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### **MOTHER KNOWS BEST SO MOTHER FAILS MOST: BENEVOLENT STEREOTYPES AND THE PUNISHMENT OF PARENTING MISTAKES**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

*Positively stereotyped groups are often associated with having natural ability. These stereotype-based expectancies may have negative consequences when positively stereotyped groups fail to live up to them. In this study, participants imagined they were on the jury for a case in which a parent (i.e., mother or father) accidentally left their baby in a car on a hot day, resulting in the child's death. Consistent with hypotheses, participants blamed the mother more and rated her as a less competent parent. Male participants recommended a longer jail sentence. For men, ratings of parent competency was a mediator for assigned prison sentence.*

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Although stereotyping and prejudice researchers have largely focused on negative and hostile attitudes about groups, positive and benevolent stereotypes have also been shown to play an important role in the dynamics of intergroup relations (Czopp & Monteith, 2006; Glick & Fiske, 2001; Eagly, 1987). For example, Blacks are commonly viewed as athletic, Asians are viewed as skilled at math, and women are perceived as nurturing and communal. Often times these positively stereotyped group members are perceived as having some innate and natural ability which contributes to their stereotyped competence (Fiske & Stevens, 1993). For instance, Black people are often perceived to be athletic due to biological and genetic factors (Harrison & Lawrence, 2004). The belief that certain groups possess positive innate characteristics can result in expectancies and prescriptions for those group members. Consequently, there may be negative consequences when they fail to live up to their positive stereotypes. For instance, a mother may be evaluated more harshly than a father for behaviors suggesting failure as a parent. In this study, we explored the consequences for women who fail to fulfill the positive stereotypes (e.g., nurturance) that are associated with their group.

## **Positive Stereotypes and Natural Ability**

Not only are positive stereotypes an important component of intergroup relations they are also some of the most commonly held stereotypes that people hold about groups (Czopp & Monteith, 2006). For instance, Lin and her colleagues (2005) showed that the positive stereotype that Asians are competent is one of the most prominent stereotypes about Asians. Furthermore, Eagly and Mladinic (1994) found that women are stereotyped more positively than men and are associated with highly favorable traits such as warmth and nurturance. Often times, these positive stereotypes are a consequence of beliefs about group differences in natural and innate ability. That is, positively stereotyped groups are often associated with being innately competent due to biological or genetic factors. For instance, one of the first stereotypes that people mention about African Americans is that they are naturally athletic (Czopp & Monteith, 2006). When Harrison and Lawrence (2004) asked participants what reasons they thought were responsible for African Americans' athletic achievements, they primarily mentioned reasons related to Blacks' biological, genetic, and evolutionary advantages. Similar to the belief that Blacks are naturally athletic, women are believed to be naturally nurturing due to biological factors. This belief about women is not surprising considering that females are the primary, if not the only parent, for about 95% of mammalian species (Clutton-Brock, 1989). Furthermore, the fact that child custody cases most often result in mother-sole custody is consistent with the stereotype that women are naturally competent, superior parents. (Cancian & Meyer, 1998). Perhaps, because people perceive mothers as having a biological predisposition for parenting they are awarded sole custody more frequently.

## **Positive Stereotypes and Expectations**

Perhaps in part because of the natural ability associated with positive stereotypes, stereotyped group members are often held to different performance standards compared to non-group members (Biernat & Manis, 1991). That is, perceivers' standards for what qualifies as a given trait (e.g., athletic ability) shifts depending on stereotypes associated with the target's social group. A "very athletic" Black target is likely to be perceived as objectively more athletic (e.g., stronger, faster) than a White target similarly described as "very athletic." These standards may translate into expectations such that people come to expect positively stereotyped group members to behave in stereotype-confirming ways. Furthermore, because positive stereotypes are often prescriptive and dictate how targets *should* be, perceivers may encourage and reward such stereotype-consistent behaviors. For example, Czopp (2010) has demonstrated that White perceivers encouraged a Black student-athlete, but not a White student-athlete, to pursue athletic-related activities (e.g., practicing) at the expense of academic-related activities (e.g., studying).

Such expectancies may lead to negative consequences for targets who actively disconfirm them with stereotype-inconsistent behavior. For instance, women who engage in self-promoting behaviors necessary for career advancement (e.g., assertiveness, confidence) are often punished for violating female stereotypes of modesty and civility (Rudman, 1998). Indeed, Rudman and Glick (2001) hold that women are often placed in a catch-22 where they "can enact communal behaviors and be liked but not respected or enact agentic behaviors and be respected but not liked. In either case, they risk being disqualified for leadership roles" (p. 744). Similarly, Correll and her colleagues found evidence for the "motherhood penalty" such that working mothers are

not only perceived as less likable than working fathers (Benard & Correll, 2010), but also that they are perceived as less competent on the job and as deserving lower starting salaries (Correll, Benard, & Paik, 2007). Thus, counter-stereotypic behaviors may lead to derogation of positively stereotyped targets. Slightly different, and the focus of this research, is the notion that positively stereotyped targets may also be punished for failing to live up to the lofty expectations associated with their group's stereotypic "strengths." That is, even in the absence of stereotypic-*inconsistent* evidence (e.g., female assertiveness), the lack of stereotype-*consistent* information is sufficient to elicit negative evaluations of a target.

This approach is based on expectancy violation theory which posits that when group members violate stereotypic expectations, evaluations of them become more extreme (Jussim, Coleman, & Lerch, 1987). In the context of negative stereotypes, group members who surpass low expectations (e.g., a Black student who performs well academically) are often evaluated more favorably than group members who were already expected to behave favorably (e.g., an academically successful White student). In the context of positive stereotypes, group members may be evaluated more negatively than non-group members when they fail to confirm the relatively high expectations of their group. For example, Bettencourt, Dill, Greathouse, Charlton, & Mulholland (1997) found that participants exposed to a poorly delivered speech rated its author more negatively when given by a speech-team member (i.e., positively stereotyped group member) than when given by a football player (i.e., negatively stereotyped group member). Similarly, expectation states theory (Berger, Fisek, Norman, & Zelditch, 1977; Humphreys & Berger, 1981) argues that when status characteristics-based expectations (e.g., stereotypes) are inconsistent with performance, advantaged group members will be evaluated more negatively than disadvantaged group members. Thus failing to confirm positive stereotypic expectations has negative outcomes. Similarly, in the context of gender stereotypes, voluntarily childless women are evaluated more negatively than involuntarily childless women (Jamison, Franzini, Kaplan, 1979).

## **The Current Study**

The prescriptions that positive stereotypes provide may be so strong that positively stereotyped group members may also be blamed to a greater extent when they involuntarily or accidentally fail to fulfill the stereotypes with which they are associated. That is, even when positively stereotyped group members involuntarily behave non-stereotypically they may be blamed for deviating and failing to fulfill their perceived natural and innate ability. This idea was explored in this study. Participants were asked to imagine that they were on the jury for a case in which a parent (i.e., mother or father) neglected to take their child to day care before going to work. As a consequence, the child was accidentally left in the car on a hot day while the parent went to work. This mistake resulted in the child's death. Participants were asked to provide evaluations of the parent including how long they believed the parent should spend in prison for the death of the baby. Three main hypotheses were tested:

- 1.) The mother target will be evaluated significantly more negatively than the father.
- 2.) The mother target will be blamed for the death of the baby significantly more than the father target.
- 3.) The participants will sentence the mother to a significantly longer jail sentence than the father.

## **METHOD**

### **Participants**

Three-hundred fourteen undergraduates (207 women, 107 men) from introductory courses in psychology at a large Midwest public university participated in exchange for course credit. Of these participants, 224 (71.3%) of the participants reported being Caucasian, 50 (15.9%) reported being Black, 16 (5.1%) reported being Asian, 4 (1.3%) reported being Latino, leaving 20 (6.4%) unknown.

### **Materials and Procedure**

In groups of up to 10, participants read several scenarios regarding different individuals' positive and negative behaviors in different situations (e.g., a young man who won a fishing tournament, an older woman who won the lottery). There were two version of the critical scenario in which participants imagined they were serving on the jury for a criminal court case. The case involved the accidental death of a 20-month-old child who was accidentally left in the back seat of a car by a distracted parent. The parent forgot to drop the child off at daycare before going to work, and the child was left in the back of the car in the parking lot for seven hours on a very hot day resulting in the death of the child. For half of the participants the parent in the scenario was the child's mother and for the other half of participants the parent was the child's father.

After reading the scenario participants completed a questionnaire regarding their impressions of the target's behavior. Participants were asked three questions about how much they blame the parent for the death of the child ( $\alpha = .81$ ): "How much do you blame the mother/father for the child's death?", "How responsible do you think the mother/father is for the child's death?" and "How much do you think the child's death was not the mother/father's fault?" These items were answered on a 0 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Extremely*) scale. Afterwards, participants responded to five questions evaluating how good of a parent they thought the target was ( $\alpha = .65$ ). Questions included, "How good a parent do you think the mother/father is?" and "How nurturing do you think the mother/father is?" These items were also answered on a 0 (*Not at all*) to 5 (*Extremely*) scale. Finally, participants indicated what their verdict for the case of the parent would be (i.e., Guilty or Not Guilty) and if they ruled guilty, how many years in prison they would sentence the parent.

## **RESULTS**

### **Parent Evaluations**

Participants' evaluations of the parent (degree of blame and perceived competence) were analyzed in a 2 (parent condition: mother or father) x 2 (participant gender) Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA). Table 1 provides correlations and descriptive statistics for the variables that were analyzed. There was a significant main effect for parent gender condition,  $F(2, 308) = 11.08, p < .001$ , partial eta squared = .067. Neither the main effect for participant gender nor the participant gender by parent gender interaction were significant. At the univariate

level, the main effect of parent condition on parent blame was significant,  $F(1, 309) = 10.01, p = .002$ , partial eta squared = .032. As shown in Table 2, participants blamed the mother significantly more for the accident than they blamed the father. Furthermore, although both parents received relatively low parent competence ratings overall, the mother was rated as significantly less competent than the father,  $F(1, 309) = 107.84, p < .001$ , partial eta squared = .055.

*Table 1: Correlation Matrix and Descriptive Statistics*

	1	2	3	4	5	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
1. Participant Sex (female = 0, male = 1)	-	-.01	-.05	-.03	-.19**	314	0.34	0.475
2. Parent Condition (mother = 0, father = 1)		-	-.16**	-.22**	.07	314	0.5	0.501
3. Blame			-	-.30**	.16**	313	4.49	0.81
4. Parent competence				-	-.39**	313	1.77	0.93
5. Sentence length					-	287	16.3	15.34

Note: \*\*. Correlation is significant at the .001 level.

*Table 2: Mean Parent Evaluation & Sentencing by Parent Gender and Participant Gender*

	<i>Men</i>		<i>Women</i>	
	Mother	Father	Mother	Father
Blame Parent	4.65	4.21	4.61	4.32
Parent Competence	1.41	2.05	1.65	1.93
Prison Sentence (years)	12.0	7.84	14.16	15.78

### **Verdict & Sentencing**

The overwhelming majority of participants (95%) indicated that the parent should be found guilty. Of those that voted indicated not guilty, verdicts did not differ by participant gender or parent gender (Men: father  $n = 3$ , mother  $n = 2$ ; Women: father  $n = 6$ , mother  $n = 5$ ). Of those that voted for conviction, some participants provided a sentence range (e.g., 10 – 15 years), in which cases we took the midpoint of the range (e.g., 12.5 years). For participants who indicated a life sentence, we used 25 years as a value. Some participants provided vague responses that could not be coded into usable sentence length (e.g., “a long time”).

Using the data among participants who indicated a guilty verdict and provided an acceptable sentence length ( $n = 288$ ), we conducted a 2 (parent condition: mother or father) x 2 (participant gender) univariate analyses of variance. There was a significant main effect for participant gender,  $F(1, 284) = 16.64, p < .001$ , partial eta squared = .055. Overall, women suggested longer sentences for the parent target ( $M = 14.96$  years,  $SD = 10.68$ ) than men ( $M = 9.90$  years,  $SD = 8.66$ ). There was no main effect for parent condition,  $F(1, 284) = 1.02, p = .314$ , partial eta squared = .004, however there was a significant interaction between parent gender and participant gender,  $F(1, 284) = 5.37, p = .021$ , partial eta squared = .019. As shown in Table 2, although women recommended higher sentences overall compared to men, they recommended similar sentences for the mother ( $M = 14.16, SD = 9.33$ ) and the father ( $M = 15.78, SD = 11.90$ ),  $F(1, 284) = 1.26, p = .263$ , partial eta squared = .004. Men, however, recommended significantly longer sentences for the mother ( $M = 11.97, SD = 9.26$ ) compared to the father ( $M = 7.78, SD = 7.55$ ),  $F(1, 284) = 4.20, p = .041$ , partial eta squared = .015.

To examine potential mediating variables, sentence length was regressed separately on parent competence (beta =  $-.32, p < .001$ ) and parent blame (beta =  $.19, p = .001$ ). When these variables were included in a regression equation along with participant gender, parent gender and the participant by parent interaction, the previously significant interaction (beta =  $.21, p = .021$ ) was reduced (beta =  $.16, p = .063$ ). Sobel tests indicated significant indirect effects for both parent competence (beta =  $-.31, Z = 2.80, p = .005$ ) but not parent blame (beta =  $.11, Z = 1.44, p = .15$ ). Thus, men's greater punitiveness toward mothers was partially mediated by their perception of mother's shortcomings as a parent.

## DISCUSSION

This study examined the way in which positively stereotyped group members may be evaluated more harshly and may suffer from more negative consequences when they fail to live up to the standards established by such stereotypes, compared to group members who are not associated with these positive stereotypes. Specifically, when a parent's negligence contributed to the tragic death of a child, the parent was considered to be significantly less competent when they were the child's mother compared to when they were the child's father. Additionally, despite the identical nature of their situations, the mother was perceived to be more responsible for the child's death than the father.

These data are consistent with considerable work on expectancy violation theory (Bettencourt et al., 1997; Jussim et al., 1987) which posits that positively stereotyped group members may be evaluated more negatively than non-stereotyped group members when they fail to confirm heightened expectations. Accordingly, because the mother target failed to fulfill the expectations associated with benevolent stereotypes of women as communal and nurturing, she was blamed more than the father target who was not burdened with these high expectations. Thus, although it may seem positive that some group members are stereotyped as having natural ability (e.g., women are good parents), when they fail to fulfill their positive stereotypes they may be evaluated much more negatively than group members who are not held to these high expectations.

Our findings are also consistent with the shifting standards model of stereotypes (Biernat & Manis, 1991). Based on positive stereotypes that women are naturally more competent parents, the mother target may have been held to a higher standard of parenting ability compared to the father target. Therefore, when her behavior transgressed such standards, her mistake may have been deemed considerably more costly than the father's identical mistake because she had farther to fall from her stereotypically elevated status as the better parent.

The mechanism for the mother's negative outcomes in this study may be explained by work on sex roles. Eagly (1987, 2004; Eagly & Seffen, 1984) holds that the potential for prejudice emerges when individuals perceive an inconsistency between stereotype-based expectancies and the attributes associated with a particular group member. Accordingly, because women are expected to be nurturing, a woman who behaves in a non-nurturing manner will be perceived negatively and as less of a member of her gender group (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Mladinic, 1989).

In addition to demonstrating diverging evaluations of parent competence and responsibility, our findings also provide more concrete measures of parent evaluations by asking participants to suggest the target's punishment in terms of prison sentence. Although women participants suggested longer sentences for the parent target (regardless of target gender), men recommended significantly longer sentences for the mother compared to the father. Although this effect among men is consistent with ingroup favoritism (i.e., simply because they are members of the same group, men may have suggested a shorter prison sentence for the father target compared to the mother target); however, our mediation analyses suggest that stereotyped based expectancies may have played at least a partial role in this finding. Male participants' perceptions of the target's parenting competence partially mediated their sentencing decisions. That is, the fact that men opted for harsher prison sentences for the mother compared to the father seems to be at least partially related to their perception of the mother as a less competent parent compared to the father, even though the mother and father made the same parenting mistake. This finding indicates that men seem to have differing expectation-based perceptions of mothers and fathers who make a parenting mistake and they are taking these differing perceptions into account when making sentencing decisions, at the cost of mothers.

This study contributes further support to the idea that the positive stereotypes may not be so positive. At first glance, it may seem encouraging that some socially disadvantaged groups are perceived to be especially talented or adept in certain domains. However, it is important to recognize that those perceptions often come with high expectations. When positively stereotyped group members do not fulfill their positive stereotypes, when they fail despite having some supposed natural ability, they likely end up being judged and treated more harshly than group members who are not associated with these stereotypes. If these group members are indeed being perceived as less competent, are blamed more, and are treated more harshly when they fail, compared to non-stereotyped group members, then one can certainly see how these "positive stereotypes" are in many ways negative.

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