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Male/Female Conceptualization Differences in Children
of Single Fathers and Dual Parent Families

Patricia A. Riley

University of Richmond

Abstract

Fifteen single fathers and their children and fifteen presently married fathers and their children were Ss in this study to investigate differences in male/female conceptualizations between the children of the two different family structures as well as the influence of the fathers' self-reported sex-role on the children. The BEM Sex-Role Inventory was administered to the fathers and the Kagen Symbolic Conceptualization Test was given to the children. Analysis results indicate no sex-role differences among both groups of fathers. Children's responses were significant when 1) scores of children of married fathers and children of single fathers were compared on the feminine dimensions ($F=4.70$, $p=4.00$); 2) male children of both groups were compared ($F=10.75$, $p=4.17$); and 3) sons and daughters of married fathers were compared ($F=13.67$, $p=4.24$). Future research needs to be done in the area of parent-child interactions in the single father situation.

Male/Female Conceptualization Differences in Children of Single Fathers and Dual Parent Families

Introduction

In recent years, the family structure in America has been faced with many changes. With an ever increasing divorce rate and in the liberation of child custody laws, a new phenomenon is emerging - the single-parent father. In nearly a half-million families in the United States, the father is the primary parent because there is no mother present in the nousehold. By definition, a single-parent father is a man who is rearing his minor children without the assistance of a co-parent. The parent may be single due to widowhood, divorce, separation, non-marriage or single parent adoption. With ninety percent of children in one-parent families residing with the mothe, most studies have been directed toward the father-absence phenomenon. But little research has been paid to the aspect of mother-absence. In todays' world, the single father's role is both new and atypical. How does this uncharacteristic role that the father plays affect the male/female conceptualizations of his children? The focus of the present paper is to investigate the prescense or absence of differences in

the male/female conceptualizations of children of single fathers and of children of dual parent families.

Literature dealing with single fathers and their children is sparse. Those recent studies available concentrate on the adjustment needed to be made on the part of the father. Gasser and Taylor (1976) interviewed forty single fathers living with a dependant child or children under eight years of age. The fathers were given a list of six items representing activities necessary to the functioning of a household and were asked to indicate a) involvement in the tasks while living with their wives, b) involvement at present and c) perception of degree of difficulty in carrying out these tasks. Gasser and Taylor found that fathers today appear to be more familiar with roles in home management and childcare than expected. The majority of the fathers handled the responsibilities of management alone or with their children, implying a greater interchange of former role stereotypes. But how does this interchange of roles affect the children's conceptualizations of sex-roles? Do they find conflicts when comparing themselves to dual parent families?

A similar investigation was made by Mendes (1976) where thirty-two single fathers were interviewed for about three hours. The four major areas that were examined in the interview were: a) the supervision and protection of children, b) homemaking, c) the emotional needs of children and d) rearing daughters in a motherless home. Comparisons of all thirty-two fathers revealed very similar problems and concerns. A major problem was that of synchronizing a work schedule with a school schedule so that the children are not left alone. They all complained of the fact that

they were required to cook every day and the boring regularity of it. Older fathers tended to feel inhibited in talking with their daughters about sexuality and often sought out special help with this. They all expressed concern about their daughters' lack of female role models. The present study wished to investigate whether this lack of a female role model is really a necessary concern or not.

Orthner, Brown and Ferguson (1976) interviewed twenty single fathers to find out what they consider the successes and strains in childrearing, in the use of compensatory services, and in their own lifestyle. They acquired similar findings as Mendes (1976). These fathers, like those interviewed by Mendes, were concerned about supervision of their children, of spending enough time with them, of the inadequacies of supportive services, and of the lack of female role models for their daughters.

In regard to the child, a study by Kagen (1961) investigated the child's differential conceptualization of the concepts of 'mother', 'father', and 'self'. Earlier studies reviewed by Kagen resulted in remarkable agreement in indicating that the father, in relation to the mother, is perceived as more punitive, more feared, more dominating and less nurturant. It was Kagen's aim to replicate findings of this nature. Kagen devised a special instrument to assess the child's conceptualization of 'father', 'mother', and 'self' through pictorial representations of 11 dimensions such as strong-weak, cold-warm and mean-nice. Kagen did, in fact, find boys and girls to conceptualize the father in comparison to the mother as stronger, larger, darker, more dirty, more angular, and more

dangerous. It should be noted that subjects in Kagen's study were 6-8 year olds from intact families. It is possible that children living with only their father may conceptualize attributes of their father differently since these children may also experience their father in more feminine roles than children of intact families.

It was the intent of this study to investigate whether or not children in single father families do hold different conceptualizations of parental roles than children in dual parent families, and to see if the father's conceptualizations of their own masculinity and femininity relate to the children's conceptualizations.

Method

Subjects: Fifteen single fathers and their children ranging between the ages of five and ten and fifteen married fathers and their children of the same age range were used as Ss. Single fathers were initially selected from Parents Without Partners, Inc., Richmond, VA and it was found necessary to also select from private grammar schools in the Richmond and Metropolitan New Jersey area. The children must have lived at least a year in the single father situation. The married fathers were selected from private grammar schools in the Richmond and Metropolitan New Jersey area.

Apparatus: The BEM Sex-Role Inventory was used to obtain the degree of masculinity and femininity of both single and married fathers. (See Appendix I). An adaption of the Kagen Symbolic Conceptualization Test was used to obtain the child's concept-

ualizations of the father role. This adaption included 33 rather than 66 pictorial symbols in an effort to reduce the child's impatience with the task. (See Appendix II).

Procedure: All participating fathers were given an introduction letter which included a permission slip to be signed by the parent(s) to acknowledge consent to take the BEM Inventory as well as their children to participate in the Kagen Test. (See Appendix III). Both the father and the child were allowed to remove themselves from the study at any time without statement of reason. Testing took place in the homes of the participants. The fathers were separated from their children and the subjects were individually administered the corresponding test. In the case of more than one child needing to be tested, they were given the test without the other sibling(s) present. E explained to each child the nature of the test as being a means of finding out what kinds of things remind them of their father. They were also told that at no time would their father be told of the child's response and that it was not a test that they can pass or fail being that there were no right or wrong answers.

Results

The means and standard deviations of married fathers' (M-F) and single fathers' (S-F) scores on the BEM Inventory are indicated in Table I. The standard average masculine score is 4.89. Both M-F

Insert Table I about here

Table I

Means and Standard Deviations of BEM Inventory

Dimensions	M-F		S-F	
	\bar{x}	s.d.	\bar{x}	s.d.
Masculinity	5.09	.58	5.21	.64
Femininity	4.24	.33	4.37	.27

Table II

Means and Standard Deviations of Kagen Test

Dimensions	M-F children N=27		S-F children N=28	
	\bar{x}	s.d.	\bar{x}	s.d.
Masculinity	19.74	2.66	18.11	2.91
Femininity	13.26	2.66	14.89	2.91

Table III

Means and Standard Deviations of Kagen Test
Males vs. Females

	M-F children		S-F children		Total Children	
	x	s.d.	x	s.d.	x	s.d.
Males	21.13 N=15	2.35	18.00 N=18	3.00	19.42 N=33	3.12
Females	18.00 N=12	1.95	18.30 N=10	2.86	18.14 N=22	2.35

and S-F rated higher on this dimension. The standard average feminine score is 4.75. Again both M-F and S-F rated themselves lower on this dimension. This indicates a general tendency of both M-f and S-F to view themselves in more of a masculine dimension with less feminine attributes. Two analysis of variance were performed comparing M-F and S-F masculine scores and M-F and S-F feminine scores. Both analysis indicated non-significant differences at the .05 level in M-f and S-F scores on both dimensions. ($F=.26, p=4.20$ for masc.), ($F=1.22, p=4.20$ for fem.).

Table II and Table III indicate means and standard deviations of results of the Kagen Test. Out of a possible 33 responses, both M-F and S-F children on the average perceived their father as being more than half of the typical male symbols. The S-F children do display a lower average for the male dimensions than the M-F children. Analysis of variance comparing M-F children's scores and S-F children's scores on the male dimensions indicate no significant differences ($F=3.58, p=4.00$). But further analysis comparing these groups scores on the female dimensions resulted in a significant difference ($F=4.70, p=4.00$) at the .05 level indicating S-F children conceptualize their father in more feminine dimensions than M-F children.

Insert Table II about here

Table III delineates the Kagen Test scores into average differences in responses of the males and females of the M-F and

Insert Table III about here

S-F groups. M-F males on the average scored their fathers highest on the male dimensions. Analysis of variance comparing M-F males with S-F males resulted in a significant difference ($F=10.75, p=4.17$) at the .05 level indicating M-F males conceptualizing their father on more male dimensions than S-F males. Analysis performed on females for both groups indicated no significant differences ($F=.08, p=4.32$).

To pursue possible sex differences further, two more analyses were performed. One analysis compared males and females within the M-F sampling. The other analysis compared males and females within the S-F sampling. Results indicated a significant difference ($F=13.67, p=4.24$) at the .05 level between males and females of the M-F group indicating more males conceptualizing their married father in more male dimensions than their sisters did. The analysis of males versus females of the S-F group resulted in no significant differences ($F=.07, p=4.22$) indicating both brothers and sisters conceptualized their father's male dimensions about equally. A final analysis was performed in which males scores of both groups combined were compared to females scores of both groups combined resulting in no significant differences ($F=2.71, p=4.00$).

Discussion

Interpretation of these results can be misleading due to the predominance of those non-significant results over those that are significant. It is interesting to note that although Gasser and

Taylor (1976) found single fathers to be more familiar with home management (typical female duties), and Orthner, Brown and Ferguson (1976) found single fathers to be concerned over the lack of female role objects for their children, that single fathers did not differ from married fathers in their self-evaluations of their masculinity and femininity. Perhaps, although these single fathers are performing the feminine duties in place of the absent mother, they do not see these duties as being internalized into their masculinity concept. Instead, they perform these duties out necessity and do not see themselves any more feminine because of it.

The most interesting results and those that this study is most concerned with are those involving the children. Since both groups of fathers see themselves in relatively the same masculinity realm, one may conclude that children of both groups are receiving very similar non-verbal information about sex-roles and behavior. But the significance of some of the children's results indicate that this perhaps is not true. The significance of the differences between children of married fathers and children of single fathers in their conceptualizations of the father's feminine dimensions is important. Although single fathers are not viewing their female duties as an integral part of their sex-role, their children are definitely picking up on these behaviors and incorporating them into their concept of the father role. Married fathers' sons, because perhaps of the lack of feminine actions of the fathers still see their father in more male dimensions as found Kagen (1961). Married fathers' daughters do not

apparently rate their fathers as high on male dimensions as their brothers. A possible explanation for this phenomenon may be that fathers display more affection and less aggressiveness to their daughters than their sons.

A major intervening variable which was unable to be controlled for may explain the lack of significance in regard to the single father daughter versus married fathers daughters' responses. Although the single father does not have a spouse this does not mean that a female is not present to perform typical female duties. This female can be father's girlfriend, a maid, a relative etc. Therefore daughters of single fathers may be seeing duties done by this surrogate in a similar manner that daughters of married fathers see their mothers. One last result is very significant because of its statistical non-significance, that being the lack of differences between scores of sons and daughters of single fathers. Because of this lack of differences it may mean that these sons and daughters are receiving less differentiating cues regarding sex-roles as compared to the sons of married fathers who scored their fathers much higher than the daughters did. Single fathers may be treating their sons and daughters equally in regard to affection, responsibility etc. This may be an indication of a more androgenous atmosphere than in the dual parent situation.

Future research in this area is abounding. Most of the interpretations of these results are speculation. More research needs to be done on parent-child interactions in the single father situations to confirm or disprove these speculations. More

research also needs to be done on interactions of single father children and their caretakers in the absence of father. Perhaps through these interactions one may find how the children develop the conceptualizations that were recorded in this study.

References

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- Gasser, R.D. & Taylor, C.M. Role adjustment of single parent fathers with dependant children. Family Co-ordinator, 1976, 25, 397-402.
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- Parsons, T. & Bales, R.F. Family, Socialization and Interaction Process. Glencoe, Illinois: Free Press, 1955.

Appendix I

Name _____ Sex M F

Yr. in School Fr Soph Jr Sr Intended Major _____

Telephone No. _____

On the next page you will be shown a large number of personality characteristics. We would like you to use those characteristics in order to describe yourself. That is, we would like you to indicate, on a scale from 1 to 7, how true of you these various characteristics are. Please do not leave any characteristic unmarked.

Example: sly

Mark a 1 if it is NEVER OR ALMOST NEVER TRUE that you are sly.

Mark a 2 if it is USUALLY NOT TRUE that you are sly.

Mark a 3 if it is SOMETIMES BUT INFREQUENTLY TRUE that you are sly.

Mark a 4 if it is OCCASIONALLY TRUE that you are sly.

Mark a 5 if it is OFTEN TRUE that you are sly.

Mark a 6 if it is USUALLY TRUE that you are sly.

Mark a 7 if it is ALWAYS TRUE OR ALMOST ALWAYS TRUE that you are sly.

Thus, if you feel it is sometimes but infrequently true that you are "sly", never or almost never true that you are "malicious", always or almost always true that you are "irresponsible", and often true that you are "carefree", then you would rate these characteristics as follows:

Sly	3
Malicious	1

Irresponsible	7
Carefree	5

DESCRIBE YOURSELF

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
NEVER OR ALMOST NEVER TRUE	USUALLY NOT TRUE	SOMETIMES BUT INFREQUENTLY TRUE	OCCASIONALLY TRUE	OFTEN TRUE	USUALLY TRUE	ALWAYS OR ALMOST ALWAYS TRUE

Self-reliant	
Yielding	
Helpful	
Defends own beliefs	
Cheerful	
Moody	
Independent	
Shy	
Conscientious	
Athletic	
Affectionate	
Theatrical	
Assertive	
Flatterable	
Happy	
Strong personality	
Loyal	
Unpredictable	
Forceful	
Feminine	

Reliable	
Analytical	
Sympathetic	
Jealous	
Has leadership abilities	
Sensitive to the needs of others	
Truthful	
Willing to take risks	
Understanding	
Secretive	
Makes decisions easily	
Compassionate	
Sincere	
Self-sufficient	
Eager to soothe hurt feelings	
Conceited	
Dominant	
Soft-spoken	
Likeable	
Masculine	

Warm	
Solemn	
Willing to take a stand	
Tender	
Friendly	
Aggressive	
Gullible	
Inefficient	
Acts as a leader	
Childlike	
Adaptable	
Individualistic	
Does not use harsh language	
Unsystematic	
Competitive	
Loves children	
Tactful	
Ambitious	
Gentle	
Conventional	

Appendix II

Kagen Symbolic Conceptualization Test - Adaption

E will first show S some practice stimuli that are obvious for men or women (e.g. man-lady, family members). E will then administer the 33 test stimuli. A verbal description of the two pictures will be read, for example, "Here is a strong rabbit and here is a weak rabbit. Which one reminds you of your father?".

The verbal descriptions of the 33 pairs of pictures follow:

1. Little boat and big boat.
2. Mouse that knows how to read and mouse that does not know how to read.
3. A lamb and a lion.
4. A clean dog and a dirty dog.
5. Black horse and a white horse.
6. Round shape and a pointed shape.
7. Weak piece of wood and strong piece of wood.
8. Warm fireplace and cold fireplace.
9. Nice cat and mean cat.
10. This shape and that shape.
11. Strong fence that stood up and weak fence that fell down.
12. Little table and big table.
13. Someone covering the cat so that it will be warm and someone not covering the cat.
14. Dog that can do tricks and a dog that can not do tricks.
15. Someone telling the child to go to his/her room and someone not doing this.
16. Clean room and a dirty room.
17. Cold day and a warm day.
18. Mean squirrel and a nice squirrel.
19. This line and that line.
20. Strong plate that did not break and weak plate that did break.
21. Squirrel that does not know where to look for food and a squirrel that does know where to look.
22. Someone yelling at the child and someone not yelling at the child.
23. Crocodile and bird.
24. Dirty pig and clean pig.
25. White telephone and black telephone.
26. Nice cow and mean cow.
27. This design and that design.
28. Strong rope and weak rope.
29. Someone bringing the lamb into the house and someone telling the lamb to go away.
30. A rabbit and a snake.
31. This line and that line.
32. Someone scolding the child and someone not scolding the child.
33. Warm bath and cold bath.

Appendix III

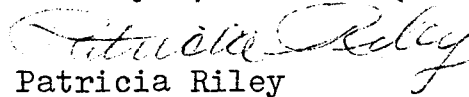
Dear Parent,

I, Patricia Riley, an Honors student in Psychology at the University of Richmond, will be conducting a study at the University's Psychology Department facility. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University and its purpose is to determine if children notice typical adult behaviors and values. The parent(s) will be asked to fill out a values questionnaire. The children will be shown pictures of animals, boats and other objects which are familiar to them. They will be asked if the pictures have any relationship to adults.

The parent(s) must sign the consent form for their questionnaire and their children's observations to be used in this research. Although your names are necessary in order to match parents with children, you are guaranteed complete anonymity. However, if you chose to participate, you may 1) withdraw from the study at any time; 2) ask for the results of the study; 3) make arrangements for an interview with the researcher after you have been informed of the results of the study.

Your time and effort devoted to this study are very much appreciated. Your signature below means that you are giving permission for your questionnaire and for your children's observations to be used in the study.

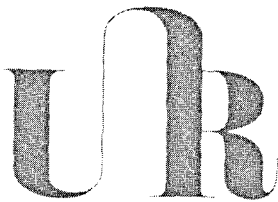
Thank you,


Patricia Riley

Signature: _____

Sex and age of Children: _____

Please check this blank if you would like the results of your questionnaire in addition to the results of the study. _____



Graduate School
Office of the Dean

November 16, 1978

Professor Joanne C. Preston
Department of Psychology
University of Richmond

Dear Joanne:

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to inform you that the proposal of your advisee, Ms. Patricia Riley, "Sex-Role Conceptualizations of Children with Single-Parent Fathers," has been accepted.

There are, however, two suggestions that I would like to make to you as the project adviser. First, it seems to me that the title of the proposal is somewhat misleading. Why "single-parent fathers" if "single-parent mothers" and "dual parents" are also to be included in the study? Second, I would ask you to review carefully with Ms. Riley the explanation of her study on the consent form. Some of her language is very awkward.

Thank you for your cooperation.

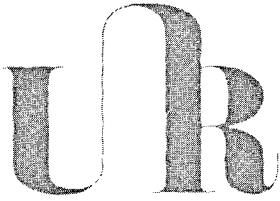
Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, likely belonging to Arthur B. Gunlicks.

Arthur B. Gunlicks, Chairman
Institutional Review Board

ABG/ds

P.S. Please return a revised consent form to me.



Graduate School
Office of the Dean

November 29, 1978

Ms. Patricia A. Riley
Box 5247 W. C.
University of Richmond, Va. 23173

Dear Ms. Riley:

Thank you for your letter of clarification and the much improved revised consent form. We appreciate your prompt response and wish you well in your research project.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Arthur B. Gunlicks".

Arthur B. Gunlicks, Chairman
Institutional Research Board

ABG/ds

cc: Dr. Joanne Preston