

Girls' Perceptions of their Mothers at Work and Home: Warm Does Not Mean Weak

Short title: *Girls' Perceptions of Mothers*

Elizabeth J. Parks-Stamm*¹, Emma N. Henson¹, and Sarah E. Martiny²,

¹ University of Southern Maine; Portland, Maine USA

² UiT The Arctic University of Norway; Tromsø, Norway

*Corresponding author information: Elizabeth J. Parks-Stamm, Department of Psychology, 506 Science, 96 Falmouth Street, Portland, ME 04103 (elizabeth.parksstamm@maine.edu).

Abstract:

Upper elementary school girls were surveyed about their mothers' warmth, competence, and agency at home and how they imagine their parents at work. Mothers' warmth at home was positively correlated with perceived competence and agency both at home and at work. Differences between daughters' perceptions of their mothers and fathers at work are discussed.

Keywords:

Working mothers, warmth, competence, agentic, role model, stereotype content model

Data availability statement:

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

Acknowledgements:

This work was supported by a research grant to the first author from the Center for Collaboration and Development at the University of Southern Maine.

Abstract

Upper elementary school girls were surveyed about their mothers' and fathers' warmth, competence, and agency at home and how they imagine their parents at work. Mothers' warmth at home was positively correlated with perceived competence and agency both at home and at work. Differences between daughters' perceptions of their mothers and fathers at work are discussed.

Girls' Perceptions of their Mothers at Work and Home: Warm Does Not Mean Weak

Inevitably our opinions cover a bigger space, a longer reach of time, a greater number of things, than we can directly observe. They have, therefore, to be pieced together out of what others have reported and what we can imagine. - Stereotypes, W. Lippman (1922)

It is often assumed that working mothers provide counterstereotypical role models for their children through modeling (Bussey & Bandura, 1999), but past research on counterstereotypical role models' effect on children is often conflicting (for a review, see Olsson & Martiny, 2018). As Lippman suggests, children who cannot directly observe their parents at work need to piece together information from what they see and hear at home, and what they extrapolate from stereotypes. The ability of working mothers to provide a role model that is perceived as competent and agentic for their daughters depends on this interpretive process, but little is known about how girls form a mental image of their mothers' traits and behaviors at work.

The Stereotype Content Model proposes the key dimensions *warmth* and *competence* drive perceptions (SCM; Fiske et al., 2002) at the group and individual level (Abele & Wojciszke, 2014). For evaluations of women, warmth and competence are negatively correlated, as women are often categorized into one of two opposing subtypes: homemakers (warm but not competent) or female professionals (competent but not warm; Cuddy et al., 2004). Eckes (2002) showed that competence and warmth are significantly negatively correlated across the female subgroups but not significantly related for men. This conflict between warmth and competence has important implications for the workplace (Heilman & Parks-Stamm, 2007). Women who overcome the warm-but-incompetent female stereotype by demonstrating their competence experience *penalties for success* (Heilman et al., 2004): women who are successful in

stereotypically masculine domains are characterized as cold and unlikeable, and they experience negative social and economic consequences (i.e., *backlash effects*; Rudman & Fairchild, 2004).

The inverse correlation between warmth and competence for women may affect mothers' ability to provide a competent and agentic role model for their daughters. Does a mother's warm caregiving behavior at home undermine her children's perceptions of her competence and success in the workplace? Work by Roussos and Dunham (2016) suggests children may differ from adults in how they use warmth and competence; they found warmth and competence ratings were highly correlated for both 6 and 10 year olds (but not adults). Although they did not separate data for male and female targets, this may suggest that children's judgments of warmth and competence are governed by an overall valence evaluation.

The present study therefore examines how perceptions of mothers' warmth at home are associated with upper elementary school daughters' perceptions of their mothers' competence both at home and at work, as well as their envisioned workplace behaviors. In line with the work of Abele et al. (2016), we separately measure two facets of the SCM "competence" dimension: competence (e.g., smart and capable) and agency (e.g., assertive and ambitious). We then look at relationships between daughters' perceptions of their mothers' warmth, competence, and agency at home and at work, and compare their impressions of their mothers at work to their impressions of their fathers at work.

Methods

Participants

We collected data from an anonymous online sample of 48 upper elementary girls who reported living with a mother and father who work outside the home in the United States. Ten were excluded (7 missing > 90% data, 2 same-sex parents, 1 missing father data). This resulted

in a sample of 38 participants (12 3rd graders, 11 4th graders, 15 5th graders). After parental consent and child assent, girls rated their mothers' competence, warmth, and agency at home and how they imagined them at work (repeated with the father to provide a comparison).

Trait Ratings

Girls completed Likert-type scales (1-7) for what their mother is like at home with them in terms of warmth (compassionate, caring, friendly, helpful; $\alpha = .81$), competence (smart, capable; $r = .60$), and agency (assertive, confident, a leader, ambitious; $\alpha = .57$). They then rated these traits at the workplace for their mothers (warmth [$\alpha = .81$], competence [$r = .94$], and agency [$\alpha = .58$]) and their fathers (warmth [$\alpha = .78$], competence [$r = .91$], and agency [$\alpha = .72$])

Workplace Roles and Responsibilities

Using the scale from Williams and Chen (2014), girls answered to what extent their mother (and then father): is successful in her career, an important person at work, and earns a high salary (1-7). An *office housework scale* measured girls' perception of how likely the mother (and father) would be responsible for: organizing a holiday party, ordering lunch for others, taking notes at a meeting, cleaning up after a lunch meeting or office party (0-100; 4 items; $\alpha = .70$ mothers; $\alpha = .66$ fathers). *Workplace communication* items included 4 bipolar sliding scales with the following anchors: gives orders - makes requests; directly commands - asks nicely; tells other people what to do - is told what to do; runs meetings - is quiet at meetings (0-100).

Results

Are Girls' Perceptions of Their Mothers' Traits at Home Correlated with How They Imagine Them at Work?

Ratings of mothers' warmth at home was strongly positively correlated with perceptions of competence at home ($r = .76, p < .001$) and agency at home ($r = .66, p < .001$). Ratings of mothers' warmth at home was also associated with how the girls imagined their mothers at work, positively correlating with workplace agency ($r = .41, p = .011$) and competence ($r = .33, p = .045$).

Are There Differences in How Girls Imagine Their Mothers and Fathers at Work?

Girls believed that their fathers were significantly more agentic at work than mothers (mothers: $M = 6.00, SD = .89$; fathers: $M = 6.24, SD = .88$; $t(37) = 2.13, p = .04$) but not more competent ($p = .23$). They imagined their mothers were marginally warmer at work than fathers (mothers: $M = 6.61, SD = .73$; fathers: $M = 6.38, SD = .83$; $t(37) = 1.92, p = .063$).

Although girls do not imagine their mothers and fathers differ in the extent to which they are an important person at work, $t(37) = 1.43, p = .160$, or successful in their career, $t(37) = .177, p = .860$, they do imagine a significant difference in salary (mothers: $M = 5.29, SD = 1.56$; fathers: $M = 5.97, SD = 1.15$; $t(37) = 2.54, p = .016$). Rather than the negative correlation that might be anticipated between perceived warmth at home and roles at work, nonsignificant (positive) correlations were found between warmth and perceived success ($r = .28, p = .087$), importance ($r = .25, p = .128$), and salary ($r = .22, p = .18$).

Girls do imagine a significant difference between their mothers and fathers in "office housework" responsibilities at work, $t(37) = 2.60, p = .013$. See Table 1 for the individual items. Gender differences were particularly stark for organizing a holiday party and taking notes at a meeting. Warmth at home, however, was not associated with the extent to which they imagined their mothers doing these office housework tasks, $r = -.09, p = .605$, nor was competence and agency at home ($r = -.03, p = .876$ and $r = -.12, p = .458$, respectively).

Paired t-tests for how girls imagine their mothers and fathers communicate at work returned different patterns for the four items. Although girls imagined their mothers were more likely to tell others what to do (vs. get told what to do) than their fathers, they also imagined their mothers were significantly more likely to “ask nicely” (vs. directly command others; see Table 2). Warmth at home was not significantly correlated with how daughters imagined their mothers communicating at work (all $ps > .66$), nor was competence and agency (all $ps > .12$).

Discussion

As daughters cannot directly observe their mothers at work, they need to piece together a mental image of their work traits and behaviors through what they see and hear from their parents at home, and what they infer from stereotypes. The present study suggests that girls do not utilize female subtype stereotypes that assume an inverse relationship between warmth and competence. Rather, mothers’ warmth at home was positively related to imagined competence and agency in the workplace. As women strive to provide working mother role models for their daughters, our results suggest they should not be concerned that their warmth undermines their daughters’ perceptions of their competency and agency. The present research instead suggests that daughters who think highly of their mothers imagine their mothers as highly competent and agentic in the workplace as well.

Although upper elementary school girls’ perceptions of their working mothers do not seem to be driven by subtype stereotypes that pit warmth and competence against each other, significant differences in how daughters imagine their mothers and fathers at work in the present study suggest gender stereotypes are still at work. Whereas fathers are perceived to be significantly higher in agency and earned salary, mothers are imagined as warmer, more polite in their communication, and responsible for more office housework. Future research should

investigate the extent to which these perceptions reflect actual differences in the workplace, how these perceptions are developed, and when perceivers begin to differentiate between warmth and competence in line with adult gender stereotypes.

References

- Abele, A. E., Hauke, N., Peters, K., Louvet, E., Szymkow, A., & Duan, Y. (2016). Facets of the fundamental content dimensions: Agency with competence and assertiveness—Communion with warmth and morality. *Frontiers in Psychology, 7*, 1810. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01810
- Abele, A. E., & Wojciszke, B. (2014). Communal and agentic content in social cognition: A dual perspective model. In *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology* (Vol. 50, pp. 195-255). Academic Press.
- Bussey, K., & Bandura, A. (1999). Social cognitive theory of gender development and differentiation. *Psychological Review, 106*, 676-713. doi:10.1037/0033-295X.106.4.676
- Cuddy, A. J., Fiske, S. T., & Glick, P. (2004). When professionals become mothers, warmth doesn't cut the ice. *Journal of Social Issues, 60*, 701-718. doi:10.1111/j.002-4537.2004.00381
- Eckes, T. (2002). Paternalistic and envious gender stereotypes: Testing predictions from the stereotype content model. *Sex Roles, 47*, 99-114. doi:10.1023/A:1021020920715
- Fiske, S. T., Cuddy, A. J., Glick, P., & Xu, J. (2002). A model of (often mixed) stereotype content: Competence and warmth respectively follow from perceived status and competition. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 82*, 878-902. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.82.6.878
- Heilman, M. E., & Parks-Stamm, E. J. (2007). Gender stereotypes in the workplace: Obstacles to women's career progress. In S. J. Correll (Ed). *Social Psychology of Gender*, p. 44-77. doi:10.1016/S0882-6145(07)24003-2

- Heilman, M. E., Wallen, A. S., Fuchs, D., & Tamkins, M. M. (2004). Penalties for success: Reactions to women who succeed at male gender-typed tasks. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 89*, 416-427. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.89.3.416
- Lippmann, W. (1922). Stereotypes. In W. Lippmann, *Public Opinion* (p. 79–94). MacMillan Co. doi:10.1037/14847-006
- Olsson, M., & Martiny, S. E. (2018). Does exposure to counterstereotypical role models influence girls' and women's gender stereotypes and career choices? A review of social psychological research. *Frontiers in Psychology, 9*, 2264. doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2018.02264
- Roussos, G., & Dunham, Y. (2016). The development of stereotype content: The use of warmth and competence in assessing social groups. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 141*, 133-144. doi:10.1016/j.jecp.2015.08.009
- Rudman, L. A., & Fairchild, K. (2004). Reactions to counterstereotypic behavior: The role of backlash in cultural stereotype maintenance. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 87*(2), 157-176. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.87.2.157
- Williams, M. J., & Chen, S. (2014). When “mom’s the boss”: Control over domestic decision making reduces women’s interest in workplace power. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations, 17*(4), 436-452. doi:10.1177/1368430213497065

Table 1*Mean Scores for Office Housework Items by Parent*

Item	Mothers	Fathers	<i>t</i> (37)	<i>p</i>
Organizing a holiday party	37.45 (30.52)	19.79 (22.69)	3.78	.001
Ordering lunch	18.92 (24.52)	23.28 (26.51)	.90	.376
Taking notes	59.54 (37.85)	43.70 (35.50)	3.36	.002
Cleaning up after a meeting or office party	39.26 (36.34)	31.18 (33.99)	1.50	.142

Note. Group means (with standard deviations in parentheses) for daughters' ($N = 38$) ratings of how likely their parents are to do these actions at work, with the results of the paired t-tests comparing ratings of mothers and fathers.

Table 2*Mean Scores for Office Communication Items by Parent*

Item	Mothers	Fathers	<i>t</i> (37)	<i>p</i>
Gives orders---Makes requests	53.29 (25.21)	49.47 (29.57)	.88	.385
Directly commands---Asks nicely	29.87 (30.32)	41.87 (27.55)	2.89	.006
Tells others what to do---Gets told what to do	61.58 (25.28)	49.76 (25.31)	2.41	.021
Runs meetings---Is quiet at meetings	50.79 (28.46)	45.68 (30.84)	.87	.393

Note. Group means (with standard deviations in parentheses) for daughters' ($N = 38$) bipolar ratings of how likely they are to do these actions at work, with the results of the paired t-tests comparing ratings of mothers and fathers.