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YOUNG CHILDREN'S STIGMATIZATION  
OF THE CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

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A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
Psychology

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by  
Anna Marie Avila  
December 1994

YOUNG CHILDREN'S STIGMATIZATION  
OF THE CHILDREN OF DIVORCE

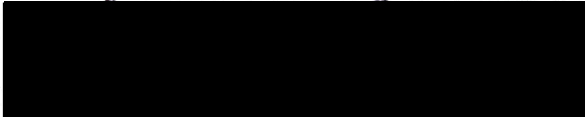
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A Thesis  
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by  
Anna Marie Avila  
December 1994

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Date

## ABSTRACT

The present study investigated how knowledge of family background would influence young children's attitudes towards their peers who were depicted as coming from divorced mother homes versus intact homes, divorced father homes versus intact homes, and divorced father homes versus divorced mother homes. Children were presented with both boy and girl same-sex pairs of target children for each family condition and responded to 7 bipolar dimensions. The overall findings indicated that, using a forced choice methodology, children from intact homes were preferred significantly more often than children from divorced mother and divorced father homes. Sex of the subject differences and preferences were also found. Furthermore, children from divorced mother homes were preferred significantly more often than children from divorced father homes. Sex differences were also obtained. These findings indicate that children as young as 5 years old have learned to stigmatize their peers based on knowledge of family background. Implications for intervention in the development of negative stereotypes are discussed.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Ta Da! I have finally finished. It feels wonderful to be able to write that on paper. But, I never would have completed my work here at CSU, San Bernardino without the understanding, patience and feedback from Charles "Chuckles" Hoffman. I would also like to thank my other committee members, Gloria Cowan and Robert Cramer for their support and assistance. It was more appreciated than you will ever know. I would also like to thank Dean Kaplan and the ASI board for selecting me to receive their financial fellowship award. My parents deserve a special thank you for their emotional and financial support. I am very fortunate to have parents who are involved in my academic goals. Finally, one big thank you goes to Eric Guerra. Every one who endures graduate school deserves the emotional support, understanding, and unconditional love that Eric gave to me.

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## INTRODUCTION

From 1960 to 1980 the divorce rate in the United States has doubled (Emery, Hetherington, & Dilalla, 1984; Hetherington, 1979; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1982; Kitson & Morgan, 1990; Chase-Lansdale, & Hetherington, 1990). More specifically, there was a dramatic rise in the divorce rate, beginning in the early 1960s, that lasted nearly twenty years. It was not until the early 1980s that the rise in divorce began to ease up and eventually level off before fluctuating slightly downward (Glick, 1988; Chase-Lansdale, & Hetherington, 1990). As a result, the image of the ideal "American family" of 1960 has little in common with the reality of the family today (Glick, 1988). It is clear that divorce has become a pervasive phenomena in our society (Doherty & Needle, 1991; Koch & Lowery, 1984). The far reaching effects and psychological implications of divorce have led to a vast amount of scientific study and observation. However, a review of the literature reveals that there are conflicting results regarding the social attitudes involved in divorce.

In the 1970s and 1980s, the public's reluctant acceptance of divorce appears to have increased substantially (Gerstel, 1987). As a result of changing



social attitudes, some researchers argue that stigmatization with regards to divorced persons is becoming increasingly less apparent in our society. According to Weitzman (1981), the social stigma attached to divorce is declining and divorce is increasingly seen as a normal event. Spanier and Thompson (1984) go one step further by stating that the stigma surrounding divorce has not only declined but has altogether disappeared. Once more, Halem (1980) comments that divorce is no longer subject to the moral outrage it once encountered just a few decades ago and is no longer considered a sin in the Catholic and Protestant doctrines.

Although prejudice against divorce itself appears to be dissipating, society still holds a negative image of people from divorced households (Amato, 1991; Ball, Newman, & Scheuren, 1984; Etaugh & Birdoes, 1991; Etaugh & Crump, 1982; Etaugh & Malstrom, 1981; Etaugh & Nekolny, 1990; Friedman, 1982; Guttman, Geva, & Gefen, 1988; Santrock & Tracy, 1978). Furthermore, research has indicated that divorced persons have been and continue to be the victims of stigmatization. Gerstel's (1987) findings suggest that the divorced come to be seen and tend to see themselves as devalued individuals who are less desirable and discounted more

than married individuals. Moreover, recent research also suggests that the negative stereotype or stigmatization that clings to each adult and child from a divorced family lingers long after the divorce is over and may have some detrimental effects on everyone involved, especially the children (Demo & Acock, 1988; Gerstel, 1987; Healy, Malley, & Stewart, 1990; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1985).

Claire Etaugh, who specializes in how specific factors such as employment status and marital status influence perceptions of men and women, has demonstrated that married individuals are perceived as more "happy, relaxed, secure, stable, reliable, responsible, and personally satisfied than are the divorced" (Etaugh & Brides, 1991, p. 491). In an earlier study, Etaugh and Malstrom (1981) investigated the negative stereotype associated with singlehood (divorced, widowed, never married) in our society. They asked college students to read a brief description of a stimulus person and rate the individual on 20 7-point bipolar scales that described personal traits (e.g., happy, secure, friendly) and professional traits (e.g., successful in job, professionally competent, dedicated to career). Each subject rated one of eight persons who were described either as male or female and

either as married, widowed, divorced, or never married. Etaugh discovered that in the case of divorced versus married stimulus people, divorced persons were seen as less stable, relaxed, dependable, and reliable and more likely to have personality adjustment problems. Married individuals were rated as happier and more secure than divorced individuals. Male and female stimulus persons were perceived similarly on most characteristics showing that marital status was a more powerful determinant of the way individuals were perceived than was their gender. This study provided empirical evidence for the existence of stereotypes regarding characteristics of married and divorced persons. Now, nearly a decade later and in contrast to many current research findings, Claire Etaugh and her associates find empirical evidence which suggests that stigmatization towards divorced persons is still present.

Etaugh and Nekolny (1990) gathered information pertaining to how both divorced and married mothers were perceived as a function of whether they were employed or not. Using subjects from a shopping mall, Etaugh and Nekolny (1990) found that married women with young children were evaluated more positively than divorced women with young children. Married mothers

were rated as both better adjusted and as more nurturant than their divorced cohorts, and divorced employed mothers were rated as less professionally competent than married employed mothers. In a more recent study, Etaugh and Poertner (1991) examined college students' perceptions of working mothers in less prestigious jobs (i.e. low-paying, low-status service, clerical, and sales occupations) versus working mothers in moderate-status jobs (i.e. counselors, nursing, economics). As predicted the results showed that married mothers, whether in low- or moderate-prestige jobs, received more favorable personality evaluations than divorced mothers and were seen as generally better adjusted. Overall the divorce literature demonstrates that divorced persons are rated lower than married persons in the areas of professional competency, emotional adjustment, overall happiness, ability to relax, emotional security, emotional stability, reliability, responsibility, and satisfaction (Etaugh & Nekolny, 1990; Etaugh & Poertner, 1991).

Unfortunately, divorced adults are not the only victims of stigmatization. Although it is the parents who divorce, it is often their children who get caught up in and suffer the consequences of divorce, including

the stigmatization which accompanies the divorced household (Amato, 1991; Ball et al., 1984; Guttman et al., 1988; Santrock & Tracy, 1978). Approximately 60 percent of all divorces involve children (Demo & Acock, 1988; Glick, 1988). Once people are aware that a child comes from a divorced household, the negative stereotypes begin and expectations of the divorced child's performance compared to a child from an intact home are lowered (Guttman et al., 1988). Amato (1991) comments that society assumes that the ideal condition for socializing children is the married family and anything deviating from this is seen as "likely to result in deficits in children's behavior, school achievement, and personalities" (p. 59). Given this viewpoint, it appears highly likely that most individuals have a negative mental picture of children of divorce. However, these preconceptions of children from divorced households have seldom been examined (Amato, 1991).

Some studies have examined people's views of children of divorce and how this information that the child comes from a divorced household can bias the recall of information about the children.

In a study investigating negative stereotypes and children from different family types (i.e. married,

divorced, widowed, remarried, never-married), researchers found that adolescents and children of divorce were rated more negatively by university students in terms of security and stability and classroom performance even though the only difference between the intact group of children and the divorced group of children was their family background. All other information was identical (Bryan, Coleman, Ganong, & Bryan, 1986, cited in Amato, 1991).

Using teachers as subjects, Santrock and Tracy (1978) wanted to see if teachers relied on a stereotype when rating children and had negative expectations for children from divorced families and positive expectations for children from father-present families (intact family). An identical videotape was shown to two groups of teachers who were asked to rate the target child on 16 personality traits (i.e. happiness, gets along with others, etc.) and behaviors in school. In the first group, the subjects were informed that the male child in the video was from a divorced family and in the second group, the subjects were informed that the male child came from an intact family. The results of the teacher ratings revealed that boys from divorced

families were rated more negatively on overall personality traits and behavior in school than were boys from two-parent families.

In another study, Ball et al. (1984) first examined teachers' expectations for children of mother-headed households versus children of two-parent households and, second, examined teachers' expectations for boys living with their divorced mothers versus girls living with their divorced mothers. Teachers read an introductory statement describing the target child. After reading the statement, the teachers were asked to rate the expected academic, behavioral, and social characteristics of the target child. The results indicated that, overall, teachers had significantly more negative expectations of children living with divorced mothers than children living in two-parent households. Furthermore, Ball et al. (1984), found that boys living with divorced mothers were rated more negatively than girls living with divorced mothers with respect to working independently, class preparation, academic achievement, classroom behavior and coping with stress.

Guttman et al. (1988) took an innovative approach to studying children of divorce by not only investigating teacher expectations of children who live

in divorced households versus intact households, but by also including seventh- and eighth-grade students evaluations of the target child as well. Guttman et al. (1988) questioned whether there was a valid interpretation of these studies that used teachers' ratings of children, implying that there may be an inherent conceptual flaw in the use of teachers' rating as objectively reliable data of children's behavior. Discrepancies in previous studies appeared when several studies compared teachers' ratings with the children's own self-ratings or with the children's actual performance. According to Guttman et al. (1988) teachers' ratings are not necessarily based on observation, but may be influenced by stereotype-derived expectations. Most teachers standards for evaluating students are determined significantly by attributes considered most desirable by educated middle class members. One of these attributes is that a child's parents should be married and not divorced. Therefore, in considering this discrepancy and in order to make their findings more generalizable Guttman et al. decided on the use of students' ratings of the target children as well. Guttman et al. (1988), recruited teachers and students from Tel Aviv University to participate in their research. Coming



from a different country and culture, this unique sample could have a different stereotype about children of divorce that is different than the United States.

In the experiment, subjects read a written introduction that instructed them that they were about to see a film of a 9-year old boy or girl (fourth grader). Surpassing Santrock and Tracy (1978), Guttman et al. (1988, p. 560), used a written introduction which allowed the researchers to introduce the sex-of-target-child manipulation and the family structure of the child manipulation by indicating one of the following: "The boy/girl lives in Tel Aviv with his/her parents his/her 12-year-old sister, and a 7-year-old brother" (intact family) or "The boy/girl lives in Tel Aviv since his/her parents' divorce 2 years ago. S/he lives with his/her mother, 12-year-old sister, and 7-year-old brother" (divorced family). After reading the introduction, the subjects, who were teachers and adolescents, watched an 8 minute film of the target child engaged in various activities (i.e. drawing, doing homework, listening to the radio). Next, the subjects rated the target child on 23 emotional and school performance characteristics and two recall protocols to investigate the subject's information processing. The results showed that for both groups of

subjects, knowledge of the target child's family background (i.e. divorced vs. intact) had a significant effect on evaluations of the target child. Both teachers and students rated children from divorced homes lower in academic, emotional, and social functioning than children from intact homes.

Furthermore, Guttman et al. (1988) found that family background had a significant effect on the subjects' pattern of selective memory. Subjects recalled more facts presented in the film when the target child's parents were believed to be married than when they were believed to be divorced. Interestingly, no gender stimulus differences were reported.

Several variables contribute to the development of children's social attitudes. One of the most important variables that influence the formation of children's social attitudes is their parents' attitudes (Kidd & Kidd, 1990). Research has shown that young children tend to learn concepts from their adult role models (Fagot & Leinbach, 1989; Etaugh, Grinnell, & Etaugh, 1989). Just as they learn sex-role stereotypes, for example, if there is a prevalent negative bias in our society such as adult stigmatization of persons from divorced households, then young children imitating their adult role models will most likely learn to

stigmatize persons from divorced households. Previous research has also demonstrated that adults employ stigmatization when it comes to rating individuals who come from a divorced household (Amato, 1991; Ball et al., 1984; Etaugh & Crump, 1982; Etaugh & Nekolny, 1990; Friedman, 1982; Guttman, et al., 1988; Santrock & Tracy, 1978).

In summary, divorce is pervasive in our society. Based on recent studies it is clear that stigmatization of persons from divorced households is still apparent. Furthermore, given the large number of divorce cases involving children there is evidence to suggest that the effects of stigmatization may be manifested at an early age. However, there is clearly a paucity of studies which have examined the effects of stigmatization of persons from divorced households, especially in the area of children's stigmatization of children from divorced households. Guttman et al. (1988) appear to be the only researchers to have considered investigating adolescent expectations of other adolescents from divorced households (i.e. peer stigmatization). Moreover, to our knowledge there has been no research conducted which investigates the stigmatization of children of divorce (i.e. 5-7 year olds) by their peers. Early socialization experiences

contribute to young children's acquisition of attitudes. Environmental influences such as family, peers, television and so on shape a young person's early views. For example, research has demonstrated that by 2-3 years of age children have learned traditional sex-role stereotypes (Etaugh & Duits, 1990; Fagot & Leinbach, 1989). Corresponding to the research of stigmatization and divorce several studies suggest that it is still an anomaly to see the child of divorce living solely with the father, especially if the child is a female (Furstenberg, Morgan, & Allison, 1987; Greif, 1979; Loewen 1988; Seltzer, 1991). Statistics show that only 1 out of 10 children end up in the father's sole custody (Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984). Once more, traditional societal values have tended to portray the mother-child relationship after divorce as the norm and the father-child relationship after divorce as the exception.

The present investigation examined the influences of socialization as they are manifested in young children's attitudes toward traditional family structure (i.e mother and father, intact homes) versus divorced families. Here young children were asked to express, in a forced-choice manner, their preference for children of their own age presented as being from

divorced or intact homes. We predicted that children from intact families would be preferred more often than children from divorced mother homes and that children from intact families would also be preferred more often than children from divorced father homes. We also predicted that children from divorced mother homes would be preferred more often than children from divorced father homes.

## METHOD

### Subjects

The subjects in this study were 96 children (48 girls and 48 boys) ranging in age from 5 to 7 years with a mean age of 6.7. The children were recruited from elementary schools and after school programs located in Redlands and Rialto, California. The ethnic groups were 41 white, 31 Latino, 9 African-American, 8 Asian, 3 Native American, and 1 Pacific Islander. Ethnic background for three subjects was not completed on the demographic form. The male and female participants were randomly assigned to one of three treatment conditions.

### Experimental Conditions

In condition I, participants were presented photographs of a child with his/her mother and father (Intact Home) versus a child with his/her mother (Divorced Mother). In condition II, participants were presented photographs of a child with his/her mother and father (Intact Home) versus a child with his/her father (Divorced Father). In condition III, participants were presented photographs of a child with his/her mother (Divorced Mother Only) versus a child with his/her father (Divorced Father Only).

The experiment consisted of two sets of three parallel treatment conditions. Half the male participants were randomly assigned to first rate male target child stimulus arrays and then rate female child stimulus arrays and this was reversed for the remaining half of the male participants. The same procedure was followed for female participants. The order in which participants viewed either boy or girl stimulus sets first or second was counterbalanced.

#### Stimulus Material

The stimulus material for the experiment consisted of three groups of black and white 5 x 7 photographs of both the target child and the target child and his/her family. For each experimental condition, there were two sets of photographs presented. The first set consisted of a pair of black and white photographs which portrayed the head to waist of two fully clothed Caucasian boys or girls between the ages of 5 to 7 years (target children), followed by a second pair of black and white photographs which showed each target child with his/her mother and father (Intact) or his/her mother (Divorced Mother) or his/her father (Divorced Father). For the second set of photographs the subject was presented with a similar third and fourth pair of photographs which portrayed two target

children that were opposite in sex compared to the target children in the first set of photographs. Within each experimental condition, the roles of target child A and target child B were counterbalanced. For condition I, half of the subjects were presented with child A (Intact Family) and child B (Divorced Mother only) or vice versa. For condition II, half of the subjects were presented with child A (Intact Family) and child B (Divorced Father only) or vice versa. For condition III, half of the subjects were presented with child A (Divorced Mother only) and child B (Divorced Father only) or vice versa. The same procedure was followed for the second pair of stimulus children presented to each participant.

#### Procedure

Following acceptance of the procedures and methodology by the Departmental Research Ethics Committee, permission was obtained from principals, parents, classroom teachers and child subjects. Permission slips and a two-page demographic questionnaire which included occupation of mother and father or guardian, marital status, ethnic background of child, and age of child (see Appendix B) was sent home with each child one week before the experiment was scheduled to run. The experiment took place during



school in a room, specified by the principal, nearby the child's classroom.

Each subject in the experiment was tested individually. The researcher sat behind the subject and carefully read the following verbal instructions: "You are going to see several pictures of two children close to your age with their families. Please pay close attention because I want to see if you can tell me which child is "Karen/David" and which is "Lisa/Thomas" and if their parents are married or divorced. After we have learned their names and family background, I will ask you a few questions." The researcher asked if there were any questions, if none were asked, the researcher presented two pictures of either a pair of boy stimulus children or a pair of girl stimulus children and introduced the stimulus children's names and their family background to the subject. Two boy's names and two girl's names were adopted from Kasof (1993) for the pre-experimental stimulus check and the experiment. Both pairs of forenames were matched on attractiveness, intellectual-competence connotation, age stereotype and racial connotation. If the subject was unclear about each target child's name and family background, the subject was presented the stimulus material again up to a

maximum of three times. If they were still unclear, the subject was excused and the data was eliminated. However, in the experiment, all the subjects were able to complete the task and no subjects were eliminated. After the subject could correctly identify the stimulus children and family background, the researcher read a list of 7 bipolar dimension pairs chosen for the study. Three dimensions dealt with relationships (e.g., "Who would you like to be your friend and who wouldn't you like to be your friend?" "Who would be more fun to play with and who wouldn't be more fun to play with?" "Who would you invite to your birthday party and who would you not invite to your birthday party?"). One dimension was academically related (e.g., "Who is smart and who is not smart?"). Three dimensions were related to the subject's perception of the target child's emotional and social functioning (e.g., "Who is happy and who is sad?" "Who lies a lot and who doesn't lie?" "Who is good and who is bad?"). The questions used in this study were adapted from the scales used by Guttman et al. (1988) and Haugh, Hoffman, & Cowan (1980). There were two versions in which the same seven bipolar dimensions were read to subjects. The two versions were alternated for both girl and boy subjects with each subject being read the same version twice. After

the subjects saw the first stimulus pair and were asked the dimensions, the researcher read the verbal instructions again and showed the subject the second pair of photographs of the two target children with their perspective parent(s). Only the gender of the stimulus child was changed. The 7 bipolar dimensions were again read to the subject. Subjects responded by pointing and verbally indicating which target child received the positive half of the bipolar dimension or the negative half of the bipolar dimension.

Following completion of the study the researcher debriefed the participants by reviewing the purpose of the study and answered any questions that the participants had at that time. The participants were thanked for their participation.

#### PRE-EXPERIMENTAL STIMULUS CHECK

Prior to the experiment described, twenty-four subjects participated in a pre-experimental stimulus check, 12 boys and 12 girls. Each subject saw either a pair of stimulus boys or girls that were also used in the experiment. Once the subjects could identify the stimulus children they were asked three bipolar adjective pairs that were also asked in the experiment.

The dimensions were:

1. Who would you like to be your friend and who wouldn't you like to be your friend?
2. Who is smart and who is not smart?
3. Who is good and who is bad?

Without any family background information being given to the subjects, the chi-square contingency analysis revealed that none of the subjects had any significant preference for any one of the stimulus children.

## RESULTS

Chi-square analysis of the distribution of subject's responses indicated no order effects based on the gender of the stimulus pair presented first in any of the three experimental conditions. Additionally, no differences were obtained based on the order of presentation of the seven bipolar dimensions.

### CONDITIONS I AND II

In order to present the results comparing intact versus divorced background choices, the results for conditions I and II are presented first. If subjects were not responding on the basis of family background, the expectancy would be about an equal number of divorced and intact child choices on each bipolar adjective dimension. Over both conditions, sex of subject and sex of stimulus pair, subjects made 546 (61%) intact choices and 350 (39%) divorce choices out of a total of 896 choices on the seven bipolar dimensions. Overall, chi-square analysis of the distribution of subjects' intact and divorce responses for both conditions I and II, indicates a highly significant chi-square difference  $\chi^2 (1, N = 896) = 42.87, p < .001$ . However, not all sex of stimulus pairs were significant for both conditions I and II

Table I

Subject's Number of Intact Choices for Condition I and II (of 112 Total Choices, chance = 56 or 50%)

---

Stimulus Pairs	<u>Sex of Subject</u>			
	Female		Male	
	<u>GG</u>	<u>BB</u>	<u>GG</u>	<u>BB</u>
Condition I	81 (72%)*	82 (73%)*	59 (53%)	68 (61%)**
Intact vs. Divorced Mother				

---

Stimulus Pairs	<u>Sex of Subject</u>			
	Female		Male	
	<u>GG</u>	<u>BB</u>	<u>GG</u>	<u>BB</u>
Condition II	55 (49%)	76 (68%)*	69 (62%)*	56 (50%)
Intact vs. Divorced Father				

---

$\chi^2$  test    \*\*p < .05.            \*p < .001.

Note: GG = Girl/Girl Stimulus Pairs  
 BB = Boy/Boy Stimulus Pairs

when considering sex of subject. Table I illustrates the number of choices of the child from intact families (112 total within each cell, 16 subjects X 7 choices) for male and female subjects in condition I (Intact versus Divorced Mother) and condition II (Intact versus Divorced Father). For condition I, female subjects chose the child from the intact family significantly more often for both girl/girl  $\chi^2$  (1, N = 112) = 22.14,  $p < .001$ , and boy/boy pairs  $\chi^2$  (1, N = 112) = 24.14,  $p < .001$ . In condition I, male subjects chose the child from the intact family for boy/boy pairs  $\chi^2$  (1, N = 112) = 5.14,  $p < .05$ . Male subjects did not chose girl/girl pairs differently based on the background characteristics.

For condition II, female subjects chose the child from the intact family over the child from the divorced father family 76 times out of 112 responses for boy/boy pairs  $\chi^2$  (1, N = 112) = 14.28,  $p < .001$ , with no differences being obtained for girl/girl pairs. In condition II, male subjects chose the child from the intact family for girl/girl pairs  $\chi^2$  (1, N = 112) = 12.07,  $p < .001$ , with no differences being obtained for boy/boy pairs.

## DIMENSIONS

Across male and female subjects in conditions I and II, an overall analysis of the number of intact and divorce child choices were computed for each of the seven adjective pairs. This indicated that subjects choose the positive half of the bipolar dimension for intact target children. Four of the seven dimensions were highly significant: Out of a total of 128 responses for each dimension, subjects chose the "No Lie" for the intact family 78 (61%) times for the "Lie/No Lie" dimension  $\chi^2 (1, N = 128) = 6.12, p < .025$ , the "Smart" for the intact family 84 (66%) times for the "Smart/Not Smart" dimension  $\chi^2 (1, N = 128) = 12.5, p < .005.$ , the "Good" for the intact family 81 (63%) times for the "Good/Bad" dimension  $\chi^2 (1, N = 128) = 9.04, p < .005$ , and subjects chose significantly the intact family 88 (69%) times out of a possible 128 responses the "Want to Play With" for the dimension "Want to Play With/Not Want to Play With"  $\chi^2 (1, N = 128) = 18.0, p < .001$ .

While the list of choices indicated relatively more intact than divorced choices than would be expected by chance, chi-square analysis did not reach acceptable statistical significance for the "Friend/No Friend", 72 (56%) intact choices  $\chi^2 (1, N = 128) = 2.0,$



"Invite to my Birthday Party/Not Invite to my Birthday Party", 74 (58%) intact choices  $\chi^2$  (1,  $N$  = 128) = 3.0, and "Who is Happy/Who is Sad", 69 (54%) intact choices  $\chi^2$  (1,  $N$  = 128) = .78.

### CONDITION III

Condition III had a different dependent variable (Divorced Mother vs. Divorced Father) than conditions I and II (Intact Family). The results of the divorced mother families choices versus the divorced father families choices, condition III will be presented. Overall subjects made 288 (64%) divorced mother choices and 160 (36%) divorce father choices out of a total of 448 choices on the seven bipolar dimensions. Overall chi-square analysis of the distribution of subject's divorced mother and divorced father responses for condition III indicates that subjects significantly chose the divorced mother family  $\chi^2$  (1,  $N$  = 448) = 36.56,  $p < .001$  over the divorced father family. However, when analyzing girl/girl stimulus pairs and boy/boy stimulus pairs the results were not all significant. Table II illustrates the number of choices of the child described as from divorced mother (112 total with each cell) for male and female subjects in condition III (Divorced Mother versus Divorced Father). For condition III, female subjects chose the

positive half of the bipolar dimension for the target child who was depicted as coming from the divorced mother family over the divorced father family significantly more often for both girl/girl pairs  $\chi^2$  (1,  $N = 448$ ) = 26.06,  $p < .001$ , and boy/boy pairs  $\chi^2$  (1,  $N = 448$ ) = 7.0,  $p < .01$ . In condition III, male subjects chose the positive half of the bipolar dimension for the target child who was depicted as coming from the divorced mother family over the divorced father family for boy/boy pairs  $\chi^2$  (1,  $N = 448$ ) = 14.28,  $p < .001$ . Male subjects did not chose girl/girl pairs differently based on family background.

When examining the results of the seven adjective pairs in condition III, a chi-square analysis of the number of divorced mother and divorced father choices showed that overall subjects made more divorced mother choices for the positive half of the bipolar adjective questions. Four of the seven dimensions were highly significant. However, the four significant dimensions for condition III were different than the four significant dimensions in condition I and II. Out of a total of 64 responses for each dimension, subjects chose the "Friend" for the divorced mother 46 (72%) times for the "Friend/Not Like to be your Friend" dimension  $\chi^2$  (1,  $N = 64$ ) = 12.25,  $p < .001$ , the "Invite

to Your Birthday" for the divorced mother 41 (64%) times for the "Invite to Your Birthday/Not Invite to Your Birthday" dimension  $\chi^2 (1, N = 64) = 5.06$ ,  $p < .05$ , the "Good" for the divorced mother 42 (66%) times for the "Good/Bad" dimension  $\chi^2 (1, N = 64) = 6.25$ ,  $p < .02$ , and subjects chose significantly the intact family 43 (67%) times out of a possible 64 responses the "Who is happy" for the dimension "Who is Happy/Who is Sad"  $\chi^2 (1, N = 64) = 7.56$ ,  $p < .01$ .

Table II

Subject's Number of Divorced Mother Choices for  
Condition III (of 112 Total Choices, chance = 56 (50%))

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Stimulus Pairs	<u>Sex of Subject</u>			
	Female		Male	
	<u>GG</u>	<u>BB</u>	<u>GG</u>	<u>BB</u>
Condition III	70 (63%)*	83 (74%)**	59 (52%)	76 (68%)**

Divorced Mother vs. Divorced Father

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$\chi^2$  test \*p < .01.                      \*\*p < .001.

Note: GG = Girl/Girl Stimulus Pairs

BB = Boy/Boy Stimulus Pairs

## DISCUSSION

The goal of the present study was to determine the extent to which knowledge of family background would influence children's attitudes towards their peers. As was predicted for intact household versus the divorced mother household (condition I) and intact household versus the divorced father household (condition II), knowledge of family background was found to contribute significantly to children's overall preference for peers from intact homes versus peers from divorced homes. Subjects indicated that children from intact homes were more desirable to play with, better behaved, less likely to lie, and were more intelligent. In other words, when children have no other basis for their choice and when forced to choose, the child selected the stimulus child from the intact home rather than the child from the divorced home. These findings are consistent with previous children of divorce literature which reports that individuals tend to hold negative images of children who do not come from two-parent families and that these stereotypes bias society's judgements (Amato, 1991; Ball et al., 1984; Guttman et al., 1988; Santrock & Tracy, 1978). The bias reflected in the preferences expressed by the

young children in the present study reflect an ongoing and pervasive negative after effect suffered by the children of divorce.

In the present study, the results for intact versus divorced father are particularly informative because, to the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to explore attitudes towards children from divorced father households versus the intact family homes. Previous research has examined the condition of divorced mother household versus the intact family only (Amato, 1991; Ball et al., 1984; Guttman et al., 1988; Santrock & Tracy, 1978). As expected, the results demonstrate that children hold negative stereotypes not only for peers from divorced mother households but for peers from divorced father households as well.

Though the tendency for children to choose the child from the intact home over the child from the divorced home was found to be highly significant, not all sex of stimulus pairs viewed by the subjects were significant for conditions I and II. For female subjects for intact versus divorced mother, results for sex of stimulus pair were consistent with our predictions in that they choose the child from the

intact home over the child from the divorced home for both boy/boy and girl/girl stimulus pairs. However, in intact versus divorced mother, male subjects significantly chose the child from the intact family over the child from the divorced family for boy/boy pairs but not for girl/girl pairs. Furthermore, for intact versus divorced father backgrounds, female subjects significantly chose the child from the intact family over the child from the divorced family only for boy/boy stimulus pairs while male subjects chose the child from the intact family over the child from the divorced family for girl/girl stimulus pairs. These sex differences are not readily explained by the available literature on children of divorce. Future research might examine the differences in preference for sex of stimulus pairs in more detail. Perhaps the difference in sex of stimulus pair preferences may be indicative of the sex-role stereotypes that are often utilized in socializing children and are apparent in children as young as 3 years old (Haugh et al., 1980). Perhaps children as old as 5 years were paying attention to the gender of the stimulus pairs and were not taking into consideration the family background of the stimulus pairs.

In the present study, divorced mother versus divorced father (condition III) was introduced to explore comparisons between perceptions of children from divorced mother households versus perceptions of children from divorced father households. As predicted overall, children choose the positive half of the bipolar dimension more often for the target child who was depicted as coming from a divorced mother family over the divorced father family. These results indicate that when forced to choose between peers from divorced mother homes versus peers from divorced father homes, subjects chose peers from divorced mother homes significantly more often. Previous research has shown that after a divorce children will most often live with their mother (Furstenberg & Spanier, 1984; Koch & Lowery, 1984; Loewen, 1988; Seltzer, 1991). Additionally, the prevalence of divorce and the frequency that "the majority of school children are exposed to divorce in the families of friends, relatives, or classmates regardless of their own family status" (Mazur, 1993, p. 204) are factors which would most likely influence preferences for children from divorced mother households over children from divorced father households. Preferences for children who live with their divorced mothers reflect societal realities



that most children will live their mothers after a divorce. They also reflect sex-traditional values in that mothers are often perceived to be the primary parent (Teyber & Hoffman, 1987).

The results for divorced mother versus divorced father condition also revealed sex of subject and sex of stimulus pair differences. Female subjects significantly chose the child from the divorced mother home for both boy/boy and girl/girl stimulus pairs. However, male subjects chose the child from the divorced mother home for only boy/boy pairs. Perhaps when forced to pick a child of the same sex from a divorced mother or divorced father home, boys identify with the same-sexed child and make a stereotypic choice.

Overall, physical characteristics of the stimulus pairs could possibly have influenced subjects preferences for one target child over the other. However the pre-experimental stimulus check indicated that with the exclusion of the family background variable, subjects choices for one target child over another were random. Although target children were checked for physical preference their families were not. Perhaps subjects found certain target family members more physically attractive than others and this

could have influenced their choices. Future research will have to test all the target family members for physical attractiveness. Also, in order to insure the validity of the family background variable, future research might employ a larger sample from which to conduct the stimulus check.

As stated earlier, the results for intact versus divorced mother condition and intact versus divorced father condition not only support previous findings that adults and adolescents hold negative stereotypes of children from divorced households but also demonstrate that young children hold similar negative stereotypes of peers from divorced households. From where do these negative stereotypes originate? According to Amato (1991, p. 63), one explanation centers on the notion of cognitive schemas where people tend to organize sets of beliefs about some object or stimulus. Amato suggests, that "people notice, ... think about, encode into memory, and recall information that is schema-consistent rather than inconsistent." Therefore, when processing information about children of divorce, people tend to select information that supports their negative expectations. Furthermore, these negative expectations are the result of existing cultural and societal influences. The theory of "self-

fulfilling prophecy" may explain how these negative stereotypes are perpetuated. Researchers have suggested that people such as teachers, parents, counselors, and coaches tend to treat children in ways that are consistent with their own preconceptions (Amato, 1991; Ball et al., 1984). Hence, people who expect specific behaviors from selective children may, in turn, cause those children to adopt these very behaviors. For example, if a teacher expects a child from a divorced household to be more rebellious then based on these expectations, the child may adopt rebellious behaviors.

The real world implications of the present study are that these negative stereotypes are manifested as early as 5 years old and are part of a vicious cycle that will not easily be broken without educating all members of society. With the increase in the number of fathers gaining sole custody and joint custody after divorce, we might expect a change in the attitudes towards father divorced homes in the near future. Nevertheless, future research should consider indirect methods of intervention such as using open ended questionnaires or interviews to determine which sources are most influential in creating these negative stereotypes in young children. It is unfortunate that

after all the stress children from divorced homes must endure, these children must also inherit from society a legacy that carries with it the negative stigma which they are forced to live.

APPENDIX A

PARENT PERMISSION FORM

Dear Parent or Guardian,

My name is Anna Avila and I am a graduate student at California State University, San Bernardino. I am investigating how children, such as yours, perceive other children. I will be at your child's school and would appreciate your permission to include your child. My study has been approved by the Chair of the Psychology Department at California State University, San Bernardino, Dr. Charles Hoffman and the principal Robin Valles.

The purpose of my study is to compare how children feel about children from different family backgrounds. We are not at all interested in how any particular child responds. Rather, we will combine your child's responses with those of other children and report how groups of boys and girls expressed their preferences. No names of individual child participants will be recorded or used in any way. In order to insure confidentiality of your child, only I.D. numbers will be employed. As with any study, participation is completely voluntary. Your child has the right to refuse to participate even though his/her parent(s) or guardian has given their consent.

I will show your child pictures of children of the same approximate age as your child. Based on a brief description of the pictures of each child and their families, your child will be asked to respond to several questions, such as which of two children he or she would prefer to play with, be friends with, want to invite to their birthday party, and which listens to the teacher and appears to be happy or sad. Children depicted will be from different family backgrounds such as single parent or two parent homes. The entire procedure involves approximately 8-10 minutes and will be conducted in a classroom near your child's own classroom.

We thank you in advance for your cooperation. If you agree to let your child participate in this study, please fill out the attached information form, and also sign the permission slip. Please return the signed forms to your child's teacher. If you have any questions about this study, please feel free contact me or Dr. Hoffman at (909) 880-5570.

APPENDIX A (cont')

We anticipate that the results of this research will be completed by \_\_\_\_\_, 1994. General results of the study will be available after that date. If you would like a copy of the results, please fill in your name and address in the space indicated.

Sincerely,

Anna Avila  
MA Candidate

Charles D. Hoffman Ph.D.  
Professor and Chair

APPENDIX A (cont'd)

PERMISSION SLIP

My child \_\_\_\_\_ has my permission to participate in the study concerning children's attitudes toward other children from various family structures.

Parent/Guardian Signature

Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Teacher's Name \_\_\_\_\_

I would like to receive a copy of the general results of the study \_\_\_\_\_ yes \_\_\_\_\_ no

If you marked Yes, please print your name and address below:

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zip: \_\_\_\_\_

Please complete the following information form. Again, we are not interested in individuals but, rather, in group differences and no names will be recorded (only code numbers) and your confidentiality is completely assured.

APPENDIX A (cont'd)

PERSON COMPLETING THIS FORM

MOTHER \_\_\_\_\_ FATHER \_\_\_\_\_ other \_\_\_\_\_ (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

1. OCCUPATION of MOTHER \_\_\_\_\_ FATHER \_\_\_\_\_

2. EDUCATION level completed (check one for each)

	MOTHER	FATHER
less than high school	_____	_____
completed high school	_____	_____
some college	_____	_____
two year college and degree	_____	_____
BA/BS degree	_____	_____
some graduate education	_____	_____
graduate degree	_____	_____

3. YOUR CURRENT MARITAL STATUS

\_\_\_\_\_ single  
\_\_\_\_\_ married  
\_\_\_\_\_ separated - for how long \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ divorced - number of times \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_ remarried  
\_\_\_\_\_ other (please specify) \_\_\_\_\_

4. CHILD LIVING WITH

\_\_\_\_\_ Mother and Father  
\_\_\_\_\_ Mother  
\_\_\_\_\_ Father  
\_\_\_\_\_ Other (please indicate) \_\_\_\_\_



APPENDIX A (cont'd)

5. ETHNICITY OF CHILD

- Latino
- Black or African-American
- Native American
- Asian or Asian-American
- White-Anglo or White-European
- Pacific Islander
- Middle Eastern
- Other Ethnicity (specify) \_\_\_\_\_

6. AGE OF YOUR CHILD \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX B

### DEBRIEFING STATEMENT (CHILDREN)

The present study is part of a research project designed to investigate children's preferences for other children with different family backgrounds. Unfortunately, in order to receive your honest selection a small deception was necessary. I apologize for this deception, however, I needed you to believe that these children and adults were actual families otherwise you may have changed your answers. Are there any questions? It is important for the completion of this research that you do not speak to other classmates about this study. I need other children to also believe that these are real families. I would like to thank you very much for participating in this study.

## APPENDIX C

### DEBRIEFING STATEMENT (ADULTS)

The present study is part of a research project designed to investigate children's negative stigmatization of other children. Unfortunately, in order to investigate this phenomena a small deception of the subjects was necessary. We showed your child several pictures of children and their families. Your child was under the impression that these were actual families when in fact they were all volunteers. We apologize for this deception, however, if they children know that the people in the photographs were not actual families, their responses may have been affected.

The present study conforms to the ethical principles of the American Psychological Association. If you have any questions or comments please feel free to call Dr. Charles Hoffman or Anna Avila at (909) 880-5570.

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