd, 1999). After divorce, a father's contact with his children tends to drop at a dramatic rate. Close to one half of children of divorce will not see their fathers at all and only one-sixth will see him on a weekly basis. Only one third of children will be in contact with their fathers ten years after the divorce. These are the statistics of married couples with children who divorce; an additional 30% of children in the United States are born out of wedlock and most of those never develop any tie to their biological fathers (Weissbourd, 1999).

Leving and Kenik (1999) make the following suggestions for a father to be considered a good parent in a custody case: exhibit genuine love and concern for his children; take an active interest in the children's physical, social, emotional, and academic developments; arrange regular visits to doctors and dentists; attend the children's athletic events, music and dance recitals, school plays, debates, science fairs and so on; meet with the children's teachers regularly; impose and enforce (but not with corporal punishment) reasonable rules of behavior; shop for the children's food and clothing; foster church or synagogue attendance and moral development; ensure the children are bathed and properly dressed; help with homework and school projects; assist the children in solving problems and encourage and support the children's creative tendencies. However, even if a father demonstrates all of the above characteristics he is still not guaranteed to win a custody case, as the mother still holds a significant

advantage. All things being equal, the mother is still more likely to win custody (Leving & Kenik, 1999).

Effect of Social Change on Child Custody

With the change in the number of women in the workforce and out of the homes, the "tender years" doctrine became obsolete. Many women are currently choosing to go to work and many families must have both parents working to make ends meet. In approximately 8% of married couples the woman is the primary breadwinner and the father is choosing to run the household and take care of the children (Cohn, 1998). Custody decisions are said to be decided based on which parent spends more time with the children or is the primary caregiver, regardless of gender or financial circumstance. This would give greater than 8% of stay at home fathers a good chance at obtaining custody in the event of divorce, unless there was a bias involved in the decision making process (Cohn, 1998). According to the above notion a case with a stay at home father and a working mother would be a straight-forward decision for who gets custody, but this is not so.

A highly publicized case in Coral Gables, Florida, is an example of such a circumstance (Cohn, 1998). There were many variables in this case that led to the decisions made by the judge but the most pertinent factor was that the mother won custody of the children even though the father was noted as the primary caretaker and nurturer of the children. Several witnesses testified to this fact, but it was ignored and custody was given to the mother who was an attorney and rarely home. The father gained custody only on appeal (Cohn, 1998).

This paradox is a reflection of our conflicting views and stereotypes of the roles and responsibilities of a mother and father. A father who chooses to care for his children while his wife supported the family financially was discriminated against because he was not providing for the family; thus being viewed as lazy and lacking motivation. Evidence to this fact is that at one point in the trial, during the father's testimony, the judge asked the man why he didn't just get a job (Cohn, 1998). This example might lead an observer to believe that the judge made some decisions based on personal beliefs he held about the role a father and mother should have within the family structure. A prior notion of who should get custody and what makes a good parent is most likely colored by gender stereotypes and expectations that may not apply to all situations.

Sex-role Stereotypes

Many researchers have studied gender role stereotypes. One of the first to address this issue was I. Broverman whose 1970 study asked clinicians to describe a healthy, mature and socially competent (1) adult, gender unspecified, (2) man, and (3) woman using a forced choice sex-role stereotypic scale. The clinical judgments of the participants in the study characterized healthy males and healthy females differently and the author concluded that these differences were rooted in sex-role stereotypes. The results also suggested that when healthy "adults" were rated they resembled male characteristics as opposed to female ones (Broverman, Broverman, Rosenkrantz, & Vogel, 1970). In 1972, Broverman et al added that there was also a consensus regarding different characteristics of men and women across many groups, even when they differed on education level, age, sex or marital status. Feminine characteristics tend to be less valued as compared to male characteristics and the traits we are inclined to value in

women center on warmth-expressiveness, while the positively valued traits we look for in males center on competence (Broverman et al, 1972). In 1994 I. Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson and Rosenkrantz addressed the current appraisal of sex-role stereotypes and continued to support the existence of clearly defined sex-role stereotypes for both men and women, contrary to gender equal or unisex themes apparently touted by the media. The primary themes from this body of research appear to be that females were apt to be viewed as less competent, independent, objective and logical, while men, were found to lack interpersonal sensitivity, warmth and expressiveness. Overall, stereotypic male characteristics are most often viewed as more positive than stereotypic female characteristics (Broverman et al, 1994).

Broverman's studies have been replicated by many researchers. Nowacki and Poe (1973) used Broverman's sex-role stereotypic scale to determine if the prior findings generalized to mental health; i.e., if there were gender role stereotypes between the male and female conception of mental health. They had undergraduates of both sexes rate a mentally healthy male and female and found that a rating of mental health does measure concepts other than male and female stereotypes (Nowacki & Poe, 1973). In other words, their study further supports the presence and pervasiveness of sex-role stereotypes. Harris and Lucas (1976) again looked at sex-role stereotyping using undergraduate and graduate students in social work to determine if there was a double standard of mental health for men and women. Their results suggested that sex-role stereotypes are dynamic and change among both male and female participants, although they believed that females were revising their views more rapidly than males at that time. They also suggested that sex-role stereotypes of mental health were becoming less rigid and represented more

human and flexible standards, with a less distinct difference between men and women. Junior and senior students were more likely to subscribe to sex-role stereotypes, when compared to graduate students, suggesting an age/maturity difference in the results (Harris & Lucas, 1976).

The Broverman studies have also been re-examined within the population of mental health professionals. Philips (1985) concluded that meaningful cognitive change had occurred in how clinicians interpret men and women's adjustment, although there were still differences in the perceptions held by the professionals regarding men and women. This finding was based on a study with a sample of psychiatrists, psychologists and social workers whose ratings suggested that traditional feminine traits were regarded more favorably, as compared to the Broverman et al(1970) findings, and were also considered appropriate characteristics for adults in general as well (Philips, 1985). Philips and Gilroy (1985) attempted to replicate the Broverman et al(1970) study using the same three conditions (1) adult, sex unspecified, (2) female and (3) male with a sample of mental health professionals. They did not find significant differences related to the participants' sex. There was a significant effect found for social desirability and what was judged as healthy for the sex unspecified adults, although they did not find a relationship between social desirability and traits associated with conventional sex-role stereotypes. The authors suggest that either the Broverman et al(1970) findings were an artifact of the forced choice methodology they employed or that progress had been made in the nonsexist direction among mental health professionals (Philips & Gilroy, 1985).

One other criticism of the Broverman studies is the need to specify the environmental context in research on sex-role stereotyping (Poole & Tapley, 1988). This

is of particular importance to the current study due to its purpose of assessing sex-role stereotyping in the context of parenting. Poole and Tapley (1988) structured a study in which clinical psychologists rated a “mature healthy socially competent” male and female within both a work and home setting. They found a significant effect for environment, with the ratings of men and women more closely resembling traditionally masculine traits in the work setting, although the participants did not assign significantly different ratings to men versus women (Poole & Tapley, 1988). Again, this study emphasizes the importance of the environmental context on sex-role stereotyping.

Sex-role Stereotypes and Child Custody

Sex-role stereotyping has been studied in several domains. However, gender bias in child custody decisions has not been extensively addressed, even though throughout history gender stereotypes have played an important role in child custody dispositions (Warshak, 1996). Both men and women’s advocacy groups report discrimination against fathers and mothers, respectively. Fathers may feel that women are assumed to be the better caretaker, and therefore obtain primary custody, while placing men in the provider/visiting parent role, without thorough consideration of other alternatives. Mothers may feel pressured to suppress their career drive, decrease hours at work, etc., so as to fit a more traditional stereotype of a woman/mother, especially during custody proceedings and can even be judged as maladjusted or sick if they behave in gender incongruent ways (Page, 1987). Gorman and Fritzsche’s (2002) study recently examined this idea of a “good mother stereotype” and as predicted the mother who remained at home with her child and who was satisfied with staying at home was given higher ratings than was the dissatisfied stay-at-home mother. Further, the continuously employed

mother who was satisfied working outside of the home was rated as less selfless and less committed to being a mother than the dissatisfied employed mother (Gorman & Fritzsche, 2002). The take home message here appears to be that to avoid being labeled a bad mother one must either stay at home and be happy and satisfied or be a working mother who feels guilty and dissatisfied, wishing she was at home with her children. Professional women have long been aware of this double standard; if they challenge traditional expectations they are not feminine, yet if they comply they are dependant, immature and passive (Olarde, 2000).

Fathers also face a double standard regarding employment. Riggs (1997) found that approval ratings deteriorated significantly when a father sacrificed financial security for care giving, in contrast to the mothers who received high approval for that same behavior (Riggs, 1997). This finding suggests that competency in fathers is primarily judged by their ability to provide financially for their families. This idea is further evidenced by most custody decisions where the mother receives primary custody and the father pays alimony and/or child support and receives only visitation (Riggs, 1997).

Sex-role stereotyping is not limited to mental health professionals and students. Martin, Reynolds and Keith (2002) examined the extent to which men and women employed in the legal system were aware of gender inequality. The results indicated that one's own gender influences gender-bias observations. Women's observations of more gender bias were associated with heightened feminist consciousness, while this pattern was not found with men, for either judges or attorneys. The differences found did not appear to be due to status, but rather the individual experience associated with gender (Martin, Reynolds & Keith, 2002). In other words, the authors believe that the gender

bias the participants displayed was primarily due to their gender and the personal experiences related to it. This finding suggests that our individual gendered experiences and interpretations of the world around us lead us to perceive events differently based upon these factors; therefore gender's pervasive influence strongly affects gender bias. Stepnick and Orcutt (1996) investigated the extent to which male and female judges and attorneys engage in biased behavior against females in the legal setting. Their findings suggest that female judges and attorneys are much more aware of gender-biased behavior against women and significantly differ from male judges with regard to perceptions of judges behaving unprofessionally towards women. They also found that these perceptions were in part due to the age of the judge. The authors suggest that promotion of more female judges, as well as educational efforts aimed at the younger generation of male judges, would reduce the biased treatment of females in the legal system (Stepnick & Orcutt, 1996).

In addition to lawyers and judges, psychologists and/or other mental health professionals can play an important role in the determination of custody. Although no studies were found concerning bias in decisions made by psychologists during custody evaluations, there has been some documentation of gender bias within the field. Tredinnick and Fowers (1997) studied gender bias among psychologists, professors and students. Their findings suggest that psychologists are just as likely to engage in gender bias as professors and members of the general public. The participants' response to case vignettes describing males and females displayed a preference for the masculine form of individualism for males, as compared to females.

The issues associated with bias in the legal system and among psychologists are of primary concern to child custody since these are the individuals who tend to make recommendations and decisions regarding the best interest of the child(ren). The current study uses similar groups to assess gender bias in a parenting situation to determine if gender is one factor that informs decisions regarding competency in parenting.

Socialization of Gender Differences

The marginalizing of fathers, in general, is probably due to many factors, including race and culture. Fathers are often viewed as peripheral to the basic care of children, thus are treated that way by teachers, health care providers and the community in general (Weissbourd, 1999). This is not to suggest that doctors and teachers are discriminating against fathers, but instead, that they are reinforcing low expectations of fathers with regard to the hard work of parenting. This is exemplified by doctors verbalizing instructions to the mother instead of the father, or the teacher's requesting that the father let the mother know what needs to be brought to school the next day, etc. (Weissbourd, 1999). Another example of gender role expectations includes placement of baby-changing stations. Until recently they were only found in women's restrooms. The fact that they are being placed in some men's restrooms has symbolic and practical importance for fathers.

Anecdotally speaking, women tend to complain that they are ignored by individuals such as car salesmen, mechanics, etc., in the presence of a male, although they are probably not aware of situations where the male is ignored. Mothers are viewed as the designated experts when it comes to children. In a study regarding African American men in health care systems it was noted that 90% of health questions are posed

to mothers when both parents are in the room and eye contact is rarely made with the father (Weissbound, 1999). Gender role expectations are so deeply embedded in our culture that even in a study of intact marriages where the father is providing the primary care giving role, the traditional gender roles prescribed by society are still being adhered to. This translates into a situation where, regardless of the care giving status, the mothers are still bathing the children and putting them to bed, while the fathers perform the maintenance in and outside of the house (Frank, 1995).

Because the parenting bar is set so low for expectations of fathers, the ones that do show some interest and nurturing capabilities towards their children tend to be highly praised. This is evident in schools holding "dad's days" or other father events that help involve the men in their children's lives. This type of day is not typically held for mothers, probably because we assume that the mothers are already highly involved. The notion of celebrating these fathers for showing up at school for one-day is an example of how little is expected of them and how much we expect of mothers; maximum involvement with little or no acknowledgment (Weissbound, 1999). Silverstein (1996) suggests that redefining fathering to emphasize nurturing as well as providing could give attachment and connection primary importance in the gender socialization of men and further suggests that this could make masculinity less oppressive to both men and women (Silverstein, 1996).

The socialization of low expectations of the role of fatherhood starts at an early age. Boys are not generally reinforced for nurturing and care-taking behaviors; instead they tend to be encouraged towards aggressive and active behaviors (Lytton & Romney, 1991). If men are to become more involved in a meaningful way in the lives of their

children, many changes will need to be made. Some of these may include changing the workplace so they can expand their parenting role, e.g. paternity leave, more flexible scheduling, company based childcare and a reasonable number of hours in a workweek (Weissbourd, 1999). Education regarding the responsibilities of parenthood should be taught not only to women but young men as well, beginning early in their educational process. Mentoring programs and community resources could be used to model and teach responsible fathering behaviors and communicate a message to future parents of what their roles could be in their children's lives.

Division of Labor and Roles within the Family

Research that examines the lives of children after divorce tends to focus exclusively on those who live with their mothers, most likely because it is the most common custody arrangement (Cancian & Meyer, 1998). Research documents several negative consequences of growing up in a mother-only family as well as high levels of economic vulnerability (McLanahan & Sandefur, 1994). These negative consequences are most likely due to a combination of factors, not one exclusively, and the study did not examine father-only families to determine if the same results exist there.

Children are the poorest Americans, with more than one out of five living in poverty (U. S. Bureau of the Census, 1995). Growth of single parent families, as a result of divorce and changing childbearing behavior, has paralleled the increase in child poverty. There are well-documented negative effects of poverty on children. It is linked to dropping out of school, low achievement in school, teenage pregnancy, poor mental and physical health, as well as unemployment in adolescence and early adulthood (Harris & Marmer, 1996). The home environment also plays an important role in determining the

extent to which low income affects childhood development. Closer positive supervision and emotional support in the home improve socio-emotional development and helps prevent deviant behaviors. The role parents' play and the interaction of two parent households may mediate a portion of the disadvantage that is associated with lower income. It is also well documented that negative perceptions are held against individuals of low SES (Harris & Marmer, 1996). They are typically viewed as unintelligent, lazy, of poor health and lacking drive and motivation. The importance of fathers in impoverished families may be critical since recent studies suggest parenting behaviors can mediate the effects of poverty on the development of children, although this research did focus on mothers. This mediating role could go either in a positive or negative direction depending upon whether the behavior displayed by the parent is supportive and nurturing or punitive and erratic (McLoyd, 1990; McLeod & Shanahan, 1993).

The impact of divorce on fathers and their children is not well understood. There is a consensus among researchers that fathers are important to abnormal and normal childhood development outcomes and that young children can be as attached to their fathers as they are their mothers (Popenoe, 2000; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999; Williams & Radin, 1999). Williams and Radin (1999) did a twenty year follow up study on the young adult children of fathers of intact, White, middle-class families who had been closely involved in child-rearing duties. The authors suggested that the extent to which the child's locus of control, expectations about gender roles in career and family contexts, and academic competence was different from those of children raised in a more traditional family, where the father was not significantly involved in child rearing. Their

findings suggest that increased paternal involvement with children contributes to internal locus of control, particularly in sons (Williams & Radin, 1999).

Popenoe proposes that the role of father is an essential figure in child rearing and the absence of this figure results in "paternal deprivation" (Popenoe, 2000). However, Silverstein and Auerbach (1999) propose Popenoe's (2000) theory is oversimplified and based on their research believe that neither a father nor a mother is essential to a child's proper development. Even if a father is not physically present he can still play an important role in his child's life (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999).

Silverstein and Auerbach (1999) have concluded that a variety of family structures can lead to positive outcomes with childrearing. Their research includes several types of fathers including gay, divorced, never married and remarried fathers. They state, "Children need one responsible, care-taking adult that has a positive emotional connection to them and with whom they have a consistent relationship (p. 398)". A single parent household could meet the above requirements and any additional adults/parents could contribute to positive child development as well. The adults or parents in question could be a mother or father based on these criteria. The primary factors that predict positive child adjustment are the stability of emotional connection and the predictability of the care-taking relationship, not gender (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999).

Men are spending more time working within the household than they ever have (Levine & Pittinsky, 1997; Robinson & Godbey, 1997), but women are still doing the larger share of responsibilities (Demo & Acock, 1993). There are several theories that attempt to explain this dynamic, including a historical division of labor within the household where the male does the "dirty" jobs such as taking out the garbage, mowing

the lawn, fixing things around the house etc, while the female performs tasks such as dusting, vacuuming, cooking, etc. This leads to a lack of exposure/modeling for male children of fathers performing what has previously been considered “women’s work” (Demo & Acock, 1993). The media and our culture in general may also reinforce the traditional role message of a division between what a male and female should do within the household (Ahmeduzzaman & Roopnarine, 1992). This is evidenced by how cleaning products, lawn care equipment, tools, etc. are marketed. Women tend to be in commercials for household items, cooking products, and medications for children. They are seen endorsing the nice scents, clean results or how proud the family will be of your efforts if you use the product. In contrast, men are typically found in advertisements for tools, lawnmowers, building supplies, etc., and discuss how tough the product is or how it will make the job more efficient. Consequently, media and pop culture may reinforce the traditional division of labor and role definitions within the household, therefore, maintaining sex-role stereotypes in both parenting and the family relationships.

Allen and Hawkins (1999) offer an alternative explanation of why men are underrepresented within the responsibilities of the household, calling it “maternal gatekeeping.” They define this as a set of beliefs and behaviors held by a mother that inhibit a collaborative effort between the mother and father in family work that results in limiting a father’s opportunity for learning and growing through caring for the home and children (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). The authors suggest that there are three dimensions of maternal gatekeeping that inhibit father involvement in family work. These include mothers’ reluctance to relinquish responsibility over the household and/or family matters

by setting unrealistic or rigid standards, external validation of mothering identity, and differentiated conceptions of family roles (Allen & Hawkins, 1999).

Maternal gatekeeping is only one possible cause of minimal father involvement. There is likely a relationship between the involvement of both the mother and father with their children and the quality of their (marital) relationship. Highly involved mothers may elicit and encourage more involvement from the father, especially in low-conflict happy marriages (Harris & Marmer, 1996).

Maternal beliefs appear to be important in several contexts of parenting, both to the children and partner. Kennedy investigated the relationship of maternal beliefs to social competence in preschool children (1992). She found that mothers highly valued social competence in their children and the mothers of children rejected by peers were less likely to teach their children about social skills (Kennedy, 1992). This suggests that mothers in general may be less likely to educate a father or child if their skills are believed to be deficient or are viewed as unable to learn the desired skill. Based on this finding one could conclude that if a woman holds a stereotype regarding a man's lack of parenting skills or potential to learn she would be less likely to attempt to educate or involve him in the child's daily life, and instead take on the responsibility herself.

Summary of Literature Review

The most pertinent issues that emerged from the literature review appear to be the high incidence of sex-role stereotyping within our society and culture. Although this phenomenon has been investigated in many domains, there is little research on how it affects fathers, particularly within the context of custody and parenting. The number of couples with children divorcing each year seems to be increasing, suggesting that this

problem is not going away. Some studies suggest that gender bias and sex-role stereotyping is pervasive and can extend to many environments, including the workplace and occupational decisions, which is of primary concern to the current study. Judges and psychologists play a major role in determining which parent is most suited to provide primary care for the child(ren), when divorcing, and it is therefore imperative to understand if their decisions are made in an objective manner or if they are in any way dependant upon sex-role stereotyping and gender bias.

The literature also suggests that both fathers and mothers receive messages from social, political and other environmental sources that aid in shaping parenting behaviors and beliefs (Weissbourd, 1999). Many of these messages contain gender stereotypes and skewed perceptions of what is expected from the role of mother or father (Silverstein & Aurbach, 1999). The evolution of child custody law represents changing views of gender preference for parenting, but it seems as though actual change based on these laws is decades behind. Custody is still typically awarded to the mother, but there is evidence that the courts are beginning to be slightly more open to a shared arrangement, that may allow the father more access. The increase in shared arrangements is small and is typically only granted if there is little or no conflict between parties. There appears to be no evidence of an increase in fathers gaining sole custody of their children after divorce. Of primary concern to this study are fathers not obtaining custody based on a lingering belief that a woman is a better parent than a man (Cancian & Meyer, 1994).

Purpose and Hypotheses

This study primarily examined gender stereotypes with regards to parenting. The purpose of the study was to determine how participants viewed identical patterns of

parenting behavior and emotion when the gender of the character in the vignette was varied, along with socioeconomic status. Further, participant variables, including gender, occupation and age, were expected to influence the ratings of the parent as well. No previous studies were found to suggest what the potential effects the gender of the respondent could have on the ratings; therefore it was included to determine what effect, if any, would result. District court judges and psychologists were selected as two groups in the sample since they are the primary individuals who help determine the best interests of the child and therefore the potential presence of gender bias would be of particular interest. A college student sample was also selected to address possible age effects. The specific hypotheses of the studies follow.

Hypothesis 1. I expect respondents to rate women higher than men on overall parenting skills. I expect the mother in the vignette to be rated higher than the father with regard to adjectives representing positive parenting, particularly nurturance. I expect the father to be rated higher on adjectives representing negative attributes of parenting.

Hypothesis 2. I expect that there will be an interaction between vignette gender and the occupation of the respondent, with the judges having the most positive perception of mothers and the most negative perception of fathers, as measured by overall parenting skills and the three factors of the Parenting Adjective Questionnaire (PAQ).

Hypothesis 3. I expect that the older respondents, as compared to a college population, will rate women higher on overall parenting skills.

CHAPTER II

METHOD

Participants

The present study included a sample of college students along with individuals who are primarily involved in determining the “best interests of the child” during custody evaluations e.g. family court judges and psychologists. The sampling was conducted in North Dakota and Minnesota based on a mail out questionnaire. Four non-overlapping samples of one hundred psychologists each who work with children and families were randomly selected from APA membership status that met the following criteria: (1) licensed, (2) a resident of either North Dakota or Minnesota, and (3) had paid their special assessment fee, indicating that they were currently practicing. The 400 address labels were purchased from the American Psychological Association (APA) for the mailing. Two hundred questionnaires were mailed to family court judges in North Dakota and Minnesota. This included all districts in North Dakota and 4 districts in Minnesota. The college population was sampled by requesting participation from an undergraduate sociology class in North Dakota, in exchange for extra credit.

Preliminary analyses of the respondent's demographic information were performed. The total sample size was $N = 304$, which was comprised of 122 psychologists, 47 judges and 135 college students. The age range was 52 (min = 18, max = 70), with a mean of 37.1 (SD = 17.1). The sample was equally split between males and

females, 145 each, with 14 individuals choosing not to indicate their gender. One hundred thirty seven individuals in the sample were married, 17 divorced and 148 single. Most of the respondents were Caucasian ($n = 296$), while 1 was African-American and 4 were in the other category. One hundred sixty four of the participants (53.9%) did not have any children, 17 (5.6%) had 1 child, 69 (22.7%) had 2 children, 33 (10.9%) had 3 children, 13 (4.3%) had 4 children, 5 (1.6%) had 5 children, 1 (.3%) had 6 children, 1 (.3%) had 8 children and 1 (.3%) had 9 children. The income level, number of children, and group were strongly related in this sample. The college student population tended to be single, earning less than \$10,000 with no children, while the professionals (i.e. judges and psychologists) tended to be married/divorced, earning more than \$60,000 and most had children. Response rates were: 23.5% for judges and 30.5% for psychologists and 100% for college students. See Table 1.

Table 1. Mean and (Standard Deviation) of Age and Income by Participant Group.

Group	N	Age	Income
Psychologists	122	50.64 (7.88)	5.48 (1.05)
Judges	47	53.70 (5.94)	6.00 (0.00)
College students	135	19.08 (1.79)	0.56 (0.03)

Note. Income: 0 = under \$10,000; 1 = \$10-20,000; 2 = \$20-30,000; 3 = \$30-40,000; 4 = \$40-50,000; 5 = \$50-60,000; 6 = over \$60,000.

Materials

Demographics Questionnaire. See appendix B. The following information was requested from the participants: gender, age, race, SES, marital status, occupation, number of children, of those how many live in your household over 75% of the time.

Vignette and Questionnaire. See Appendix C. A vignette was constructed involving a stressful and emotional parenting situation that only differs based on gender (male, female) and salary (\$20,000/year, \$45,000/year). The vignette is followed by the Parenting Adjective Questionnaire (PAQ), which includes questions that rate the parent's overall parenting skills used in the situation and the following adjectives: frustrated, nurturing, understanding, irritated, kind, emotional, angry, annoyed, hostile, critical, calm, and aggravated. All ratings were on a nine point scale with 1 = not at all, 5 = moderate, 9 = extremely. Additional qualitative questions were asked regarding the basis used for rating the vignette parent. These will be analyzed at a later date.

A pilot study with 39 individuals was performed to ascertain the reliability and validity of the intended measure. Bivariate correlations were performed on 11 pre-post questionnaires. The individual pairs of adjectives were found to be highly correlated (i.e. $>.4$) with one another based on pre-post assessments with the exception of the following adjectives: impatient, confident and strict. See Table 2.

An exploratory factor analysis was then performed and initially 4 components were extracted from only 12 adjectives. A forced 2-factor model was attempted but only 6 of 12 adjectives had acceptable factor loadings and no change was noted with rotation. Then a 3-factor model with rotation was attempted and was the best fit for the data (see

Table 3). Three adjectives (confident, strict, impatient) were omitted from the pool due to low factor loadings and/or pre-post correlations.

Table 2. Pre-post Adjective Bivariate Correlation Results from Pilot Data.

Adjective	Correlation	Sig
Frustrated	.695	.017
Nurturing	.448	.167
Understanding	.685	.020
Impatient	.078	.819
Kind	.482	.133
Emotional	.837	.001
Angry	.443	.172
Confident	.345	.299
Hostile	.741	.009
Critical	.773	.005
Calm	.655	.029
Strict	.158	.644
Overall Parenting Skills	.654	.029

Factor 1 represents “empathic parenting”, Factor 2 represents “angry parenting” and Factor 3 represents “reactive parenting.” The removal of three adjectives from the pool left Factor 2 needing one additional adjective and Factor 3 needing two more adjectives, which was done by selecting synonyms of the adjectives that loaded highly on each factor. The final factors consist of: Factor 1: nurturing, kind, understanding and

calm; Factor 2: annoyed, angry, hostile, critical; Factor 3 aggravated, irritated, frustrated, emotional. Table 4 shows the final factor loadings from a confirmatory factor analysis after all data were collected. The following bivariate correlations between Factors 1, 2 and 3 were observed: $r_{1,2} = -.388$; $r_{1,3} = -.132$; $r_{2,3} = .472$. Reliability analyses using coefficient alphas demonstrated acceptable internal consistency: Factor 1 = .80; Factor 2 = .67; Factor 3 = .76.

Table 3. Factor Loadings for Exploratory Factor Analysis on Pilot Data.

Factor	Factor Loading
Factor 1	
Nurturing	.834
Understanding	.691
Kind	.641
Calm	.496
Confident	.726
Factor 2	
Angry	.538
Hostile	.795
Critical	.784
Strict	.596
Impatient	.426
Factor 3	
Emotional	.705
Frustrated	.816

Table 4. Factor Loadings for Confirmatory Factor Analysis.

Factor	Factor Loading
Factor 1	
Nurturing	.672
Understanding	.672
Kind	.720
Calm	.443
Factor 2	
Angry	.453
Hostile	.589
Critical	.600
Annoyed	.417
Factor 3	
Aggravated	.677
Irritated	.611
Emotional	.267
Frustrated	.657

Procedure

The participants were asked to read and sign a consent form (see Appendix A). After agreeing to participate in the study they were instructed to fill out a demographics survey, read the parenting vignette and answer complete the PAQ. The parenting

situations were identical, but the description of the parent varied based on gender and salary. This resulted in 4 unique parent profiles including (1) mother earning \$20,000, (2) mother earning \$40,000, (3) father earning \$20,000 and (4) father earning \$40,000. See Appendix C for further description. Questionnaires were returned by mail unless given within a classroom setting. The questionnaires were given a code letter prior to completion that indicates the group sampled e.g. P = psychologists, J = judges, CS = college students. No names or identifying information were recorded. The data are stored in a locked filing cabinet and will be destroyed three years after the completion of the study.

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

The effect of respondent gender and vignette SES were considered independently in preliminary analyses, to determine whether they would be considered in further analyses of the hypotheses. One-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were used to determine if respondent gender and SES of the parent in the vignette would be of significant importance to the overall parenting skills ratings. Neither respondent gender, $F(1, 288) = .68, p = .41$, nor vignette SES, $F(1, 302) = .30, p = .58$, were significantly related to ratings of overall parenting skills. In addition, the effect of respondent gender on all three factors of the PAQ was non-significant: for Factor 1, $F(1, 288) = .12, p = .73$, for Factor 2, $F(1, 288) = 1.31, p = .25$, and for Factor 3 $F(1, 288) = .23, p = .64$. The SES level of the parent portrayed in the vignette also had a non-significant effect on the ratings of PAQ Factors: for Factor 1, $F(1, 302) = 2.24, p = .14$, for Factor 2, $F(1, 302) = .08, p = .77$, and for Factor 3, $F(1, 302) = 3.42, p = .07$. Based on these findings, respondent gender and vignette SES were omitted from the remaining analyses.

Hypotheses 1 and 2. I expect respondents to rate women higher than men on overall parenting skills and the three factors of the PAQ. I also expect that there will be an interaction between vignette gender and the occupation of the respondent, with the judges having the most positive perception of mothers and the most negative perception of fathers, as measured by overall parenting skills and the three factors of the PAQ.

Table 5. Differences in Ratings of Overall Parenting Skills and PAQ Factors by Group and Vignette Gender.

Vignette gender	Overall Parenting Skills		Factor 1		Factor 2		Factor 3	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Female								
Psychologist	4.28	1.50	13.42	4.65	25.75	5.10	30.52	3.95
Judge	4.19	1.63	12.27	5.26	23.69	5.83	29.81	4.65
College	5.01	1.80	14.47	5.33	25.89	4.96	30.18	4.40
Male								
Psychologist	3.75	1.64	11.94	4.76	26.55	4.65	30.83	3.46
Judge	3.43	1.36	11.96	4.50	28.52	6.79	28.81	6.74
College	4.78	.72	12.93	4.95	26.16	5.92	29.68	4.50
Total								
Psychologist	4.05	1.58	12.77	4.73	26.10	4.90	30.66	3.73
Judge	3.85	1.55	12.04	4.89	25.85	6.67	29.36	5.63
College	4.90	1.75	13.69	5.18	26.03	5.45	29.93	4.44

Note. Factor 1 = nurturing, understanding, kind, calm; Factor 2 = angry, hostile, critical, annoyed; Factor 3 = aggravated, irritated, emotional, frustrated.

A 3x2 ANOVA was completed with group (psychologists, judges, college students) and vignette gender (male, female) as factors on the dependent variable overall parenting skills. There was a significant main effect found for both vignette gender, $F(1, 298) = 5.72, p = .017$, and group, $F(2, 298) = 12.39, p = .000$. However, no interaction was found $F(2, 298) = .520, p = .595$. All three groups rated men more

negatively than women (see Table 5). An interesting finding was that the judges consistently rated parents in general (both mothers and fathers) most negatively, followed by psychologists, then college students, yet not all of these differences reached significance. Post hoc LSD means indicate that the psychologists and judges' ratings did not significantly differ from one another (mean difference = .20, $p = .48$). Both psychologists and judges significantly differed from the college students' (mean difference = .85, $p = .00$, and mean difference = 1.05, $p = .00$, respectively).

A second 3x2 Multivariate Analyses of Variance (MANOVA) was completed, using group (psychologist, judge, college student) and vignette gender (male, female) as factors to obtain an overall test of significance as well as lower order analyses for the three factors of the PAQ. The MANOVA was used to help control for the potential error involved when running multiple analyses on the dependent variables. Means and standard deviations for the analyses are presented in Table 5 and a summary of the MANOVA results are presented in Table 6.

Post-hoc analyses were performed using the twelve individual adjectives as the dependent variables, and again using vignette gender as the independent variable. Vignette gender had a significant effect on four of these adjectives: (nurturing $F(1, 292) = 6.52, p = .01$, kind $F(1, 292) = 6.22, p = .01$, emotional $F(1, 292) = 4.78, p = .03$ and hostile $F(1, 292) = 4.54, p = .03$), while the remaining eight were non-significant (see Table 7). Analysis of the means suggests that the female parent was rated as significantly more nurturing, kind and emotional than the male parent, while the male parent was rated significantly more hostile than the female parent (see Table 7).

Table 6. Summary of Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA) on Participant Group and Vignette Gender for the Three Factors with Follow-up Univariate Analyses of Variance (ANOVAs) for each Factor.

	F	df	p
MANOVA			
Vignette Gender	4.69*	3, 295	.01
Group	1.71	3, 295	.12
Gender * Group	2.47*	3, 295	.02
ANOVA			
Factor 1			
Vignette Gender	3.42	1, 297	.07
Group	2.51	2, 297	.08
Gender * Group	0.21	2, 297	.82
Factor 2			
Vignette Gender	8.02*	1, 297	.01
Group	0.02	2, 297	.98
Gender * Group	3.23*	2, 297	.04
Factor 3			
Vignette Gender	0.50	1, 297	.48
Group	1.88	2, 297	.16
Gender * Group	0.47	2, 297	.63

Table 7. Means and Standard Deviations by Vignette Gender for PAQ Items.

PAQ Items	Male (n = 142)		Female (n = 162)		F	p
	M	SD	M	SD		
Frustrated	7.60	1.47	7.54	1.33	.10	.76
Nurturing	3.78	1.53	4.27	1.79	6.52*	.01
Understanding	3.09	1.56	3.38	1.55	2.50	.12
Aggravated	7.70	1.13	7.41	1.59	3.23	.07
Kind	3.12	1.44	3.58	1.69	6.22*	.01
Emotional	7.40	1.65	7.77	1.25	4.78*	.03
Angry	7.73	1.24	7.70	1.22	0.03	.85
Irritated	7.44	1.41	7.54	1.32	0.36	.55
Hostile	6.03	2.23	5.48	2.20	4.54*	.03
Critical	6.13	2.04	5.69	2.08	3.45	.06
Calm	2.42	1.46	2.48	1.50	0.16	.69
Annoyed	6.77	1.84	6.78	1.87	0.00	.98

Hypothesis 3. I expect that the older respondents will rate women higher on overall parenting skills as compared to a college population.

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to predict the overall parenting ratings as well as Factors 1, 2, and 3 scores for (1) male parent in vignette, (2) female parent in vignette, and (3) entire sample from the participant group and age of the respondent. The logic of entry was to determine the effects of respondent age above a

beyond that of participant group for each vignette gender and as a whole so they could be compared. The participant group variable was entered first (Model 1), followed by age (Model 2) for all regression analyses. Table 8 contains the bivariate correlations as well as means, standard deviations and sample sizes for all regression analysis variables.

See Table 9 for a summary of multiple regressions predicting overall parenting skills, and Factors 1, 2, and 3 from participant group (Model 1) and age (Model 2) for male and female parents separately, as well as the entire sample. When the entire sample was analyzed, the overall regression equation for Model 2 of overall parenting skills was significant, $F(1, 298) = .03$, $\Delta R^2 = .07$, $p = .03$ and suggests that age accounts for a significant portion of unaccounted for variance of overall parenting skills, 2% above that of participant group alone. However, when regression analyses were performed on male and female vignette gender separately, the results differed. There was not a significant relationship between respondent age and overall parenting skills for the female parent, $F(1, 159) = .48$, $\Delta R^2 = .00$, $p = .49$, while there was a significant relationship for the male parent, $F(1, 136) = 6.74$, $\Delta R^2 = .04$, $p = .01$. These multiple regression results suggest that as the age of the respondents increase, overall parenting skills ratings tend to decline, but more so for male parents.

No relationship was found between respondent age and Factor 1 scores for the female parent, $F(1, 158)$, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $p = .27$, or for the male parent, $F(1, 136)$, $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $p = .06$. However, when considered as an entire sample there was a significant relationship found between age and Factor 1 scores, $F(1, 297) = 4.13$, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $p = .04$. This finding seems contradictory, yet the correlations between respondent age and Factor 1 for the male parent and the entire sample are significantly negatively correlated (see

Table 8), while the correlation is negative for the female parent, but non-significant. This suggests that as the age of the respondent increases they tend to perceive parents in general as less empathic, but possibly not to a significant degree when gender differences are separated out.

There was also a significant relationship between respondent age and Factor 2 scores for the male parent, $F(1,136) = 8.56$, $\Delta R^2 = .06$, $p = .01$, while there was not a significant relationship found for the female parent, $F(1,158) = 1.66$, $\Delta R^2 = .01$, $p = .20$, or for the sample as a whole, $F(1,297)$, $\Delta R^2 = .00$, $p = .33$. Further, there was a significant positive correlation $r(139) = .16$, $p = .03$, between respondent age and Factor 2 scores for the male parent. These results suggest that age is a significant factor for predicting Factor 2 scores in the male parent. Therefore, as age increases, so does the Factor 2 score, thus suggesting the older a respondent becomes, the angrier a male parent is perceived.

There was not a significant relationship found between respondent age and Factor 3 scores when the sample was considered as a whole, $F(1,297) = .01$, $\Delta R^2 = .00$, $p = .93$ or when it was separated into female, $F(1,158) = .43$, $\Delta R^2 = .00$, $p = .51$, and male, $F(1,136) = .31$, $\Delta R^2 = .00$, $p = .58$, parent groups. These findings suggest that age of respondent is not a significant predictor of emotional or reactive parenting. Table 9 also contains the standardized coefficient Beta for the age predictor as well as the corresponding significance test.

Table 8. Bivariate Correlations, Means, Standard Deviations and Sample Size for all Dependent Variables, Participant Group and Age for the Male and Female Parent Separately and the Entire Sample.

Regression	Variable	1	2	3	M	SD	N
Male parent	1. Overall Parenting Skills	-			4.20	1.74	139
	2. Participant Group	.28*	-		1.12	.92	139
	3. Age	-.34*	-.88*	-	36.12	17.31	139
Female parent	1. Overall Parenting Skills	-			4.57	1.68	162
	2. Participant Group	.20*	-		0.99	0.92	162
	3. Age	-.20*	-.84*	-	37.85	16.95	162
Entire sample	1. Overall Parenting Skills	-			4.40	1.72	301
	2. Participant Group	.23*	-		1.04	.92	301
	3. Age	-.26*	-.86*	-	37.06	17.1	301
Male parent	1. Factor 1	-			12.34	4.78	139
	2. Participant Group	.09	-		1.11	0.92	139
	3. Age	-.15*	-.88*	-	36.14	17.31	139
Female parent	1. Factor 1	-			13.66	5.07	161
	2. Participant Group	.09	-		0.98	0.92	161
	3. Age	-.13	-.84*	-	37.96	16.94	161
Entire sample	1. Factor 1	-			13.07	4.97	300
	2. Participant Group	.08	-		1.04	.92	300
	3. Age	-.13*	-.86*	-	37.12	17.10	300

Table 8 (continued)

Regression	Variable	1	2	3	M	SD	N
Male parent	1. Factor 2	-			26.61	5.66	139
	2. Participant Group	-.05	-		1.11	0.92	139
	3. Age	-.16*	-.88*	-	36.14	17.31	139
Female parent	1. Factor 2	-			25.48	5.19	161
	2. Participant Group	.01	-		0.98	0.92	161
	3. Age	-.07	-.84*	-	37.96	16.94	161
Entire sample	1. Factor 2	-			26.00	5.44	300
	2. Participant Group	-.01	-		1.04	.92	300
	3. Age	.04	-.86*	-	37.12	17.1	300
Male parent	1. Factor 3	-			30.02	4.50	139
	2. Participant Group	-.12	-		1.11	0.92	139
	3. Age	.13	-.88*	-	36.14	17.31	139
Female parent	1. Factor 3	-			30.27	4.23	161
	2. Participant Group	-.04	-		0.98	0.92	161
	3. Age	.00	-.84*	-	37.96	16.94	161
Entire sample	1. Factor 3	-			30.15	4.35	300
	2. Participant Group	-.08	-		1.04	.92	300
	3. Age	.07	-.86*	-	37.12	17.10	300

Note. * $p < .05$.

Table 9. Summary of Multiple Regressions Predicting Overall Parenting Skills, Factors 1, 2, and 3 from Participant Group (Model 1) and Age (Model 2) for Male and Female Parents Separately as well as Combined in the Entire Sample.

Variables	Model 1		Model 2		p	Beta	t	p
	R ²	R ²	ΔR ²	ΔF				
Male Parent								
Overall Parenting Skills	0.08	0.12	.04	6.74*	0.01	-0.44	-2.60*	.01
Factor 1	0.01	0.03	0.03	3.52	0.06	-0.33	-1.88	.06
Factor 2	0.00	0.06	0.06	8.56*	0.01	0.51	2.93*	.01
Factor 3	0.02	0.02	0.00	0.31	0.58	0.10	0.56	.58
Female Parent								
Overall Parenting Skills	0.04	0.04	0.00	0.48	0.49	-0.10	-0.70	.49
Factor 1	0.01	0.02	0.01	1.22	0.27	-0.16	-1.11	.27
Factor 2	0.00	0.01	0.01	1.66	0.20	-0.14	-1.00	.32
Factor 3	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.43	0.51	-0.10	-0.66	.51
Entire Sample								
Overall Parenting Skills	0.05	0.07	0.02	4.95*	0.03	-0.24	-2.23*	.03
Factor 1	0.01	0.02	0.01	4.13*	0.04	-0.23	-2.03*	.04
Factor 2	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.96	0.33	0.09	0.76	.45
Factor 3	0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	0.93	-0.01	-0.09	.93

Note. Beta = standardized coefficient for predictor, age.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

The primary goal of the present study was to assess the bias in gender associated with parenting roles. Historically speaking, there has been a long held belief that women are the more capable and competent parent. This belief became more prominent after the Industrial Revolution when most fathers began working in factories rather than on family farms. This shift gave mothers primary responsibility at home. It is clear that social change can affect the dynamics of the family, particularly with regard to role definition and distribution of responsibility. Social change again affected childrearing behavior during the women's liberation movement of the 1960's, which resulted in a significant portion of women's employment outside of the home, thus shifting childcare responsibilities outside of the home for many families (Cancian & Meyers, 1998). Childcare responsibilities have evolved over time with a shift towards a mutual responsibility between parents yet little change has occurred in who is awarded custody in the event of a divorce. One might expect that the judicial system would closely parallel what social change, but this does not appear to be the case. Although fathers have more responsibility in the home and with their children than they ever have, they still are not consistently awarded sole custody at the same rates as mothers (Cohn, 1998). This issue is complex and probably results from many factors. This study focused solely on the

biases in perception individuals have when evaluating parenting behaviors based on gender of the parent and socioeconomic status. Participant group was also of importance and judges and psychologists were included in the sample due to their role in determining the “best interests of the child.” College students were also sampled to assess for a possible generational difference.

Upon initial analyses SES did not play an important role in the ratings of parenting skills or behavior. This was contrary to the expected outcome, yet the discrepancy between the SES statuses utilized in the present study was probably not large enough to be of significant importance to the respondent. In retrospect, it would have been better to have used a larger difference in income as well as include a group that was unemployed for both the male and female parent. It is possible that SES would have played a more important role if the research question revolved around which parent should obtain custody of the child, rather than simply assessing parenting skills. Results also suggest respondent gender was not of significant importance to the ratings. Male and female respondents did not significantly differ in their ratings of the parent in the vignette, which was a surprising finding and suggests that males and females may have the same patterns of biased and unbiased perceptions.

The primary hypothesis of this study suggested that women would be rated higher on parenting skills than men. This hypothesis was partially supported. Significant differences were not found when the single item measure of overall parenting skills was assessed, although when the three factors of the PAQ were analyzed significant differences were found. Factor 1 represented empathic parenting and consisted of the following adjectives: nurturing, understanding, kind and calm. The male parent was

consistently viewed as possessing less empathic qualities in the parenting scenario than the female parent. Since the vignettes were identical in behavioral terms, the differences in ratings are apparently due to beliefs or stereotypes held by the individual respondent. This translates back to the long held sex-role stereotype of mother as the nurturer and father as the financial provider. The vignette parents were not perceived differently on Factor 2 (angry) or Factor 3 (reactive/emotional), the collective negative aspects of negative parenting. This finding is somewhat encouraging since it suggests that males and females were rated equally and equally allowed to express anger and emotions without being held to a gender standard. However, when the individual adjectives were analyzed that collectively create the Factors some gender differences did emerge. The female parent was rated as significantly more nurturing, kind and emotional than the male parent, while the male parent was rated significantly more hostile than the female parent. As hypothesized, mothers were rated as more nurturing, kind and less hostile than fathers, even when exhibiting the same exact behaviors.

This is likely an example of gender role expectations. Women are expected to be and are viewed as more nurturing and less aggressive in our society (Broverman et al, 1972). This makes it difficult for males because they are not socialized as boys to nurture others and as men/fathers they are still not reinforced for nurturing behaviors they may exhibit. This could be discouraging to a father to know the mother will likely be viewed as the better parent from the start. It is possible for fathers to develop a self-fulfilling prophecy if they feel their efforts are not acknowledged. This in turn could discourage fathers from trying to be a better parent, attempting to gain custody or more extensive visitation rights, etc. if they are aware of the preconceived notions regarding parenting

and gender stereotypes. Boys tend to be rewarded for displaying aggressive and hostile behaviors, while girls are discouraged from this same type of behavior. Female stereotypes tend to suggest women are more emotional while men are supposed to be less expressive and composed in stressful situations. The results from the individual adjective analyses support all of the above gender stereotypes and suggest a continued pattern of gender role expectations and sex-role stereotyping into parenting.

Participants rated parents overall as average in spite of critical ratings on the individual adjectives. It is possible that participants were giving the vignette parent the benefit of the doubt even though they had demonstrated some poor choices during the stressful parenting scenario. This is also an encouraging trend since it is likely that all parents will at some point make poor choices with regards to their children, yet it does not automatically lead to a judgment of being a bad parent.

The second hypothesis was also partially supported. There were significant gender and occupation group differences for overall parenting skills once participant group was considered. Judges, psychologists and college students all rated the female parent higher on overall parenting skills and there was no interaction found due to the consistent pattern of responding. Judges were the most critical raters of both the male and female parent, while college students were the least critical raters for both parents. Psychologists' ratings fell in the middle for both the male and female parent. However, when the three factors of the PAQ were assessed there was a main effect for vignette gender, while none was found for participant group, yet there was a significant interaction between these two variables. The interaction effect was due to the inconsistent pattern of rating by judges and college students for the vignette parents on Factor 2.

Judges were the most critical of the three groups on the male parent in the vignette, yet the least critical on the female parent. The opposite pattern was found for college students, while again psychologists fell in the middle for ratings of the vignette parents on the three factors.

These findings suggest that sex-role stereotyping extends to all of the participant groups, yet in different ways. Gender bias within these groups can possibly be explained based upon different approaches to decision-making and critical thinking skills between the three groups.

The job description of a judge requires an individual to utilize critical thinking skills as well as develop a comfort level with making final decisions for other people in a relatively short period of time. This set of circumstances may lead to the use of dichotomous thinking, or the tendency to characterize things in "black or white" terms. This is a possible explanation for why the judges in the present sample had a larger discrepancy between their ratings of the male and female parent. Further, there are many male offenders within the judicial system, which could lead to possible skewed perceptions of males, in general, and potentially cause judges to rate them more negatively based on this. Psychologists likely have an increased awareness regarding gender bias due to extensive training, education and experience with these issues. They are trained to process information on many levels and typically include societal and cultural variables into their conceptualization of an individual or a case, therefore considering the "big picture" instead of categorizing information in concrete terms. This style lends itself well to the legal system, as a consultant, not a final decision maker. Most of the judges and psychologists sampled were parents, which may have given them

more insight into the scenario presented in the vignette. On the other hand, most of the college students sampled did not have children and likely did not relate to the stressful experience the vignette parent was going through. They were significantly less critical of the male parent for displaying anger in the situation, possibly due to the acceptability of male anger and aggression in the college years. In most areas the college students were the least critical and had the lowest discrepancy between ratings of the male and female parents, suggesting a relationship between youth and decreased use of sex-role stereotyping.

Respondent age was also a significant predictor of potential sex-role stereotyping. There were no significant relationships found in any of the regression analyses between the ratings of overall parenting skills, Factors 1, 2, or 3 and the age of the respondent for the female parent. Overall, age did not appear to be an important predictor of parenting behaviors when the female parent was the subject of the vignette. However, when the male parent was the subject, age was a significant predictor for overall parenting scores as well as Factor 2 scores. The relationships between these variables suggest that as respondent age increased, the perception of overall parenting skills of the male parent declined, and the Factor 2 (angry parenting) scores increased. These findings suggest that older adults may have more embedded sex-role stereotypes and might be less flexible in their ability to consider fathers as equally skilled as mothers. Of concern is that the male parent was viewed as angrier as age of respondent increased. What is not clear is if gender bias increases with age or if there is a generational difference within the sample.

Implications

The mother bias, particularly of older male judges, has been more of an anecdotal report within the judicial system rather than based on solid empirical findings. This study suggests that there is a mother bias, but it is not restricted to judges, rather it extends to psychologists and college student as well. Women were perceived as the more empathic and care-taking parent and based on these results it appears difficult to remain completely objective without allowing sex-role stereotyping to enter into decisions, evaluations, judgments, etc. about parenting behavior. This is of concern, especially considering judges and psychologists are expected to remain objective without imposing their own values, morals, or personal beliefs onto a client or case conceptualization. To some extent this task appears impossible. We are all human and have prejudices, stereotypes and morals that guide our own behavior on a daily basis, while the ethics code instructs us these must be put aside when acting in an occupational capacity, such as a psychologist or a judge. This can be a conflict of interests and one that has consistently challenged many professions, including psychology, law, as well as many other types of professions.

In sum, the significant discrepancy in ratings of mothers versus fathers varied based on who was doing the rating and what aspects of parenting were being rated. It appears as though evaluating parenting skills is a complex and the method one uses to arrive at these decisions is individualized and partially influenced by sex-role stereotyping. This finding suggests that there may not be an overt bias for or against one gender in the domain of parenting, rather it is more likely that personal perceptions enter into the decision-making process.

The issues raised by the present study suggest an increase in training and education in the area of gender bias is warranted for professions that require objectivity to the extent of avoiding harm to the client. More in depth practical experience may be necessary to increase competency and effectiveness in individuals who make difficult recommendations and decisions regarding custody and child placement. It is also important to increase awareness regarding personal biases or troubling issues that may cause impairment within the mental health and legal fields as a whole, as well as to the individuals practicing in these fields. These professionals need to become aware of situations where a conflict of interests, dual relationships, or personal biases may affect their occupational performance and thus require them to refer a client to another practitioner.

The general public could benefit from an increased awareness of gender bias. For many years women have reported having to work harder, watch their behavior more carefully in the workplace to be respected and given the status a male might have. This same type of effort may be required of fathers to demonstrate their competency and ability to be a complete parent so perceptions of what a father is and should be can evolve into a more nurturing and loving role within the social/family structure, rather than the disciplinarian, breadwinner, or playmate that currently defines them.

Further research is warranted in the area of gender bias in parenting as well as its interaction with the legal system. Future research is required to determine if gender bias in parenting exists in all regions and if there is a discrepancy in findings based on how liberal or conservative an area is. The current study only addressed gender bias in one instance of parenting. It is probably more informative to have an entire profile of the

parents reviewed by participants and then evaluate their positive and negative attributes as well as likelihood of giving them custody of the child. Age and gender of the children in question may also be an important variable to consider in future research. Although socioeconomic status was not significant in the current study, future research may need to address the impact of a parent being on welfare or unemployed on the perceptions held.

Limitations

One limitation of the current study was the lack of availability of a questionnaire tapping the information required to appropriately answer the hypotheses in question. For this reason one was constructed for use within the present study. Even though a pilot study was completed to support reliability and validity of the measure, the psychometrics are limited and based on a relatively small sample size and any interpretations made from single items of the PAQ are psychometrically limited as well. There is also questionable generalizability of the findings outside of North Dakota and Minnesota, due to regional differences between legal systems and mental health practitioners.

The parenting vignette utilized in the present study was meant to be a snapshot of a parent in a difficult situation who was rated on the skills and emotions exhibited for that one point in time so that gender differences could be assessed. It was not meant to represent an evaluation of all aspects of parenting and therefore the current findings can not be generalized to that extent. When determining the best interests of a child one is expected to look beyond the snapshot and into the entire profile of the parents to make decisions and recommendations. This was not the purpose of the current study nor was it practical, due to time and financial constraints.

The presence of gender bias in the perceptions of parenting behaviors suggests the potential need for a procedural change in how custody decisions are made. A more systematic and standardized approach to determining the best interests of the child in a custody dispute is highly desirable. First, researchers would be required to operationally define the spectrum of positive and negative attributes of parenting and then construct a valid and reliable set of techniques to measure these attributes. Many types of questionnaires exist that tap one area of parenting or mental health but there is not a widely used and accepted procedure for performing parental evaluations. This is a daunting task, but one that would help increase the reliability and credibility of findings of mental health professionals that perform these specialized psychological evaluations.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
CONSENT FORM

Parenting Study

You are invited to participate in a research study designed to examine parenting situations. We hope this study will help provide important information on how parenting skills are assessed. We ask that you read this form and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to participate. The study is being conducted by Krislea Wegner, M. S., a doctoral graduate student in the department of Counseling at the University of North Dakota, and is being supervised by her faculty advisor, Cindy Juntunen, Ph.D.

Explanation of Procedures

This study consists of a vignette to read after which you will be asked to answer several questions based on your reading. There is also a brief section to complete with your demographics. You are then asked to mail the questionnaire back to the researcher using the envelope provided.

Risks of the Study

There do not appear to be any obvious risks to this study, but if you feel uncomfortable answering any of the questions asked, disregard them.

Benefits of the Study

Having a better understanding of how we assess parenting situations.

Alternatives to Participating in the Study

The only alternative is to decide not to participate.

Compensation

Extra credit points for undergraduate psychology students.

Confidentiality

Findings from this research may be used for publication. However, your identity will be kept confidential. All records will be kept confidential and questionnaires will be anonymous. All records will be kept in a locked office at University of North Dakota.

Voluntary Nature of the study

If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at any time.

Offer to answer questions

You should feel free to answer questions now or at any time during the study. If you have questions you can contact the researcher or the research advisor at the following:

Krislea Wegner
701- 777- 2729
Department of Counseling
Box 8255, UND
Grand Forks, ND 58202

Cindy Juntunen
701-777-3740.
Department of Counseling
Box 8255, UND
Grand Forks, ND 58202

If you have any other questions or concerns, please call the Office of Research and Program Development at 701-777-4279.

You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Statement of Consent

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate. Your signature indicates that you have decided to participate, having read the information provided above.

Participant Signature

Date

APPENDIX B
DEMOGRAPHICS FORM

Code:

Gender: Male Female

Age _____

Marital Status: Married Divorced Single

Race: _____

Number of children _____

Of those children, how many live(ed) in your household more than 75% of the time? _____

Gross yearly income for yourself only:

Under \$10,000

\$20-\$30,000

\$30-\$40,000

\$40-\$50,000

\$50-\$60,000

Above \$60,000

Occupation _____

APPENDIX C

PARENT PROFILE/VIGNETTE

Please read the scenario below and answer the questions following it.

Helen (Mark) is a divorced mother (father) with one child. She (he) earns \$20,000 (\$45,000) yearly and works 8-5pm workdays Monday through Friday.

Helen and her son, Mitch, were at the park. Mitch was swinging and Helen was reading her book. It was a cold day and Mitch had forgotten his hat and mittens. They were already at the park when Helen realized this, but decided he would be okay for thirty minutes. Mitch has a tendency to wander off and Helen has told him several times that he can not do this because he will get lost. On that day Mitch had already gone to the drinking fountain across the park without asking, after which he received 10 minutes on the park bench. Twenty minutes later Mitch was nowhere to be found. Helen panicked and became extremely upset and angry with her son. She looked for 10 minutes and decided to call the police, after which she realized she had left her cell phone at home. Helen ran to the nearest home to use the phone. After the police arrived they scoured the park and found Mitch hiding in a tunnel from his mother. She first gave Mitch a big hug and said, "I am so glad you are okay." Mitch laughed, but Helen did not find this situation funny at all and began yelling at her son. She told him: "We are never coming to the park again", "You are lucky someone did not kidnap you so you would never see me again", and "When we get home I am going to spank your bottom so hard you won't ever

forget this.” At this time, Mitch burst into tears and told her “I hate you.” “ You are so mean.” Helen picked him up and carried him the whole way home.

Please rate the parent in the above scenario on the following questions.

1. Fill in the blank with the following twelve adjectives and circling the number for each that best fits you opinion; 1= not at all; 5 = moderately, 9 = extremely.

How _____ was Helen (Mark) during the above situation?

	Not at all			Moderately				Extremely	
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Frustrated	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
2. Nurturing	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
3. Understanding	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
4. Impatient	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
5. Kind	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
6. Emotional	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
7. Angry	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
8. Confident	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
9. Hostile	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
10. Critical	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
11. Calm	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
12. Strict	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

2. Please rate the overall parenting skills of the parent in the scenario.

Poor	Average				Exceptional			
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

3. Please indicate what lead you to your decisions in question 1 and 2 based on the following categories:

A. What behaviors did the parent exhibit or not exhibit that lead you to your decisions?

B. What feelings did the parent show or not show that lead to your decisions?

C. What things were said or not said by the parent that led to your decisions?

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