# SOCIAL PERCEPTION OF COUNTERSTEREOTYPICAL IMAGES OF PARENTS

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**Summary**. The article presents direct comparisons of perceived femininity and masculinity of men and women who fulfill their family roles in an untraditional way, in a gendered situation of transition to parenthood. A convenient sample of 120 people (incl. 61 females) took part in the study. Participants assessed four pictures presenting two men (feeding a baby) and two women (in the workplace context) in respect of their popularity and femininity/masculinity. The images were accompanied by short descriptions of professionally successful women and men primary child care-givers. Results indicated that female targets were perceived as less feminine and more masculine than men. Men prefer the male targets more than the female ones.
**Key words**: parenthood, family roles, femininity, masculinity, popularity

## Introduction

Gender stereotypes influence our perception of women and men the most in the roles that have a well-established structure (Wood, Eagly, 2002). Such roles can be associated with career choices or family background (Eagly, Wood, Diekman, 2000). Bosak, Szczesny, and Eagly (2008) conclude that in social perspective there is a link between feminine/domestic roles and communal qualities, and between masculine/professional roles and agentic characteristics (see also Eagly, Steffen, 1984; Bosak, Szczesny, Eagly, 2011). In consequence, as perceptions of women are associated with family roles whereas perceptions of men are perceived through nondomestic and job-related roles, gender stereotypes are maintained (Eagly, 1987). Since female roles are connected with child-rearing and taking care of the family, stereotypical femininity is defined by such traits as being nurturant, empathic or kind. Masculine gender stereotype includes perceiving men as, among all, brave and assertive, since those are the qualities essential for professional success (Levant, 1995; Brannon, 1999; Mandal, 2003, 2012; Abele, Wojciszke, 2007). Studies by Prentice and Carranza (2002), in which people associated various traits with a typical woman and a typical

man, showed that male competence, power, and status were especially valued as opposed to qualities connected with emotionality or weakness. Woman was socially rewarded for her warmth, openness to others or qualities associated with maternal role (e.g. interest in children), while punished for dominance, stubbornness or other traits even mildly related to aggression.

Traits defined as feminine and masculine compose one of gender stereotypes components differentiated by Deaux and Lewis (1984), and are classified as cognitive inferences/attributions based on popular knowledge concerning gender roles (Lobel, 1994; Lobel et al., 2001). According to Eagly (1987) social roles function as prescriptions for women and men. In their biosocial theory, Wood and Eagly (2002) state that those cultural restrictions are emphasized by physiological differences between genders linked mainly to reproduction and physical strength. Those biological differences have been endorsed in more developed societies and, as a consequence, patriarchy occurred. Therefore, when observing women and men fulfilling certain roles, we tend to associate their behaviors with their gender rather than with the requirements of a particular role that represents different social status.

The situation of child's birth leads to increased gender stereotypization, when biological roles and physiological functions (e.g. lactation) are emphasized (Bridges, Etaugh, Barnes-Farrell, 2002; Fox, 2001; Wood, Eagly, 2002). Studies show that in the process of transition to parenthood men and women become more gender stereotypic (Katz-Wise, Priess, Hyde, 2010), which might be explained by social expectations towards new mothers and fathers in reference to their parental duties (see also Wood, Eagly, 2002). As a consequence, care-giver and breadwinner roles are viewed as communal and agentic, regardless of parent's sex (Riggs, 1997).

Gender norms are institutionally endorsed. In Poland, a maternal leave lasts a minimum of 20 weeks after a child is born, and it is customary for a woman to stay with her newborn at home for at least a few months after birth as she is considered the primary care-giver, whereas a father usually does not take a paternal leave (Kwiatkowska, Nowakowska, 2006; GUS, 2012). In consequence, feminine self-concept is still closely linked in social perception to motherhood, and typical, communal traits of mothers (like empathy) are stereotypically required from an average woman (Bielawska-Batorowicz, 2006; Kaźmierczak, 2015). However, changes in perceptions of fatherhood are visible, as positive attitudes towards engagement in caring for a child and images of men tendering their children are popular in mass-media (Arcimowicz, 2003).

When both genders oppose highly appreciated, prescriptive schemas by behaving nontraditionally (e.g. woman as a sole breadwinner or man as a stay-at-home-dad), they are still punished by the society (Rudman, Glick, 2008). The above conclusion has been corroborated in research. In Bridges and Etaugh's (1995) research, continuously working mothers of infants were viewed as less communal and less committed to parenthood than unemployed women. Brescoll and Uhlmann (2005) found that stay-at-home-fathers and working mothers were viewed more negatively (less liked) than parents fulfilling their roles in a traditional way (stay-at-home-mothers, working fathers). Especially a father who traded work for his family

duties was seen as the worst parent who would not receive social regard. However, studies by Lobel et al. (2001) revealed that high participation in household chores might be perceived as a development of a male role in family, adding femininity to his social image, but not depriving him of masculinity, and popularity. Mothers refraining from performing household duties were seen as more masculine than fathers, even those participating little in the family life, and less feminine than traditionally family-oriented women and men (independently of their household participation). People behaving counterstereotypically in respect to family gender roles, such as stay-at-home-dads (Doucet, 2004; Rochlen et al., 2008), often express their anxieties associated with social ostracism. However, such women and men develop traits that are stereotypically associated with the other gender (Rochlen et al., 2008), which seems to enable them to be androgenic (Bem, 1981).

In the era of pancultural social and economical changes, which together often lead to modified gender roles in family, like the popularity of dual-earner diads (Pollack, Levant, 1995; Boni, Szafraniec, 2011), there is still a need for studies that compare social perception of men and women fulfilling their family and professional roles in an untraditional way. Poland has experienced communism followed by capitalism and democracy in the last nearly thirty years. Influences of Western culture (incl. US) in creating modern gender norms are visible, while the more conservative views on family are still pervasive (Kwiatkowska, Nowakowska, 2006; Boni, Szafraniec, 2011), which creates a great opportunity to analyze social perception of changing parental roles.

**Research aim**

We planned direct comparisons of perceived femininity and masculinity of men and women who fulfill their family roles in an untraditional way, in a gendered situation of transition to parenthood (Fox, 2001; Wood, Eagly, 2002; Katz-Wise, Priess, Hyde, 2010). Women and men taking on "female duties" in the household, including taking care of children in family, become more communal, that is more feminine. Whereas those who are not involved in household chores are socially perceived to develop their agency – masculinity (Lobel et al., 2001). We expected that female image of a breadwinner will be linked to decreased perceived femininity (linked to communal traits) and higher perceived masculinity (linked to agentic traits) than male image of a primary child care-giver.

The aspect of popularity was included in research due to earlier documented lower popularity/overall evaluations of mothers and fathers who do not follow traditional family roles of a male sole breadwinner and a female primary child care-giver (Bridges, Etaugh, 1995; Brescoll, Uhlmann, 2005) and to explore if such views are present in a country experiencing fast societal changes. Due to strong links between femininity and motherhood in social perception, also in the Polish cultural context, we expected that when fulfilling their family roles in an untraditional way women will be less popular (less liked) than men.

# Method

## Participants

A convenient sample of 120 people (incl. 61 females) took part in the study, mean age = 26 yrs. old (*SD* = 8.9). Sixty-three percent (76 participants) remained in a romantic relationship, 64% (77 participants) had a job, and 21% (25 participants) were parents. Each image along with the story was randomly assessed by 30 male and female participants (30 women and 30 men assessed male images, whereas 31 women and 29 men assessed female images).

## Procedure

Each participant met with a research assistant in a place of her/his choice (usually a place of living). No payment was offered for participation in the studies. Images accompanied by short descriptions were presented to participants (on paper, black and white images) – one image with a story was assessed by one person. Randomized selection of images was implemented. Next, we asked the participants to assess the actors depicted in images and stories on twelve dimensions (2 popularity items, and 10 adjectives defined as masculine or feminine).

## Measures

**Female and male images**. We chose four pictures presenting two men and two women. All images were selected on the basis on pre-assessment on dimensions of popularity and attractiveness. Four persons were assessed as fairly likeable and rather good looking. Two images presented women in the workplace context. The images were accompanied by short descriptions: *Anna is a married woman. She is a mother of a child who is nearly one year old. Anna is professionally successful. It is mainly her husband who takes care of their baby, because he does not work full-time*. In two other images men were pictured while feeding a baby. Those two images were also followed by short descriptions: *Peter is a married man. He is a father of a child who is nearly one year old. It is mainly Peter who takes care of his and his wife's baby, because he does not work full-time. His wife is professionally successful*. Two example images are presented below:

Picture 1. Images used to depict female and male targets

Both names used in short descriptions were chosen due to their popularity in Poland. Though stories were used to depict non-stereotypical gender roles, the presented men were not described as stay-at-home-dads, since this is still a very uncommon role for a father in Poland (GUS, 2012), and not working full-time was an idea more realistic in Polish conditions.

**Perceived femininity and masculinity**. Ten adjectives were used to assess actors' perceived femininity and masculinity. The list comprised of two sets of five adjectives, which were chosen from The Psychological Sex Inventory (IPP) by Kuczynska (1992). IPP is a well-known and popular questionnaire in Poland created on the basis of Sandra Bem's (1981) Gender Schema Theory. Femininity and masculinity subscales comprise of 15 adjectives each. Ten adjectives were chosen on the basis of their discriminative power as the strongest indicators of perceived femininity and masculinity. Five adjectives were defined as feminine (i.e. tender, emotional), and other 5 as masculine (i.e. self-assured, decisive). Participants assessed to what extent each trait applies to a target on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*does not apply*) to 5 (*best applies*). Each set of adjectives created reliable scales: Masculinity Index: Cronbach's alpha: .87; Femininity Index: Cronbach's alpha: .74.

**Popularity**. An index of two items was used to assess a tendency to like actors presented on the images. The items were taken from Wojciszke, Abele, Baryła (2009). The two items were as follows: *I find the person appealing* and *I would like the person*. Participants expressed their opinions about actors by choosing a number from 1 (-) to 7 (+). Correlation between the two items was *rho* = .5, $p < .001$.

It should be noted that while the perceived femininity and masculinity were negatively associated *rho*= -.34, $p < .001$, popularity was positively and significantly associated with femininity (*rho* = .41, $p < .001$), but not with masculinity (*rho* = .1, $p > .1$). A positive association of femininity and liking was also obtained in earlier studies (Wojciszke, Abele, Baryła, 2009).

# Results

Series of ANOVA analyses were carried out. It should be noted that neither two female images nor two male images differed from each other in respect of perceived femininity, masculinity, and popularity in the presented studies. Therefore, the scores were averaged for two female and two male images. All means and standard deviations of social perception dimensions are presented in table 1.

Table 1. Means and Standard Deviations for female and male targets on masculinity, femininity, and popularity dimensions

|  |  | Dimension of social perception | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  |  | Masculinity | Femininity | Popularity |
| Women perception | Female targets | 18.65(3.66) | 13.90(2.99) | 11.00(1.81) |
|  | Male targets | 12.93(2.91) | 19.07(1.98) | 11.37(1.52) |
| Men perception | Female targets | 17.38(4.39) | 13.24(3.67) | 8.86(2.03) |
|  | Male targets | 15.03(3.95) | 18.37(3.31) | 10.97(2.50) |

Note: Scores could range from 5 to 25 on the Masculinity and Femininity scales, and 2 to 14 on the Popularity scale. Standard deviations in parentheses

**Perceived femininity and masculinity**. Results indicated that there was a main effect of the role for perceived femininity of targets: $F(1; 116) = 85.476$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .424$. A main effect of participants' sex was not significant: $F(1; 116) = 1.498$; $p > .1$; $\eta^2 = .013$, as the interaction of participants' sex and perceived femininity, $F < 1$. Female targets were perceived as less feminine than men, both among women $F(1;116) = 43.786$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .27$, and men $F(1;116) = 41.726$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .27$.

Analyses yielded a main effect of the role for perceived masculinity, whereas a main effect of participants' sex was not significant. However, the interaction of participants' sex and perceived masculinity was significant. Female targets were perceived similarly by both sexes $F(1;116) = 1.697$; $p < .195$; $\eta^2 = .01$, while male targets were viewed as more masculine by men than by women $F(1;116) = 4.677$; $p < .05$; $\eta^2 = .04$. Therefore, the difference in perceived masculinity of targets (lower applied to male targets) was more significant in female group $F(1;116) = 5.738$; $p < .05$; $\eta^2 = .05$ than in a male group.

**Popularity**. The ANOVA on popularity index as a dependent variable yielded a main effect of the role and a main effect of participants' sex in perceived targets' popularity. However, the interaction of participants' sex and targets' popularity was also significant. Women perceived female and male targets similarly and favorably in respect of popularity $F(1;116) < 1$; $\eta^2 = .005$, whereas men liked the male targets more than the female ones $F(1;116) = 16,421$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .124$. Therefore, for the evaluation of female targets the sex differences were significant $F(1;116) = 17.218$; $p < .001$; $\eta^2 = .129$, however they were not significant in male targets' assessment $F(1;116) < 1$; $\eta^2 = .005$.

We controlled job and romantic relationship in the analyses, but they did not exert any effect on social perception of targets.

## Conclusions

The presented research analyzed the social perception of mothers and fathers who fulfill their roles counterstereotypically as female main breadwinners and male primary child care-givers in households after their transition to parenthood. We might conclude that as expected female targets were perceived as less feminine and more masculine than male targets. However, in the case of perceived masculinity the difference was less visible in male participants who liked male targets more.

Results indicate that when faced with a situation involving strong gender stereotypes such as transition to parenthood, people easily link feminine and masculine traits to the way family roles were fulfilled rather than to the sex of a parent. Such findings confirm those of Eagly and Wood (2002) who treat social perception of femininity and masculinity as a consequence of fulfilling domestic and nondomestic roles, as well as earlier research (see also Riggs, 1997), in a new cultural context. The situation of scarce information, i.e. the image of a woman and man in a (non)domestic environment accompanied by a very short description of their social roles gave an opportunity to evaluate personal targets' traits counterstereotypically (Bosak, Sczesny, Eagly, 2011), which also confirms the strength of expectations associated with parental roles. As non-typical parents, female and male targets might have been viewed as those who chose to be main breadwinners or care-givers, which facilitated their counterstereotypical trait attribution (see also Lobel et al., 2001).

However, attribution of feminine and masculine traits to parents behaving untraditionally in respect of gender stereotypes involved a different level of popularity. It seems that professionally active mothers of infants are less liked (but not disliked) than men taking on stereotypically female job of caring for a child. A young mother who was professionally successful, but did not temporarily resign from her career, might have been perceived as agentic, that is stereotypically masculine, but lacked typically feminine emotionality and sensitiveness, and therefore, was viewed less positively. Such a woman could be viewed as one who was not sufficiently committed to caring for a baby and egocentric, which led to negative evaluation (Bridges, Etaugh, 1995). It might have been true for men in our study who might have built the assessment of female targets on the "ideal woman" model, with strong links between femininity and motherhood (Bielawska-Batorowicz, 2006; Plopa, 2011), resulting with lower popularity of female targets. However, the overall popularity of female targets was not low among male sample. It might be due to the fact that in Polish cultural context females have long had to possess both communal and agentic traits combining family and work duties (Kosakowska-Berezecka et al., 2016). As a consequence especially Polish women in our study might have been aware of that and therefore assessed female targets favorably.

Participants might have perceived male targets as those who have not fully abandoned a role of a breadwinner (by not working full-time). Instead, their priority became a child, which suggested possessing feminine traits, thus important for social relations and liked (see also Wojciszke, Abele, Baryła, 2009). In consequence, in social

perception, the male targets did not lose masculinity to the same extent as working mothers who were deprived of their perceived femininity, at least according to men. With popular images in a modern culture of men tendering their children (Levant, 1995), male targets might have served as symbols of changing families, especially to other men. However, the question arises: why male participants were less inclined than females to decrease the perceived masculinity of the assessed fathers? It might be the result of subjectively restoring the "culturally proper" division of duties in family by perceiving the male targets as still agentic – thus possessing a core aspect of manhood (Kosakowska-Berezecka et al., 2016). Therefore, for that reason male participants might have liked more male than female targets.

Rudman and Glick (2008) do see the possibility of gender stereotypes modification in the process of assuming new roles by both genders. Regarding manhood, Levant (1995) postulates that there is a need for reconstruction and positive image of "new men". The content of gender stereotypes could be changed only if gender roles in the society are changed. Rudman and Glick (2008) conclude that if women were expected to fulfill nondomestic roles and men were encouraged to engage to a greater extent in family roles, the gender differences in agency would be diminished. Such changing family patterns should be endorsed in public policies, which decrease the occurrence of stigma often experienced by nontraditional parents (Rochlen et al., 2008) and encourage them to follow their children's needs (Fischer, Anderson, 2012). Various societal changes are currently visible, being stimulated among others by migration processes (Herzberg, 2015), and the future will show how significant they will be.

## Limitations

The study was conducted on a relatively small sample and in one cultural context. Large-scale and cross-cultural research is required. Additionally, a student sample participated in this study, which might have limited the generalization of the results. It should be noted that male targets were photographed with infants while feeding them, which might have influenced an overall more positive attitude and facilitated the attribution of femininity (as feeding an infant is not only socially, but also biologically associated with mothers). More diversified images of motherhood and fatherhood should be employed in further research.

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## SPOŁECZNE POSTRZEGANIE RODZICÓW NIESTEREOTYPOWO WYPEŁNIAJĄCYCH ROLE RODZINNE

**Streszczenie**. W artykule zaprezentowane zostały wyniki badania, w którym porównano stopień przypisywanej kobiecości i męskości mężczyznom oraz kobietom wypełniającym role rodzinne w sposób nietradycyjny. Skoncentrowano się na sytuacji podjęcia ról rodzicielskich łączonej z nasileniem tradycyjności w podziale obowiązków w parze. W badaniu uczestniczyło 120 osób (61 kobiet). Osoby badane oceniały cztery zdjęcia przedstawiające dwóch mężczyzn (karmiących niemowlę) i dwie kobiety (w sytuacji zawodowej) na wymiarach lubienia oraz postrzeganej kobiecości i postrzeganej męskości. Do zdjęć dołączono krótkie opisy kobiet odnoszących sukcesy w życiu zawodowym i mężczyzn – głównych opiekunów dziecka. Uzyskane wyniki wskazują, że oceniane kobiety były postrzegane jako mniej kobiece i bardziej męskie niż mężczyźni. Uczestniczący w badaniu mężczyźni oceniali wyżej na wymiarze lubienia mężczyznę niż kobietę na zdjęciu.

**Słowa kluczowe**: rodzicielstwo, role rodzinne, kobiecość, męskość, lubienie

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