PERCEPTIONS OF POSITIVE ATTRIBUTES OF

NEVER-MARRIED SINGLE CUSTODIAL MOTHERS AND FATHERS

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ABSTRACT

The present study examined the differences in the positive perceptions of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers. While the literature documenting the strengths of single parents is very limited, the studies that do exist on this topic have not examined how these positive perceptions differ by gender. Utilizing a feminist framework to determine gender based differences in perceptions, this study examined participants' ideas about the positive attributes of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers. The results of the thematic analysis suggested that the participants' perceptions of never-married single mothers and fathers appeared to be more strongly influenced by gender than single parent status. The results further suggest that the level of expectations were much lower for single fathers when compared with single mothers and that, overall, single mothers were held to a higher standard by participants. Suggestions for future research and clinical implications are also offered.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION

Numerous studies have explored societal perceptions of single parents as a collective group (Bennett & Jamieson, 1999; Goldscheider & Kaufman, 2006; Rhodes & Johnson, 2000; Wang & Ngai, 2011) and much of the literature that exists on single parents has focused on the problems and deficits of these parents and families (Richards & Schmiege, 1993; Wang & Ngai, 2011). For example, Bennett & Jamieson (1999) discovered that never-married single parents were viewed more negatively and less positively than married parents on all five descriptors (i.e., positive traits, negative traits, childrearing ability, family lifestyle, and family of origin) that they examined. These findings are consistent with previous research that has looked at societal perceptions and attitudes toward married and never-married parents and consistently found that single parents are viewed more negatively than any other group of parents (Bryan, Coleman, Ganong, & Bryan, 1986; Ganong, Coleman, & Riley, 1988; Rhodes & Johnson, 2000; Richards & Schmiege, 1993; Usdansky, 2009a). Together with these findings, researchers have suggested that society continues to equate "healthy families" with two-parent families and view single parents negatively (Amato, 2000; Haire & McGeorge, 2012; Richards & Schmiege, 1993). Moreover, research has shown that these societal perceptions matter because individuals who internalize negative stereotypes associated with stigma are more likely to feel shame, hopelessness, and low self-worth (Ganong & Coleman, 1995; Steele and Aronson, 1995). Additionally, only a few researchers have explored what positive societal perceptions of single parents might exist (Cohen, 1995; Ford-Gilboe, 2000; Ford-Gilboe, 1997; Hilton, Desrochers, & Devall, 2001; Kleist, 1999; Richards & Schmiege, 1993; Strom, Fleming, & Daniels, 1984). If these positive perceptions were better known, it might impact how single parents feel about themselves and how they are treated in the larger society.

While negative societal perceptions of single parents as a group have been well documented, the research also suggests that these perceptions vary by the gender of single parent (Bennett & Jamieson, 1999; Bryan et al., 1986; Haire & McGeorge, 2011; Hilton & Devall, 1998). In particular, researchers argue that single mothers are viewed more negatively than single fathers (DeJean, McGeorge, & Carlson, 2012; Ganong et al., 1988; Haire & McGeorge, 2012; Hilton et al., 2001; Jarrett, 1996). For example, DeJean and colleagues (2012) found that never-married custodial single mothers were consistently viewed less positively then never-married custodial single fathers. In addition to these findings, Ganong and Coleman (1995) reported that understanding societal perceptions and stereotypes of single mothers is important because they influence the behavior of single mothers and persons who interact with them. Additionally, never-married single mothers are at an even larger disadvantage due to the socio-historical context and structure of everyday life, which continues to oppress women (Baber & Allen, 1992). While the societal perceptions of single fathers are not as negative, they too can be perceived negatively (Troilo & Coleman, 2008). For instance, Troilo and Coleman (2008) found in their study that never-married single fathers were the most negatively stereotyped group of fathers and are commonly perceived as less hardworking and less successful than other groups of fathers (i.e., married fathers, divorced fathers, adoptive fathers, stepfathers, and gay fathers).

It is interesting to note that societal perceptions of single parents often do not match their self-perceptions. Specifically, researchers exploring the self-perceptions of never-married single fathers (DeMaris & Greif, 1997; Hilton & Devall, 1998) found that they experienced great confidence, high self-esteem, great satisfaction with their role, and perceive that society holds them in high regard. While never-married single mothers perceived themselves as good, competent, proud mothers who embraced their single parent role as a valued identity, they

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reported that society interprets their role in terms of perceived negative attributes (Jarrett, 1994; 1996). Thus, there appears to be a gap between the self-perceptions and societal perceptions of never-married single mothers and fathers. This gap is significant in ways that could impact single mothers' and fathers' own parenting and self-worth. Additionally, these findings raise the question that if societal perceptions of single parents' positive qualities were specifically examined, would there be any similarities between the single parents' self-perceptions and these positive societal perceptions? Furthermore, would these positive perceptions vary by the gender of the single parent?

Exploring societal experiences of single mothers and fathers is important given the increasing numbers of single parent headed households in the United States. This number continues to rise, as a reported 11.7 million single parent families were living with their children in 2009 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Additionally, the majority of never-married single parents are single mothers, with approximately 9.88 million households headed by single mothers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). Thus, there are six times as many single mother households as single father households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). While a considerably smaller group of parents, the number of single father headed households has increased dramatically within the last two decades (Greif, 1996) and is currently growing at an even faster rate than single mother headed households, with 1.74 million households headed by single fathers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). These growing numbers represent a significant shift in household structure and reflect a need to better understand the societal perceptions experienced by this population.

Specifically, it is important to explore the positive perceptions of never-married single mothers and fathers. While past research has tended to focus on the negative perceptions of single parents as a group, it is important to highlight the perceived strengths and positive

attributes of this population. Research has indicated that when individuals internalize negative

societal perceptions, their performance is negatively impacted (Schmader, Johns, & Forbes,

2008). Specifically, Steele and Aronson (1995) found in their study that knowledge about a

prevalent negative stereotype can lead to underperformance of stigmatized individuals and be

used as an explanation for group differences. Perhaps if the societal messages never-married

single mothers and fathers received were more positive in nature, they would have the

opportunity to "perform up" to a more affirming idea of a single mother or father. This idea of

"performing up" to a positive stereotype or set of societal perceptions highlights the need to

more fully document and explore the positive attributes that never-married custodial single

parents are perceived to possess. In addition, researchers have documented that negative societal

beliefs about single mothers and fathers appear to vary by gender (Bennett & Jamieson, 1999;

Bryan et al., 1986). Thus, it could be postulated that the positive beliefs about single mothers and

fathers may differ as well. This research study, therefore, seeks to explore possible discrepancies

in positive societal perceptions of never-married single mothers and fathers.

<div align="center">**Theoretical Framework**</div>

The theoretical framework I used in my exploration of the positive perceptions of single

mothers and fathers was feminism. While there are several definitions and schools of feminism, I

used a definition by hooks (2000), which defines feminism as, "a movement to end sexism,

sexist exploitation, and oppression" (p. 1). In order to expand on this definition of feminism, I

also used three tenets of feminism to guide this study: 1) women are oppressed by powerful

socializing institutions, which construct the way society views families and women's role in both

society and in the family, 2) both women and men are constrained by gender norms, which often

define and limit what are acceptable behaviors for them within family and societal systems, and

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3) women have diverse, valuable experiences that are important to consider and need to inform societal dialogues (Baber & Allen, 1992; hooks, 2000).

Furthermore, the definition of feminism that I used is based on the notion that women and men make individual daily decisions and are affected by the actual and perceived options that are available to them (Baber & Allen, 1992). Baber and Allen (1992) argue that a feminist perspective aims to "make explicit the social forces, often invisible, that influence women's day-to-day experiences" (p. 5). Moreover, a feminist perspective allowed for the critique of the roles that women and men perform based on socially constructed gender norms as well as the critique of the ways in which women and men are perceived in society. A feminist framework provided opportunities for the possibility that women and men deviate outside of societal gender roles and works to limit the impact of negative stereotypes and perceptions for women and men (Baber & Allen, 1992; Enns, 2004; hooks, 2000).

In addition, the feminist framework I used for this study seeks to acknowledge and explore the interlinked oppressions and privileges experienced by women and men that are associated with, but not limited to, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, culture, relationship status, and disability (Enns, 2004). For this study, this idea of interlinked oppressions, also known as intersectionality, is relevant as never-married single mothers experience oppression due to their gender as well as their relationship (i.e., single) and parenting status (Crenshaw, 1989; Enns, 2004; hooks, 2000). Additionally, while never-married single fathers experience male privilege, they also experience oppression due to their relationship and parenting status (Forste, Bartkowski, & Jackson, 2009; Hook & Chalasani, 2008; Nieto, 1990).

In addition to the relevance of intersectionality, feminism as a theoretical framework for this study was appropriate because a feminist perspective allows for the critique and

deconstruction of gender roles as well as a critique of the perceptions of gender roles as they apply to both women and men. Additionally, a theoretical framework of feminism allowed for a discussion of societal perceptions about the idealized family and perceptions placed upon single parent families that suggest a healthy family necessitates two opposite gendered married parents (Amato, 2000; Troilo & Coleman, 2008). Thus, feminism allowed for an exploration of the impact of gender, as well as the impact of perception and perceived perception on never-married single mothers and fathers. Feminism was used to inform each aspect of this proposed study from the review of literature to the interpretation and reporting of the data.

CHAPTER TWO. LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter is divided into two sections: 1) literature review and 2) research question. The literature review focuses on research concerning the positive societal perceptions of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers as well as the self-perceptions of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers. Prior to exploring the existing literature on positive perceptions of single mothers and fathers, I briefly review the literature pertaining to the negative societal perceptions of single parents. The second section of the literature review focuses on the positive perceptions of single parents in general. This set of literature does not specify the gender of the single parent being studied. The third section of the literature review focuses on the research involving the positive societal perceptions of never-married single mothers. The fourth section of the literature review focuses on the research involving the positive societal perceptions of never-married single fathers and in the fifth, and final section, I review the research involving the self-perceptions of never-married single mothers and fathers.

Overview of the Literature on the Negative Societal Perceptions of Single Parents

As the number of single parents continues to rise, unfavorable depictions of these families remain (Usdansky, 2009b). In her study looking at portrayals of never-married single parents and divorced parents, Usdansky (2009a) found that while unfavorable depictions of divorced parents declined over the century, the portrayal of never-married single parents appears to be as unfavorable now as it was at the beginning of the 20th century. Additionally, researchers have continued to document many negative or less positive views of single parents (Bennett & Jamieson, 1999; Bryan et al., 1986; Rhodes & Johnson, 2000) and compared single parents with other groups of parents (e.g., married parents and intact nuclear families) and other marginalized groups (e.g., gay and lesbian parents, people of color, low income parents; Rhodes & Johnson,

2000; Troilo & Coleman, 2008). For example, Bryan and colleagues (1986) reported that never-married single parents were viewed more negatively on five scales that measured constructs such as stability, parental satisfaction, and personal characteristics and security. Similar findings were identified by Bennett and Jamieson (1999), who examined undergraduate students' perceptions of five different parent groups (i.e., married, divorced, stepparent, never-married, and single adults without children) and revealed that never-married parents were perceived as most likely to have poor parenting skills and family relationships.

In addition to the perceived negative attributes of single parent families as a group, Rhodes and Johnson (2000) have found that while single parents are viewed as experiencing hardship, they are less likely to be viewed as victims of oppression. In fact, the hardships faced by single parent families were perceived by research participants as the result of individual choices, rather than the outcome of negative stereotypes around family structures, which disproportionately impacts single parents (Bryan et al., 1986; Rhodes & Johnson, 2000). The failure to recognize social oppression as an incorporated force in the lives of single parents further vilifies their already tainted reputation.

It is important to note that while never-married single parents are consistently scrutinized by society, none of the studies summarized in this section of my literature review that examined perceptions of single parents specified the gender of this single parent. It is important to wonder within my theoretical framework of feminism if the participants in these studies were describing a genderless single parent. Additionally, the high prevalence of single mothers as compared to single fathers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009) may contribute to the envisioning of the genderless single parent as a single mother. Thus, the findings I described about single parents could in fact be descriptors of single mothers.

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Positive Societal Perceptions of Never-Married Single Parents

In the small body of literature that does exist on the strengths of single mothers and fathers, it is important to note that a segment of this literature also does not specify the gender of the single parent. Thus, in this section I will review the literature on positive perceptions of single parents that is focused on single parents as a group and thus, for the most part, can be considered gender non-specific or genderless. Again, while the gender of the single parent was not specified, participants could be making assumptions about gender. For example, Hanson (1986) examined five variables commonly cited in the family literature as indicative of healthy, two-parent families and applied them to 42 single parent families. She found that single parents and their children reported fairly high levels of both physical and mental health, and that good parent-child communication and larger networks of social support were related to favorable health outcomes. Furthermore, Morrison (1995) employed a qualitative methodology to study the strengths of successful single parent families and found that single parents possessed strong networking skills and recognized the importance of developing positive parenting partnerships. This notion that single parents have good networking skills is a common theme throughout the literature on positive societal perceptions of single parents (Barry, 1979; Lewis, 1978; Jarrett, 1996). It is also noted in the literature that family structure was found to be less important than the proximate influences of the parent-child relationship (e.g., closeness, bonding between parent and child) in defining the strengths that single parents possess (Kleist, 1999; Morrison, 1995).

In addition to these studies conducted by Hanson (1986) and Morrison (1995), Barry (1979) surveyed 25 voluntary single parents about their positive family experiences—five single fathers and 20 single mothers—and found that these parents possessed clear boundaries and rules in the home and perceived the relationship quality between themselves and their children as

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"unusually positive," (Barry, 1979, p. 67) which alludes to the idea that this researcher might have assumed that single parents experience more negative interactions than two parent, intact families (Bryan et al., 1986; Rhodes & Johnson, 2000; Usdansky, 2009a). A final finding on positive perceptions of single mothers and fathers was identified by Rhodes and Johnson (2000), who found that while single-parent families were not perceived to experience oppression, a few of their study participants were able to identify strengths within this population; however, these researchers did not report the specific strengths that their participants identified. Furthermore, these researchers discussed that no inherent deficiency or dysfunction exists in single parent families, but that their struggles are a result of "a society that privileges traditional, nuclear families" (p. 444).

Positive Societal Perceptions of Single Mothers

There is very little research that documents the perceived positive attributes of single mothers (Atwood & Genovese, 2006; Bennett & Jamieson, 1999; Brodsky, 1996; Taylor, Larsen-Rife, Conger, Widaman, & Cutrona, 2010). Within my theoretical framework of feminism, it is important to wonder if this lack of documentation is due to the powerful socializing institutions (i.e., patriarchy), which fails to document the histories and experiences of women and fails to see women who exist outside of defined societal norms in a positive light (Enns, 2004). It is important to note that the few research findings that do highlight the positive societal perceptions of single mothers continue to be driven by the "good mother" stereotype, which involves the culturally proscribed belief that in order to be successful in the role of a mother, a woman must spend time with her children and put others' needs ahead of her own (Mottarella, Fritzsche, Whitten, & Bedsole, 2009). Additionally Hare-Mustin and Broderick (1979) describe the powerful "myth of motherhood" which contributes to totalizing effects of

mothers as either all good (e.g., loving, kind, patient) or all bad (e.g., cold, rejecting, controlling). This idea is particularly relevant to single mothers as they may experience additional stigmas related to performing the constrained gender norms of both "mother" (i.e., domestic responsibilities) and "father" (i.e., paid, occupational responsibilities) and thus, be labeled "all bad" for stepping outside of gender norms.

While it is important to note that some of the researchers did not intend to search for positive societal perceptions of single mothers specifically, a few perceptions have been identified nonetheless. Specifically, Brodsky (1996) collected a sample of 10 single mothers raising their children in an inner city neighborhood, all of whom were identified as resilient by school personnel (i.e., principals, teachers, staff, etc.) based upon their abilities to thrive and raise children in difficult circumstances. Additionally, Atwood and Genovese (2006) reported that single mothers possess the ability to design their own plan for success and skillfully utilize various support networks as they balance work and family life. Furthermore, while the status of single motherhood continues to carry stigma, Bennett and Jamieson (1999) discussed that parental status should not be an over-determining factor for societal perception, which could suggest that never-married single mothers can be acknowledged and appreciated for other facets in their lives and that their status as single parents should not define them.

<div align="center">**Positive Societal Perceptions of Single Fathers**</div>

In addition to the very limited research on the positive societal perceptions of single mothers, findings reported in the literature suggested that societal perceptions of single fathers emphasize the perceptions that single fathers may be incapable of raising children (Bennett & Jamieson, 1999; Greif, 1995; Troilo & Coleman, 2008). It is important to note that these societal stereotypes based on gender are harmful and disservice both men and women, as they often limit

the capacity for men to care and nurture their children. In addition, many dynamics of single

parenthood have largely been made synonymous with single motherhood (Emmers-Sommer,

Rhea, Triplett, & O'Neil, 2003; Strom et al., 1984). Single fatherhood, however, remains a

distinctive, growing, and often invisible trend in the United States (Emmers-Sommer et al.,

2003). Strom and colleagues (1984) found in a quantitative study comparing married fathers with

single custodial fathers who identified as sole caregivers of their children that single fathers

exhibited greater child-rearing strengths "than our society has been led to expect" (p. 86), which

alludes to the societal perception of single fathers as incapable of raising children (Bennett &

Jamieson, 1999; Greif, 1995; Troilo & Coleman, 2008). Strom et al. (1984) also found that single

fathers as compared to married fathers were more supportive of their children's creative

behavior, more tolerant of immaturity in their children, more willing to be interrupted by

children, and more relaxed when playing with their children. From my feminist framework, these

findings are encouraging as society often limits fathering to their capacity to financially support

and discipline their children and, thus, fails to consider the caring, nurturing qualities fathers

possess. Indeed, fathers have been increasingly encouraged to be further involved in child

rearing (Muhammad & Gagnon, 2010). Furthermore, Strom and colleagues' (1984) findings

expand this definition of fatherhood to include direct playful interactions with children.

Positive Self-Perceptions of Single Mothers and Fathers

While this proposed study is focused on positive societal perceptions of single parents, it

is also important to be cognizant of the positive self-perceptions that single parents report.

Researchers who have studied the positive self-perceptions of single mothers and fathers are

often prompted by the primarily negative and problem-focused literature on single parent

families (Hanson, 1986; Shaw, 1991). As previously mentioned, the lack of strength-based

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literature on single parents may be due to the societal emphasis on the two-parent, opposite gender family as ideal (Amato, 2000; Richards & Schmiege, 1993). Nonetheless, literature has shown that single mothers and fathers have held onto positive self-perceptions despite the stigmatizing environment surrounding this family structure. Specifically, interviews with never-married, African American single mothers receiving welfare revealed that in spite of the judgment that often accompanies women who bear children outside of marriage, these single mothers maintained the belief that not only were they responsible caregivers to their children, they were also competent mothers who did not need a man's assistance in order to be an effective parent (Jarrett, 1996). In fact, some never-married single mothers in this sample reported that their ability to manage multiple obstacles of single motherhood under the adverse conditions of poverty actually raised their status, despite the stigmatizing environment (Jarrett, 1996). Additional self-perceptions of single mothers have been reported which include positive attitudes regarding personal and ideological dimensions; specifically, these single mothers are reporting that they have a high potential for happiness and experience decreased stigma (Katz, 1998). This sample of single mothers perceived that economic well-being, employment, and self-esteem facilitated their positive self-perceptions (Katz, 1998).

In addition to these positive self-perceptions of single mothers, Shaw (1991) interviewed 25 separated and divorced single mothers on their experiences of single parenthood and found that all mothers expressed positive feelings about being a single parent and felt that their emotional gains counteracted the more negative feelings and experiences associated with single parenthood. In particular, these participants described emotional gains in terms of independence, self-esteem, confidence, and the pride they felt in successfully parenting their children by themselves (Shaw, 1991). In addition to the emotional gains single mothers experienced,

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qualitative interviews revealed that a negative psychological sense of community is actually adaptive and has led to positive outcomes for single mothers who perceived their community to be a threat (Taylor et al., 2010). Thus, the unique ability for single mothers to form meaningful relationships also means discerning when networks may not be as helpful (Atwood & Genovese, 2006).

Positive self-perceptions of single parent families also extend to the children of single parents, as Amato (1987) found that adolescents living in single parent families reported experiencing higher levels of autonomy than adolescents in other family types and were more likely to assume household responsibilities. The development of autonomy is especially relevant given that independence is a highly valued personal trait in Western cultures and can be viewed by single parent families as an important survival skill (Amato, 2000; Richards & Schmiege, 1993). In addition, Morrison (1995) explored the strengths that make single parents unique and distinct and reported that single parent families, as a group, identified having less conflict and tension in the home as a result of two adults no longer living together. In particular, single parents reported their families to be more cohesive, flexible and adaptable to change (Kleist, 1999; Morrison, 1995). Single parents were also found to be actively engaged in renegotiating their status in society as single parents and were dedicated to challenging the negative societal perceptions associated with single parenthood (Shaw, 1991).

In addition to positive self-perceptions of single parents as a group, Nieto (1990) found that single fathers perceived that society views them favorably, despite the high frequency of negative societal perceptions about single fathers, which are documented in the literature (Pichitino, 1983; Troilo & Coleman, 2008). In addition, the self-reported well-being of single fathers has been found to be directly positively affected by economic status (Cohen, 1995),

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which could highlight a significant gap in wage earnings between single mothers and fathers. Indeed, Amato (2000) has noted that children in single father families have a higher standard of living than children in single mother families, suggesting that single mother families appear to be even further marginalized, in addition to their status as a single parent due to the intersectionality between gender and class (Crenshaw, 1989; hooks, 2000). Moreover, single fathers have positively described their relationship with their children as being close and affectionate (Emmers-Sommer, et al., 2003; Pichitino, 1983). Thus, if single fathers do perceive that society views them positively, the existence of these negative perceptions may not impact the single fathers as personally. Finally, this self-perception literature may or may not mirror research exploring positive societal perceptions of single mothers and fathers; however, given the lack of empirical research on positive societal perceptions, these studies provide some insight for this proposed thesis.

Research Question

Given my literature review, it is clear that previous studies have neither examined positive societal perceptions nor compared the perceived positive attributes of never-married custodial single mothers to never-married custodial single fathers. Thus, the purpose of this study is to explore the positive societal perceptions of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers and how those perceptions vary by gender, which will be examined using the following research question: how do the perceived positive attributes of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers vary?

CHAPTER THREE. METHOD

This chapter will be divided into the following sections: (1) participants, including recruitment strategies and a description of the sample, (2) data collection, and (3) data analysis, describing feminist thematic analysis, which will be used to analyze the data.

Participants

Participant Recruitment

This study utilized secondary data from a larger vignette study of societal perceptions of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers. The data for the larger study were collected using a variety of recruitment methods such as: (1) professional and community email listservs, (2) announcements on television stations, and (3) fliers posted throughout a Mid-western community. It is important to note that these efforts focused on recruiting a sample from across the United States.

Sample Description

These recruitment strategies led to a larger dataset which consisted of 873 participants, with 428 participants completing the single father version of the survey and 445 participants completing the single mother version of the survey. Most participants were White and women. The age range for the single mother version of the survey was 18 to 75 years ($M = 30.67$; $SD = 12.64$), while the age range for the single father version of the survey was 18 to 74 years ($M = 30.72$; $SD = 13.42$). The majority of the participants were not parents themselves, as over 60% of the sample reporting they did not have children. However, the participants that did report having children ranged from 1 to 13 children ($M = .89$, $SD = 1.47$) for the single father version of the survey and 1 to 8 children ($M = .86$, $SD = 1.32$) for the single mother version of the survey. The majority of the participants also reported that they had never been single parents themselves. The

sub-sample of participants that did report being a single parent either currently or in the past responded that they had held this role for an average of 8 to 9 years, but ranged from 1 to 28 years for the single father version of the survey and 0.5 to 56 years for the single mother version of the survey. The samples are further described in Table 1.

Data Collection

Procedure

The data for the proposed study comes from a larger study that examined societal perceptions of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers utilizing a vignette, self-report survey instruments, and open ended questions. Thus, this proposed study will use secondary data. This data were collected using an electronic survey. In particular, participants received an email asking them to participate, which included a link to the on-line survey. If participants chose to click on the provided link, they were first presented with an informed consent document followed by a vignette about either a single mother or father. The participants were then asked to complete three self-report survey instruments that asked about their beliefs about never-married custodial single mothers or fathers which was followed by a series of demographic questions. Finally, participants were asked to complete three open ended questions. If they chose to submit their electronic survey, then informed consent was implied. Participants were also provided with the opportunity to enter a drawing for one of four Target gift cards. Finally, it is important to note that the larger study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at North Dakota State University.

Measure

The measure for this proposed study is one of the three open ended questions that was asked at the end of the larger survey. In particular, that question asked: "What do you see as the strengths of single mothers (fathers)?"

<div align="center">**Data Analysis**</div>

I used feminist thematic analysis to analyze the secondary data for this study. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe theoretical thematic analysis as a flexible, primary method for qualitative analysis, which is rooted in constructions paradigms. In particular, thematic analysis can be defined as "a method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data set in (rich) detail" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79). Specifically, utilizing a feminist theoretical thematic analysis involved coding the data in a detailed manner that remained attentive to gender based differences in how society perceives men and women. Additionally, as I familiarized myself with the data and generated codes, I remained aware of the societal beliefs and constrained gender norms which often define and limit "acceptable" behaviors for women and men (Baber & Allen, 1992; hooks, 2000). This feminist lens allowed me to be cognizant of the reinforced idealized norm of the two parent, opposite-gender family structure, as well as the harsher judgments that are made about single mothers (i.e., mother blaming) when compared to involved single fathers, who are more likely to be seen as heroic. Thus, I was informed by my feminist framework as I analyzed the data, reported the results, and interpreted the findings in the discussion.

I began the data analysis by immersing myself within the data, reading it twice in an effort to develop a "knowing of the data," and a third time with a feminist lens (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Specifically, I was mindful of my own internalized sexism and how that impacted my

interpretation of the data. As I remained informed by my feminist framework, I then searched for meaningful patterns in an effort to identify features of the data that represent possible differences between the descriptions of single mothers' and fathers' positive attributes. Here, it was important that I was attentive to the ways in which study participants described positive attributes of single mothers and fathers. For instance, societal structures and beliefs might have influenced me to applaud single custodial fathers for actions that represented the minimal care for children (e.g., feeding them dinner), while scrutinizing single custodial mothers for actions that go above and beyond that of single fathers. As I searched for meaningful patterns, I began to identify codes or salient ideas that both represented meanings that existed throughout the data or that seemed particularly important to understand an idea shared by a participant. As I identified codes I wrote these codes in the margins next to the segment of text that were represented by the code. These codes reflected the language of my participants. After I initially coded the data, I then met with my advisor for a peer debriefing to add more credibility to the coding process and maintain my feminist informed framework to guide the analysis (Daly, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). During this peer debriefing we reviewed my codes and the segments of the data I linked to each code. Throughout the peer debriefings, I made conscious efforts to remain aware of my own internalized sexism and how this biased lens may have impacted my interpretation of the data and codes.

Following the peer debriefings, I re-read the data and linked codes which consisted of related material in an effort to identify categories that represented differences in participants' perceptions of single mothers and fathers. Categories are larger schemes or ideas which identify relevant features of the data and distinguish group differences (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At this point I met my advisor again for a peer debriefing and discussed the categories I identified. After

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my advisor and I agreed on these categories, I identified themes and sub-themes. Themes are patterns across the entire data set and sub-themes are essentially "themes-within-a-theme" which can be useful in creating more structure within a particularly large and complex theme (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 92). I then met with my advisor for another peer debriefing session where we discussed the themes and sub-themes that we both felt existed within the data. Once we agreed on the themes and sub-themes, I then selected verbatim quotes to illustrate each theme and sub-theme.

CHAPTER FOUR. RESULTS

I was encouraged to find that participants provided a large number of positive diverse responses when asked to describe both single mothers and fathers. Specifically, participants identified qualities of love, care, responsibility, dedication, independence, and motivation to be a good parent as positive attributes for both never-married custodial single mothers and fathers. For example, one participant reported when describing a single mother, "It's amazing that anyone can raise children, especially alone and/or while working. It takes tons of hard work and flexibility and personal strength." Another participant described single mothers as "[having a] good work ethic, strong love for their children and an inner drive to work as hard as they need to provide a good life for their children." One participant revealed a personal account from observing single fathers: "From my experience, single fathers do very well with raising their children. They are responsive to their needs and care deeply about their well being." These quotations illustrate that single mothers and fathers can be and are viewed positively in spite of the negative rhetoric that has largely surrounded this group.

It is also important to note that while majority of responses from my participants were about positive attributes of never-married single mothers and fathers, there was a small sub-sample of responses for both single mothers and fathers which stated that participants perceived no strengths in these groups of parents. Specifically, several participants simply replied, "none," "not many strengths," and "No particular strengths relative to the general population. Most single mothers are the result of bad judgment/accidental pregnancy rather than a strong decision to have children without a father." Although these quotations comprised a small portion of the data, it is apparent that negative societal perceptions of never-married single mothers and fathers persist. Finally, this sub-group of responses seemed particularly important to highlight given that the

prompt the participants responded to was "what do you see as the strengths of single mothers (fathers)?"

Utilizing the process of feminist thematic analysis, I identified four categories that each represented differences in participants' perceptions of the positive attributes of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers. The categories were: (1) single mothers and fathers provide differently for their children, (2) societal stigma is stronger for single fathers, (3) single fatherhood is more of a choice than single motherhood, and (4) single fathers have to be mothers, and single mothers have to balance multiple roles, but do not necessarily need to be fathers. Each of these categories is discussed below as well as the themes and sub-themes that comprised each category. The themes and sub-themes will be illustrated with verbatim quotations from the data. After discussing these four categories, I end this chapter by exploring a group of responses that do not represent a difference between how never-married single mothers and fathers are perceived, but yet seemed important to explore. Specifically, this final group represented the idea that attributes describing never-married single mothers and fathers cannot be generalized to all single mothers and fathers. In particular, a group of participants noted that each single mother and father has different strengths and weaknesses and that positive attributes depended on the individual parent.

Single Mothers and Fathers Provide Differently for Their Children

Participants commented on the idea that single mothers and fathers support their children in diverse ways and address their needs using different approaches. While the specific needs of children were not identified, the ideas on how to meet children's needs varied based on the gender the single parent. Thus, this category is comprised of three themes and six sub-themes. The first theme is that single mothers provide skills such as organization, resourcefulness, and

time management, while single fathers provide income. The first part of this theme related to single mothers providing skills is illustrated by the following quotations, "… [single mothers are] able to do lots of tasks around their households, have to be able to wear many hats;" and "Highly motivated, organized, multi-tasker." Participants defined tasks, or skills, in four primary ways which represent a sub-theme within this larger theme. The sub-theme is that single mothers provide self-sufficiency, time management, resourcefulness, and organization skills. The quotations that illustrate this sub-theme appear to focus on single mothers' capacity to multi-task around the home and perform several household duties at once. This sub-theme is illustrated by the following quotations: "They learn to be resourceful and to make good use of the time and talents available to them;" "They learn how to keep up and manage things that they need and have to do for themselves and their children to stay alive;" "Organized in order to complete all tasks;" and "They truly have to be a super mom and juggle the kids and work." These quotations illustrated a belief that the positive attributes single mothers possess revolved around their ability to multi-task several responsibilities while managing their own lives as well as the lives of their children. Additionally, it is possible that participants viewed women through an essentialist lens that assumes them to be naturally better at managing the home than men (Silverstein, 1999; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1996). My feminist framework allowed me to infer that the lens of essentialism through which participants appeared to view single mothers led them to define the standards for single mothers as someone who is overloaded with tasks, successful both inside and outside the home, and expected to continuously manage the well-being of others (Enns, 2004; hooks, 2000). Additionally, it is important to wonder whether the reported positive attributes of single mothers were specific to their status as single parent, or are actually

representing beliefs about all mothers as a group. Thus, this finding could have reflected beliefs about women as a group as opposed to being specifically about single mothers.

The second half of the theme "single fathers provide income" reflected another way in which single parents support their children. This part of the theme is demonstrated by the following quotation, "If they're good fathers they should work hard to provide for their family…" Specifically for single fathers, a differentiating positive attribute when they compared with single mothers that participants identified appeared to be their ability to provide financial support for children and that being a single father meant to participants that he likely earned a higher income than a single mother, which represents the sub-theme of this larger theme. This sub-theme is illustrated by the following quotations, "[single fathers] don't struggle with the same financial problems as single mothers;" "[single fathers are] able to earn a better living than single mothers;" and "men get paid more than women so children of single fathers do better financially than children of single mothers." Again, it appeared that participants are using a essentialist framework to associate earning an income outside the home with single fathers may not be about their single parent status, but rather a belief about essentialist nature of gender. My feminist framework led me to wonder if the participants' comments about single fathers as financial providers are a product of an oppressive patriarchal system that narrowly defines the roles of men and thus, limits their responsibilities to being the traditional breadwinner (Enns, 2004; hooks, 2000).

The second theme under the category of single mothers and fathers provide differently for their children was that single fathers provide a good male role model. This theme is illustrated by the following quotations, "…the father figure is very important;" it is important for children to have a positive male influence in their lives…;" and "providing a positive male role

model to his children." Several of my participants simply shared that single fathers provide a good male role; however, it is interesting to note that none of those participants defined what this unquestioned assumption of a good male role model was, but they knew it was important for children. In addition, no participants commented on the importance of children having a good female role model. Thus, my feminist framework allowed me to interpret this vague mention of "good male role model" without specific detail as a gender social stereotype where all fathers have skills that are stereotypically masculine (e.g., strong, tough, disciplinarian), but do not need to be defined in order to be seen as valuable. In addition, while not providing a definition of a good male model, participants identified two other qualities that single fathers provide their children which represent two sub-themes within this larger theme. The first sub-theme is that single fathers are playful. The quotations that illustrate this sub-theme appear to focus on the belief that fathers are more socially accepted as playmates for their children and contribute a "fun" component to their parenting role. They were exemplified by the following quotations, "They focus on the children having fun in their lives;" "[Single fathers] may be more likely to encourage kids to try new things, particularly those activities that are more physical, such as sports—hunting, fishing, camping, hiking, plus the standard team sports;" and "Fathers, I think, tend to be quite activity/fun oriented and this can be good." A theoretical based interpretation of this theme led me to wonder whether participants' views of men bringing physical activity to their children's lives was "enough" for society to still perceive single fathers as "good," while simultaneously evading detailed description. Thus, the idea that fathers contributed to their children's lives through play is part of a larger essentialist discourse about the roles of men and women (Silverstein, 1996; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). When fathers, in general, are described this is one of the two roles they are frequently assigned (i.e., playmate) so this sub-

theme may or may not say something unique about perceptions of single fathers, but may instead reflect societal beliefs about fathers being playmates for their children (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). My feminist framework allowed me to suggest that this description of single fathers as solely being a playmate is problematic as it not only limits the roles single fathers can fulfill in the lives of their children, but also allows for single fathers to remain childlike and still be perceived positively in their role.

The second sub-theme, under this theme of single fathers providing a good male role model, is their ability to be a disciplinarian and exert authority over children. This sub-theme is illustrated by the following quotations: "[single fathers are] viewed as responsible, command respect, and therefore can exert authority over children…can keep them somewhat in check;" "strong command structure;" and "single fathers also tend to be somewhat more consistent with discipline than single mothers." These quotations appeared to illustrate the participants' views that single fathers excel at discipline and that it is natural for them to exercise power/control over their children and have their children comply with duties and demands. Again, this sub-theme illustrates one of the narrowly defined ways in which fathers are represented, namely that of disciplinarian. Thus, my feminist framework makes it possible to interpret these perceptions about single fathers being responsible for providing financial assistance, physical play, and discipline as further examples that my participants appear to be using an essentialist lens, which led them to identify and define the tasks women and men perform as natural abilities.

The third theme under the category of single mothers and fathers provide differently for their children is that single mothers provide a model of how to work hard and prioritize children. This theme is illustrated by the following quotations, "[single mothers are] capable, strong, willing to work hard, will give up a lot for their child/children;" "Single mothers are strong-

willed, independent, and hard workers. They pass these characteristics onto their children who see what they sacrifice to be good mothers;" "They have a tremendous ability to continually press forward through hard times on behalf of their children;" and "They have strong work ethics, they work hard to provide for their kids." These quotations that comprised the theme that single mothers provide a model of how to work hard and prioritize children were further represented by two sub-themes: single mothers want their children to be independent and have a better life than they had, and single mothers sacrifice for their children and put themselves last. The first sub-theme was illustrated by the following quotations, "They [single mothers] learn to be independent and teach their children to be this way also;" "good work ethic, strong love for their children and an inner drive to work as hard as they need to provide a good life for their children;" "[single mothers] often possess a great desire to raise their children to be successful;" and "Single mothers tend to be hard workers. They want what is best for their children and want them to have a good life in spite of being raised by only one parent." A theoretical interpretation of this theme could interpret these perceptions through considering the historical context of women's experiences of oppression within powerful socializing structures (e.g., the family), which may contribute to their desire to raise their children to be autonomous, self-sustaining individuals who do not need to rely on another person to survive. Moreover, the second sub-theme, single mothers sacrifice for their children and put themselves last, demonstrates a belief that good mothers must be "other-centered" and continuously place their own needs behind those of the children. The following quotations illustrate this subtheme, "Their children are their main focus;" "children [are] the most important parts of their lives;" and "[single mothers] care fiercely for their children." Additionally, one participant reflected on her own position as a single mother, stating, "Even though I am a working, single mother, I spend the free time that I do have

with the children." Moreover, it appeared that participants perceived that in order to be successful in the role of a single mother, she must spend the little free time she does have with her children and not worry about fulfilling her own needs. Thus, this culturally proscribed idea aligns with the "good mother" stereotype, which lends to the proposal that once a woman becomes a mother, any former identity is no longer relevant and any individual need should be ignored (Mottarella et al., 2009).

Societal Stigma is Stronger for Single Fathers than Mothers

When describing the positive attributes of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers, participants commented on the belief that societal stigma is more present for single men caring for children than for single mothers. The notion that single fathers experience more stigma due to their parenting status represented the second category in my findings. It is also important to note that the ideas in this category supported a belief that never-married custodial single fathers go above and beyond in their role as parents because they are less socially accepted when compared with single custodial mothers. Additionally, this category which includes four themes represented the idea that single fathers are somehow more courageous than single mothers because of their ability to withstand this more socially undesirable perceived status. Again, this scheme embodies the larger idea that mothering is expected and fathering is optional.

The first theme within this category addressed the concern that single fathers must overcome the societal stereotypes of being a single male with children. The following quotations illustrated this theme, "They must overcome prejudices of being a single male with children;" and "[single fathers are] overcoming some of society's misconceptions that they are more helpless than single mothers." These quotations that comprise the theme that single fathers must triumph over the societal stereotype of being a single male with children may have impacted how

single fathers are viewed in society. For example, single fathers may receive more sympathy or compassion from others due to the belief that they encounter everyday hardship because of their gender and parenting status. On the other hand, single fathers' parenting abilities could be underestimated due to the belief that there are basic caretaking skills that single fathers do not inherently possess. From my feminist perspective, it is possible to infer that this underestimation or low expectation of single fathers could serve as a benefit (low bar) or disadvantage as people may also assume a level of incompetence.

Within this category of societal stigma being stronger for single fathers was also the theme that single motherhood is more socially accepted than single fatherhood. The following quotation illustrated this theme: "Single mothers are more 'socially accepted' in today's society." It is also interesting to note that there was a lack of responses about single mothers' experiencing societal stigma due to their parenting status which may be interpreted as single motherhood being so normative that this stigma does not need to be mentioned or is irrelevant. A theoretical interpretation of this theme allowed me to suggest that women are commonly associated with caring for children and that single custodial motherhood is unquestionable, whereas single custodial fatherhood is a rarity. Moreover, the stigma associated with single mothers having low socioeconomic status and living in or near poverty is so ingrained in our culture that these beliefs (stigma) are seen as truths as opposed to negative societal beliefs or perceptions about single mothers. For example, one participant noted that a positive attribute of single mothers was their "ability to care for children responsibly and with love and also work, usually at a low income job." This participant goes on to share the assumption that single mothers were dependent on the financial support they received from the federal program Women Infants and Children (WIC).

The third theme in the overall category of societal stigma being stronger for single fathers is the notion that single fathers are exceptional in their roles as single parents due to the idea that single fatherhood is perceived as a rarity or not part of the norm. Moreover, the idea that never-married single custodial fathers are different and stand up for what they believe because their single parenting status is uncommon situates this theme in the context of stigma. This theme is illustrated by the following quotations: "At least they are there for their kids and not in foster care;" "They must love their children a lot to dedicate themselves to raising them alone;" "At least they are keeping in touch and taking care of them instead of ignoring them;" "more careful with infants;" "more responsible;" "more active;" and "more reliable." On the same token, participants also articulated the idea that single fathers are brave and audacious because of their ability to take on the role of single fatherhood. The following quotations illustrated this aspect of the theme that single fathers are exceptional, "I think especially since society looks down upon it, to be a single father takes courage;" and "I see the courage to be different and stand up for what you believe in;" and "the courage to be a single father and not give the children up;" These quotations appear to illustrate the notion that not only is single fatherhood noteworthy and extraordinary, single fatherhood also requires a degree of boldness and determination because it is not the norm. The feminist framework that guides this study led me to believe that the societal perception that single fathers are exceptional merely for existing are often guided by patriarchal values and beliefs which often restrict the abilities of fathers and undermine their capacities for nurturing and caretaking. In contrast, single mothers were not noted by my participants as having exceptional nurturing skills and abilities, which leads to the larger idea that these skills are inherent and thus, their identity is not as stigmatized. However, when single mothers do not possess exceptional nurturing skills and abilities they can be harshly judged.

The fourth and final theme under the category of societal stigma being stronger for single fathers is that single mothers can withstand the prejudice against them because they are the norm. It is interesting to note that while single custodial fathers were perceived as exceptional and different for their single parent roles, single custodial mothers were assumed to be able to endure the stigma associated with their parenting status due to the idea that society is already accustomed to single mothers caring for children and thus, they are neither exceptional nor different. This theme is illustrated by the following quotations, "ability to cope with problems and family;" "ability to withstand the prejudice against them and their use of WIC;" and "They have to learn to be very strong. Others may look down on them, and that they may make them want to work even harder to achieve their goals, even with a child." While these quotations illustrated a perception of single mothers being able to cope with the prejudice they may experience, what may be even more important to highlight is the fact that within my data there were very few quotations that dealt with the fact that single mothers experience stigma. This is in stark contrast to the large number of quotations about stigma towards single fathers. Again, this theme may illustrate the notion that single mothers experience some level of acceptance; however, it is important to note that this acceptance may not be fully positive as it assumes single custodial mothers should be able to endure and experience shame and blame from society.

Single Fatherhood is More of a Choice than Single Motherhood

While describing the positive attributes of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers, participants alluded to the idea that being a single father is a distinct, concrete choice or decision and that single motherhood was not. There are two themes in this category and the first theme is that fathering is optional and mothering is necessary. The notion that single fathers have the privilege to choose their role as a father, which also means they have the right to "opt out" of

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parenting suggests that fathering is optional, which represents the first half of the this theme. The following quotations illustrate this theme, "…they choose to keep their children regardless of circumstances, and raise them, while so many other unmarried fathers walk away from their situation;" "…it seems more likely that a man would choose this role as opposed to being forced into it;" "easy to leave, but chose to stay;" "they [single fathers] care enough about their children to choose to raise them;" and "they are willing to do what a lot of other men would not even think of doing." The second half of the theme—mothering is necessary—explained a gender distinction regarding who is held responsible for parenting. It is interesting to note that none of my study participants mentioned that single mothers actively choose to parent their children or have the right to not parent (i.e., opt out). Thus, it is possible to interpret this lack of commentary as an underlying societal assumption that mothers are inherent, natural caretakers and that fathers *can* be caretakers for their children, but only if they desire to take on this role and if the mother is unavailable. This part of the theme is demonstrated by the following quotations, "They [single fathers] must care more than the mother about the kids. The mother must have been bad not to have custody;" "They [single fathers] may put more effort into parenting because they know their children lack a mother. They [single fathers] may try to make up for their children's loss;" and "they [single mothers] have to do everything on their own." The idea that children must have a mother and if they do not, a terminal or extreme situation preceded the current status can be explained by the societal perception that mothering is compulsory or essential; again this idea is solely due to gender schemas. Additionally, the feminist framework that guided this study led me to wonder whether the choice single fathers have in parenting or not parenting their children further elevates them.

Within this theme are two sub-themes about single fathers' dedication to their role as a father, in addition to it being difficult for single fathers to earn custody of their children. The first sub-theme is illustrated by the following quotations, "highly dedicated;" "I think single fathers who are involved in the life of their child are strong enough to overcome many hurdles and they must persevere through it all;" "They [single fathers] seem to be hard-working and loving and always trying to do their best to make things work out;" and "They try so hard to be good parents." The second sub-theme describing the how difficult it is for single fathers to earn custody, is illustrated by the following quotations, "Most single fathers have to fight to have custody of their children so they are often dedicated and loving;" and "[single fathers are] dedicated because they have a harder time becoming the custodial parent." These quotations suggested that because it is more difficult (and rare) for single fathers to be granted custody of their children, that these single fathers must be especially dedicated in order to earn (or want) custody of their children.

The second theme under the category, single fatherhood is more of an active choice than single motherhood, is that single fathers are willing to parent (i.e., make an active choice) and single mothers must parent. Here, the notion that single fathers are agreeable toward parenting can imply the notion that parenting is somehow voluntary for single fathers and that single fathers who do parent are actively choosing to do so. In contrast, single mothers do not have this same luxury of *choosing* to come forward, but rather, were perceived by my participants as individuals whose act of parenting is a fundamental duty. Due to this perceived obligatory responsibility, it appeared that single motherhood was less of a choice (or even, not a choice at all). This overall theme is illustrated by the following quotation, "Most single mothers are the result of bad judgment/accidental pregnancy rather than a strong decision to have children

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without a father." This quotation demonstrated the idea that single women have no authority in the decision making process to have or parent a child, but rather, it is an event that happens to them in a passive sense under unfortunate conditions. Here, it is possible to infer from my participant's comment that single motherhood might actually be interpreted in a judgmental, stigmatized manner, rather than in an affirming, empowering sense. Additionally, it is possible to wonder whether having an affirmed, socially supported identity impacts the self-worth of the parent. Indeed, research has shown the opposite notion that single mothers who internalize negative stereotypes are more likely to feel shame, hopelessness, and low self-worth (Ganong & Coleman, 1995; Steele and Aronson, 1995). Thus, it is important to note that *choosing* (to parent), or lack thereof, may inform never-married custodial single parents about their sense of self-worth.

The first sub-theme under the second theme in this category, single fathers are willing to parent (active choice) and single mothers must parent, was that single fathers possess adequate levels of care about their children in order to raise them. This sub-theme can be illustrated by the following quotations, "They [single fathers] care enough about their children to choose to raise them;" "I think that if they [single fathers] are taking care of the children then they must be very caring and loving;" and "You simply cannot be in a position like that depicted in the story above [vignette about a fictional single father] without having uppermost in your mind your love for your kids and your responsibility for and to them." These quotations that illustrated this sub-theme appear to focus on the quality of care single fathers possess and the fact that they have *enough* of this characteristic in order to be suitable parents. It is important to wonder from a feminist framework, however, how much (care) is "enough" or required from single fathers, and is this level of care the same for single custodial mothers? Furthermore, this notion of "enough"

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care lends itself to the inquisition of whether society sets the level of expectation too low for single fathers when compared to single mothers?

The final sub-theme under the larger category, single fatherhood is more of a choice than single motherhood, is that single mothers are primary, inherent nurturers. The following quotations illustrated this sub-theme, "they [single mothers] generally have a better idea of how to raise child(ren) than a single father would;" "primary nurturer;" "their standard is the standard for the household;" and "they do it all." In addition, one study participant who identified as a single mother commented, "When the children need something, it is me who is there for them. When homework needs to be completed in the evening, it is me who is helping. When a lesson is learned by one of my children, 99% of the time, it is me who taught that lesson. I wouldn't change a thing." All of these quotations exemplified the notion that single mothers are central caregivers and predominant givers of the necessities for existence. Thus, a theoretical interpretation of this sub-theme led me to believe that this encapsulating description of single mothers as inherent nurturers can be explained not by biology but by gender specific social stereotypes which default to not only single mothers, but to all women. In turn, these narrowing views by which participants perceived single mothers (e.g., inherent, primary caregivers) often limit their capabilities and characteristic traits to the traditional gender role of the gentle, all-loving, non-competitive, self-sacrificing and care-giving mother with little to no allowance of gender variation. Again, this essentialist lens my participants appeared to use to identify the strengths of never-married custodial single mothers led them to infer that women are naturally better at caring for children and making personal sacrifices. These narrowing views may also set single mothers up for critique when they fail to be superior nurturers; thus, these critiques may

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raise the bar to an extraordinary level for these women and lead to greater critique of their parenting overall.

Single Fathers Have to Be Mothers and Single Mothers Balance Roles

The fourth and final category reflected participants' ideas about how one of the positive attributes possessed by single fathers appeared to be their ability to carry out roles and tasks that would otherwise be performed by a mother. This category was represented by three themes and four sub-themes. The first theme described the notion that a portion of never-married custodial single fathers' positive attributes was their ability to carry out tasks traditionally done by mothers. The following quotations illustrated this theme, "they [single fathers] probably have a good understanding of the challenges faced by single mothers, and they are probably accustomed to the 'second shift' of coming home from their full-time job;" "[single fathers perform] some duties that some families would attribute to a mother…good for children to see;" "it necessitates, in a way, the father to take over 'motherly' roles;" and "take on more responsibility in an area that isn't traditional." These quotations illustrated the overall theme, single fathers perform tasks traditionally done by mothers, which appeared to my study participants to mean that single fathers simply perform domestic tasks. A theoretical interpretation of these findings would highlight that many of the tasks traditionally carried out by mothers are household chores which were simply unnoticed by my participants, but were held to a higher value and applauded by my participants when completed by single fathers.

Under this theme are two sub-themes: single fathers keep up the house and single fathers provide emotionally for their children. The first sub-theme was illustrated by the following quotations, "Their desire to take on the challenge of being a 'homemaker;'" "They are able to run the whole house including duties given to a mom;" and "[single fathers] come home to their

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second full-time job of parenting, keeping up the house, etc.—a phenomenon that mostly women experience." Again, my participants described single fathers' positive attributes as having an ability to perform tasks by which single mothers perform daily and are expected to perform. It is possible to interpret these responses as positive attributes of single fathers due to the underlying presumption of my participants that fathering does not include domestic jobs, such as keeping up the house.

The second sub-theme under the theme, single fathers perform tasks traditionally done by single mothers, describes single fathers as sensitive, compassionate, and supportive of their children. The following quotations illustrate this sub-theme, "I think [it] helps them develop a more 'sensitive' side;" "a single father can be as strong and compassionate as a mother;" "They can give love and support as well as any mother can;" "more sensitive towards their children than fathers who have wives that deal more with the 'emotional stuff;'" "able to show compassion and emotion to their children;" "Their dedication to providing emotionally for their children;" and "They can possibly make an emotional bond with their children whereas mothers usually make that bond." These quotations about single fathers' ability to be affectionate with their children displaced them outside of the oftentimes narrowly defined roles of financial provider and disciplinarian. While these reports were encouraging, it is also interesting to note that one participant reported that single fathers would have "less emotional baggage seen by children," which may have indicated that while it is socially acceptable for single fathers to be emotional with their children, it may not be acceptable for them to be *too* emotional as women are prone to do. A feminist perspective allowed me to interpret this quotation as reflecting a belief that single mothers are more emotional than single fathers and that this emotionality is somehow bad for children.

The second theme in this category was that single fathers take on the role of two parents. Here, it seemed that single fathers' capacity to take on the roles typically performed by two people (more specifically, a heterosexual married couple comprised of a mother and father) was interpreted positively by my participants. This theme was illustrated by the following quotations, "They can be independent & versatile and play many roles that traditional male/female couples often separate by gender;" "They take on both roles—and are motivated to be good fathers mostly;" "Their dedication to providing financially and emotionally for their children;" and "They must cope with doing the job of two people (parents) as a single individual." The quotations from the participants seemed to reflect their admiration of single fathers being able to carry out two opposite realms of responsibilities—providing financially and providing emotionally. Although it was reported that single fathers can take on the role of two parents, it is possible to infer from a feminist framework that these roles are more closely associated with gender scripts (i.e., breadwinners and homemakers) than they are with taking on the roles of two individual parents. Thus, the notion that single fathers perform the roles of two people may have more to do with their capacity to work both inside and outside the home and complete tasks traditionally divided by gender, which led to the next sub-theme, single fathers are financial providers *and* homemakers.

The sub-theme for the theme, single fathers take on the role of two parents, was that single fathers perform two socially gendered roles, that of the breadwinner (i.e., financial provider) and that of the homemaker or nurturer. The following quotations illustrate this sub-theme, "When there is only one parent, dad, he has to do everything…the disciplining, 'talking,' teaching, bonding, etc;" "[single fathers are] balancing family, work, and social life;" "compassionate towards children and financial provider;" and "if they're good fathers they

should work hard to provide for their family and able to spend time with their child every day and teach them about the world." These quotations illustrated this sub-theme in that never-married custodial single fathers perform roles from two perceived different societally constructed realms of responsibilities.

The third and final theme under the category, single fathers have to be mothers and single mothers have to balance roles, described the idea that single mothers manage work/life demands. This theme was illustrated by the following quotations, "I admire women that can find a balance in a home where they are the primary (and only) care-giver. If they are able to work full-time and still provide physical/emotional/spiritual support—that is success;" "Bringing stability into childrearing;" "balanced, hard-working, determined, selfless;" and "They learn how to balance the demands of family life and work." More specifically, participants commented on the idea that single custodial mothers were able to manage time with their children and provide financially, which makes up the final sub-theme, single mothers must manage their time effectively to support their children, while also making a living. The following quotations illustrate this sub-theme, "They [single mothers] have to work hard to balance working for an income as well as caring for child/children as a single parent;" "They [single mothers] learn to time-manage really well…she has to be well-balanced;" and "The ability to manage their time and affection towards their children and balance that with a job and/or school to help support their children and themselves." It is interesting to note that although single custodial fathers are presumably taking on the same roles of balancing life and work, no participants commented on this work/life balance specifically for men. My feminist framework allowed me to suggest that this lack of response may be interpreted from a more traditional sense in the way participants perceived men's roles as strictly work (i.e., paid labor outside the home); thus, there is no need to balance

"work" and "life" because another person (i.e., wife) is already tending to those responsibilities. In contrast, the idea of work/life balance was more commonly applied to women by my participants because, although society may still be uncomfortable with mothers spending too much time at work away from their children, the notion that women work outside of the home and provide financially was perhaps more socially accepted than fathers nurturing their children.

Unable to Generalize Positive Attributes

Although not representing a difference between the positive attributes identified of never-married single mothers and fathers, it was both interesting and encouraging to find that a rather large number of participants identified that the positive attributes of single mothers and fathers cannot be generalized to single mothers and fathers as a group; rather, the positive attributes depend on the individual parent. It was important to note that a relatively equal number of responses in this group were reflected of both never-married custodial single mothers and fathers. The participants' comments regarding the inability to make conclusive statements about single mothers and fathers as a collective group appeared to surround the idea that strengths are not inherent to a group of individuals based on their single parenting status. This idea is illustrated by the following quotations, "I don't generalize my opinions about someone based upon the only one factor (such as being a single mother);" "they [single fathers] have personal strengths and weaknesses just like all people. We can't stereotype someone's personality just because he's a single father;" "It depends upon the individual, not on the fact that they are a single mother;" and "I believe each person determines their own strengths/weaknesses, and that being a single father does not necessarily determine whether you have specific strengths or weaknesses." These quotations about the inability for attributes to be applied in a blanket fashion to never-married custodial single mothers and fathers may have reflected participants' refusal to

stereotype single mothers and fathers as "all good" or "all bad." From a feminist perspective, it was affirming to discover fewer single mothers and fathers being negatively stereotyped based on their parenting status and more critical thinking being paid to the characteristics of the individual.

Additionally, participants commented on the notion that single custodial parents are no different than married, or any other parents for that matter. The following quotations illustrate this idea, "No different than the general population;" "No different from any mother. Biology does not confer character traits;" "Single fathers have the same strengths that make anyone else a great parent;" "Single mothers have varied strengths just like married mothers;" "Unique as any other individual;" "I do not see single fathers as having strengths that other fathers would not have ;" and "Although mothers that aren't single may have these qualities as well, I feel that often single mothers, partly due to necessity, may develop more of the following: independence, flexibility, androgyny." Thus, many of the comments regarding the inability to generalize positive attributes to never-married custodial single mothers and fathers related to the comparison with a specific family formation (i.e., two, opposite gender married parents) that is often perceived as the "norm" or is socially qualified as a healthy family.

CHAPTER FIVE. DISCUSSION

This chapter was comprised of five sections: (1) main findings, (2) limitations, (3) clinical implications, (4) suggestions for future research, and (5) conclusion.

Discussion of Main Findings

While I identified a number of categories, themes, and sub-themes, there were four main findings that appeared to be present across all of the results: (1) gender may be a stronger influence than single parenting status on perceptions of positive attributes of single parents, (2) participants appear to report overall lower expectations for single fathers, (3) intrinsic versus extrinsic positive attributes, and (4) general positive perceptions of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers.

Gender as a Stronger Influence than Single Parenting Status

Throughout the identified categories, themes, and sub-themes in this study, the significance and influence of gender was undoubtedly clear as participants commented on the positive attributes of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers. More specifically, it seemed as though participants were more likely to make assumptions about these parents based upon their gender rather than their single parenting status. This finding was unsurprising given that gender has long been a powerful socializing agent that constructs the way society views women's and men's roles within the family as well as defines what acceptable behaviors are for them (Baber & Allen, 1992; hooks, 2000). Thus, it was possible that my participants were just as guided, if not more, by the organizing principle of gender as they were by single parent status when they answered the survey questions (Baber & Allen, 1992; Bryan et al., 1986; Enns, 2004; hooks, 2000). For example, one of the themes identified was that single fathers provide a good male role model for their children. As part of this theme, participants identified one of the

positive perceptions of single fathers as their ability to bestow a fatherly figure and masculine

role model on their children. It is interesting to note that while participants were certain that

children needed this good male role model, no specific descriptions were given as to what

constitutes this influential presence, but only that it was important. In fact, researchers have

reported this tendency for fatherhood, as a whole, to be less well-defined than motherhood

(Silverstein, 1996; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). Here, the prevailing perception that all

children need a father or male role model is primarily guided by his gender. Given the theoretical

framework of feminism, it was important to note that gender does not determine the integrity or

credibility of a parent, but is more so a reflection of society's beliefs about what constitutes a

"healthy" family (e.g., two opposite gender parents; Amato, 2000).

In addition to the above societal perceptions about what children need to be successful, it

was also important to note that the predominant stereotype is based on an essentialist view of the

caretaking mother and breadwinning father continues to influence how society views the

dynamics and functions of families (Amato, 2000). For instance, my participants commented on

never-married single fathers' ability to be financial providers and good disciplinarians. In

contrast, single mothers were admired for their nurturing skills and ability to multitask. Again,

these stereotypes reflected gendered beliefs about parenting and appeared to be less about

whether the parent is single or partnered.

Single mothers, for instance, were described by my participants in ways that appear to fit

within these gender stereotypes based on an essentialist framework (Silverstein, 1999). In

particular, my participants perceived the positive attributes of single mothers as their ability to

multitask and balance work and family life, with family being the number one priority. Indeed,

women have long been socialized to believe that it is their duty to serve the needs of the family

and are inclined to sacrifice their own needs and personal interests "in the name of care and responsibility" (Baber & Allen, 1992, p. 2). As for her job, participants admired single mothers who were able to care for children (i.e., first priority) while working outside the home and some commented that this job was presumably low paying and less prestigious than the jobs and careers of men. Sadly, these assumptions about employment and the type of jobs women hold are informed by gender norms, which assume that employment is secondary for women and that women have limited abilities to obtain good paying jobs. These assumptions about employment have also lead to societal beliefs that single mothers need the assistance of welfare and government aid to survive, which only adds to the stigmatization of their identity (Jarrett, 1996). Thus, these stereotypes related to employment not only reflect beliefs about women as a group, but also could reflect beliefs about single mothers' socioeconomic and class status.

Therefore, to a large extent my participants' responses about the positive attributes of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers may have reflected society's beliefs about gender and not beliefs specifically about single parents. Many of the positive attributes provided by my participants could be applied to any mother or father regardless of relationship status. This finding also fits with the findings of two existing studies that examined the attitudes toward never-married single mothers and fathers and came to similar conclusions that participants' perceptions of these two groups varied primarily by the gender of the single parent and that gender is important to consider when researching and evaluating single parents (DeJean, et al., 2012; Haire & McGeorge, 2012). Furthermore, it appeared that my participants viewed the positive attributes of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers through an essentialist lens, which defines particular skills as natural for women and men to perform (Silverstein, 1999). It was, thus, unsurprising that many single fathers were noted by my participants for their ability

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to provide an income, be a disciplinarian, and provide a good male role model, while single mothers were noted for their caring and nurturing abilities as well as their self-sacrificing tendencies.

Overall Lower Expectations for Single Fathers than Single Mothers

Another main finding that I would like to highlight is related to the lower standards that my participants, and possibly society, seemed to hold single fathers to when compared to single mothers. For example, my participants appeared to believe that if single fathers solely existed in the home or provided what might be considered the minimum standard for single mothers he should then be uplifted and celebrated. For example, many of my participants commented on the general notion of—"at least he's there," which set the level of expectations especially low for single fathers. To their advantage, it is also possible that single fathers are consequentially judged less harshly from society because of the underlying assumption that children of single parents are fortunate to have a father at all. Additionally, the idea that single fathering was optional even further elevated them because their choice to "opt out" of parenting is socially accepted by the larger public discourse. However, it appeared to my participants that when single fathers opt in, their choice was often seen as very intentional and planned. For instance, many of my participants stated that men who are single fathers were more likely to choose this role as opposed to being forced into it like single mothers and that these single custodial fathers are especially dedicated, committed, and care enough about their children to choose to raise them. In addition, this contrast in findings could set single mothers up to be viewed as less intentional parents than single fathers because they did not have a choice to parent children, but rather this was an event that happened to them passively or happened to them based on their own poor choices. Given this perception, it was not surprising that the choice to parent as a single father

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would be greeted with acclaim and praise. Thus, my participants appeared to be setting the bar especially low for single fathers.

On the same token, having an overall lower set of expectations for single fathers also placed them at a disadvantage. For instance, a theoretical interpretation of this finding led me to believe that lower expectations of single fathers' parenting abilities also limits their perceived capabilities and skills, which lends to the larger belief that single fathers may be inadequate parents or incapable of raising children altogether (Bennett & Jamieson, 1999; Greif, 1995; Troilo & Coleman, 2008). Again, it is important to note that these stereotypes based on gender (i.e., patriarchy) are both harmful and disservice men and women. For instance, although participants commented on the hard work and good efforts single mothers made in their parenting, it appeared that single mothers were less noticed for balancing the roles of homemaker and breadwinner than were single fathers. Part of this assumption that single mothers can endure more work can be attributed to the "supermom syndrome" or the "good mother stereotype," (Mottarella et al., 2009), which involves the societal assumption that in order to be considered successful in her role as a mother, women must balance multiple roles (i.e., nurturer, caretaker, errand runner, financial provider, etc.), spend all the free time she has with her children, and, most importantly, not complain about it (Hare-Mustin, 1979; Mottarella et al., 2009). Given that society assumes mothers take on these diversified responsibilities, it made sense that my participants were less likely to identify strengths in single mothers as having performed these roles, and would, thus, be less inclined to note these skills as especially positive attributes of never-married single custodial mothers. Thus, my participants appeared to hold higher expectations for single mothers and perceive single fathers as successful if they "simply exist and show up."

Intrinsic versus Extrinsic Positive Attributes

The third main finding reflected participants' ideas about how the positive attributes possessed by single mothers and fathers differed based upon intrinsic or extrinsic qualities. The participants' comments regarding the positive attributes of single mothers appeared to be connected around her parenting and life skills, which were more internal and less materialistic than the skills or resources my participants perceived that single fathers provide. For example, many participants identified self-sufficiency, quality time spent together, and models of how to work hard as resources single mothers provide their children. Participants also described single mothers as ultimate sacrificing parents who place their children's needs at the forefront of their priorities and place their own needs last, which is consistent with the ways in which women have been socialized to act in their family life (Baber & Allen, 1992). It was important to note that these positive qualities are still connected to societal beliefs and gender socialization around women being inherent nurturers and caretakers. In addition, single mothers were also characterized as trying to set a good example for their children and wanting their children to be independent and have a better life. Thus, the above descriptions of single mothers' positive attributes were more about the intangible, immeasurable, and life-long offerings and less about temporary material items (i.e., money, gifts, etc.) that were more likely to be associated with single fathers.

In contrast, my participants described single fathers in terms of their ability to provide a reliable income due to the fact that men earn more money than women (Hilton et al., 2001). These findings fit the research that has shown the historical and present perceptions of fathers as breadwinners (Troilo & Coleman, 2008). Additionally, it is interesting to note that while not *all* men earn more than women, and that more men have experienced unemployment from the recent

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recession (Sahin, Song, & Hobijn, 2010), participants seemed confident that children would be in an economically advantageous position if cared for by a single father and that his financial resources (i.e., material possession) were a distinct positive attribute to his parenting. In addition, participants assumed that single fathers did not experience financial stressors and held a steady job with a stable income. These findings are not surprising given that existing literature on the positive perceptions of single fathers suggest that they are incompetent caregivers outside of the traditional roles of income provider, disciplinarian, and playmate (Bennett & Jamieson, 1999; Greif, 1995; Strom et al., 1984; Troilo & Coleman, 2008).

Although never-married single mothers have been found to be viewed less positively than never-married single fathers, one surprising element of this study was that participants appeared to view single mothers as having internal positive qualities, which is very different from the existing literature (DeJean et al., 2012; Haire & McGeorge, 2012). My participants identified basic skills and abilities single mothers provided their children in order for them to not only survive, but also be successful in their futures. Additionally, qualities of independence, having a strong work ethic, and being able to navigate safely in life to avoid unpleasant situations were all traits that participants felt were positively associated with single mothers. Thus, it was encouraging that despite the large number of negative perceptions of never-married single mothers that exist in the literature (Bennett & Jamieson, 1999; Bryan et al., 1986; Rhodes & Johnson, 2000; Richards & Schmiege, 1993; Usdansky, 2009a; Wang & Ngai, 2011), it is clear that my study documented for the first time that there are also positive perceptions of single mothers that were not situational or fleeting, but were perceived to be internal to their character. Again, it is possible that participants viewed single mothers through two conflicting discourses about women's roles as mothers, including gender status and single parent status. Thus, it

appeared that participants' positive perceptions were viewed through the lens of essentialism, which infers that women are naturally better at caretaking and homemaking tasks than men and thus these positive qualities do not reflect on them as individuals, but on their biology.

General Positive Perceptions of Never-Married Custodial Single Mothers and Fathers

Given that there was limited research documenting societally perceived positive attributes of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers, it was encouraging that my participants were able to identify positive attributes and provided a wide range of those attributes. Additionally, the amount of positive attributes for never-married custodial single mothers and fathers appeared to be similar for both genders, which was surprising given that single mothers are far more likely to be critiqued for their parenting and increasingly likely to be viewed more negatively than single fathers (Ganong et al., 1988; Haire & McGeorge, 2012; Hilton et al., 2001; Jarrett, 1996). Overall, participants identified personal strength, hard work, flexibility, dedication, and motivation as positive attributes for both never-married custodial single mothers and fathers. These quotations illustrated that single mothers and fathers can be and are viewed positively in spite of the negative rhetoric that has largely surrounded this group. It was interesting to note that when my participants were directly asked or prompted to identify positive perceptions that existed for never-married single mothers and fathers, they were successful in this task. Historically, it is possible that researchers have failed to document these positive societal perceptions because they too are influenced by negative societal assumptions about single mothers and fathers and have failed to ask participants about positive attributes. Thus, the findings from this study may reflect a change in societal perceptions toward single mothers and fathers that are moving toward being more positive and affirming or may reflect that this was the first study to directly ask participants about their positive perceptions.

Given that my participants were prompted to identify positive attributes of never-married single mothers and fathers, it was important to note that some were still unable to associate these groups with any favorable traits. For instance, some participants reported that there were simply no strengths for single mothers and fathers. Specifically, participants commented that there were either no unique strengths of single mothers and fathers as a collective group or that they simply could not think of any. It was interesting to note that even though single parent families have existed for decades and are considered a common path to family formation, it was apparent that these families continue to be viewed unfavorably by some and are often depicted negatively in society (Usdansky, 2009b).

Thus, my findings support both positive and negative perceptions of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers. Given that much of the literature that exists on single parents has focused merely on the problems or deficits of these parents and families (Bennett & Jamieson; 1999; Rhodes & Johnson, 2000; Richards & Schmiege, 1993; Wang & Ngai, 2011), it was encouraging to see that although participants still commented on unfavorable attributes of never-married single parents, they also identified highly favorable traits. Additionally, previous studies on the perceptions of mothers, in general, have documented a trend toward totalizing effects by categorizing mothers as either all good (e.g., kind, caring, loving) or all bad (e.g., cold, controlling, rejecting; Hare-Mustin & Broderick, 1979) and it appeared that my findings demonstrated a more diverse way of understanding mothers that allowed them to have both positive and negative traits. At the same time, however, many of the positive attributes identified by my participants about single mothers fit with existing literature that has found single mothers to be resilient and thrive in difficult situations (Brodsky, 1996), which was an idea my participants alluded to in the larger theme of stigma being stronger for single mothers. In

addition to single mothers, many of the findings of this study also matched the existing literature that states single fathers are not assumed to be the primary caregiver; thus, any effort is perceived by society as heroic and admirable (Frisco & Williams, 2003; Greif, 1995). Additionally, my feminist theoretical framework and analysis of the data led me to believe that while never-married single mothers and fathers were perceived both negatively and positively, single mothers were held to a higher standard in terms of level of expectations within society and, thus, were more vulnerable to critical judgment and were increasingly likely to be perceived more negatively than single fathers.

Limitations

While this study had a number of strengths, it was important to address three limitations. The main limitation of this study was the fact that this sample was self-selecting and it could be possible, therefore, that the individuals responding to the study invitation had strong views (either positive or negative) about the topic of never-married custodial single parents. Another limitation of the study was the sample composition. Although participant recruitment attempted to reach a wide range of individuals, the majority of the sample was White, female, and single. Due to the sample composition, the generalizability of the study is limited to some extent and future studies should seek a more diverse sample to see if my findings are relevant across gender, race, and relationship status diversity. The last limitation of this study was related to data collection. This study utilized data collected online and, thus, I was not able to seek clarification about participants' responses or ask follow-up questions.

Clinical Implications

There were several implications from this study regarding clinical work with never-married custodial single mothers and fathers. One of the first clinical implications was to work

with single parents to connect them to the existing positive societal perceptions about never-married custodial single mothers and fathers and make them aware of some of the specific positive attributes that have been attributed to them as a group of parents. In addition to the positive perceptions, another clinical implication from the study included therapists being aware of the stigmas attached to single parenthood and making conscious efforts not to perpetuate them. For instance, acknowledging the presence of negative societal stereotypes that exist for single parents can help the therapist to begin addressing them, thus, making these harmful and pervasive social perceptions relevant within the context of therapy. Creating space for single mothers and fathers to talk about the negative messages they receive regarding their parenting status and living within a society that values two-parent heterosexual families over all other family forms can be honoring of the lived experience of single parents.

While it is important for clinicians to be aware of the negative societal stereotypes, it is equally important for them to do their own self-reflecting on how they came to perceive what constitutes positive parenting, healthy families, and what children need in order to thrive. In particular, therapists need to explore their own beliefs about single parents and their ability to parent children effectively. Self-of-the-therapist work can be helpful in evaluating one's values and beliefs and examining the ways in which they are shaped by larger cultural discourses. Specifically, how are clinicians' own beliefs impacted by both the negative and positive societal perceptions of single mothers and fathers? How do the positive beliefs therapists hold about never-married single mothers and fathers guide them in their work with this population? Additionally, how does gender inform therapists' beliefs and level of expectation of single mothers and fathers and does that impact the way they view their capacity for change during the therapy process?

It is my hope that this study continues to open space in therapy for a critical exploration of the perceived positive attributes of never-married single mothers and fathers and how these perceptions are organized based upon the gender of the single parent. It is also my hope that this study can inform clinicians about the differences in level of expectations for single mothers compared with single fathers and how the stereotypes of fathers as financial providers and disciplinarians and mothers as sacrificers and nurturers can limit and narrowly define the positive traits attributed to them. For example, clinicians can introduce and explore with single mothers the importance of self-care practices and ways in which they define themselves outside of motherhood (i.e., by career, hobby, philanthropic endeavors, etc.). Likewise, clinicians can also create space for single fathers to talk about the ways in which they act as caretaker, nurturer, and homemaker and weaken the barriers that exist in men's culture to discussing topics that are socially perceived as more effeminate and therefore, more taboo. Finally, I also hope that the clinical implications discussed here can be part of a larger discussion about the importance of embracing positive traits and perceptions of never-married single mothers and fathers, in addition to being a part of eliminating oppressive societal stereotypes that are harmful to all people who deviate outside of the perceived norm (Haire & McGeorge, 2012).

Suggestions for Future Research

As a result of this study, there are several new avenues that could be taken in future research. For example, researchers could expand on this study by exploring *all* types of single parents (i.e., widowed, divorced, and never-married) in order to discern whether never-married custodial parenting status matters when it comes to identifying positive attributes of single parents. In other words, does it matter that we looked specifically at never-married single parents? Another suggestion for future research would be recruiting a more diverse sample for

the study. For example, do participants' demographic characteristics influence their perceptions of single mothers and fathers? Lastly, how do the positive societal perceptions of single mothers and fathers inform their own perceptions of themselves as single parents? For instance, are single fathers under additional pressure to provide monetary support and be disciplinarians? In addition, do single fathers feel restricted in their range of emotional expression with their children or feel limited to only engage in physical play with their children as a primary way of interacting? Likewise, do single mothers internalize shame for not spending more time with their children or for pursuing their own career or social interests? This future research would provide additional understanding into the influence of societal beliefs on single mothers and fathers, and their children.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the difference in the positive perceptions of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers and explore how those perceptions varied by the gender of the single parent. As single parent families have long carried with them a negative societal reputation, it was important to look at the strengths these families possess and their capacity to be viewed as not only viable options of family formations, but also as positive, healthy functioning families. In addition, while an individual's parenting status often implores societal assumptions and biases, this study provided evidence that gender frequently guides the way we perceive women's and men's roles in the family. From a feminist perspective, these assumptions oftentimes exacerbate the already narrowly defined gender roles for mothers and fathers and can confine or restrict what we see possible for them. When men continue to be defined as financial providers and disciplinarians, it leaves less space for them to be described as nurturers and caretakers. In contrast, women are often punished for not spending enough time

with their children and thus, likely suffer from guilt and blame when they pursue personal interests. When single mothers and fathers are continually placed under rigidly assigned gender roles, oppression, societal stigma, and gender inequality continues. It is my hope that this study illuminates the different standards to which we hold never-married single mothers and fathers and expands the range of capabilities for what we see as possible for single mothers and fathers. It is also my hope that findings from the current study can continue conversations about the unique barriers and challenges single parent families face as well as the many strengths they possess.

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APPENDIX A. SINGLE MOTHER VIGNETTE

Lisa is a never-married single mother of two children, Andy (8) and Molly (5). Both children live with Lisa full-time. One evening last week while Lisa was in the kitchen getting dinner ready and washing the dishes from breakfast that morning, she heard Andy and Molly start fighting about what TV shows they wanted to watch. Andy said he wanted to watch a show on the science channel about whales and Molly wanted to watch her favorite cartoon show. Andy shouted at Molly, "We're not watching that stupid cartoon. That show is for babies!" Molly started to cry and yelled back at Andy, "I'm not a baby and my cartoon isn't stupid! We always have to watch what you want!" Lisa walked from the kitchen into the living room and said "Andy, please tell Molly you are sorry for making fun of her and for calling her a baby. You both have shows you want to watch, but you'll have to take turns because you can only watch one thing at a time. How about letting Molly watch her show before dinner, and then you can watch what you want after Molly goes to bed?" "Molly always gets her way!" shouted Andy, "It's not fair!" Lisa paused for a minute and then said, "How about we just turn off the TV, go eat dinner, and then we can all play outside at the park for a while until it starts to get dark?" That would be more fun than watching those same boring TV shows anyway!" Molly and Andy looked at Lisa, and then at each other. "The park! The park!" exclaimed Molly, wiping the tears off her cheeks. "I want to go on the swings." "Can we play soccer for a little bit when we're at the park?" asked Andy, still sounding a little frustrated. "I suppose we can do that," agreed Lisa. "Now let's go eat dinner before it gets cold!"

APPENDIX B. SINGLE FATHER VIGNETTE

Tim is a never-married single father of two children, Andy (8) and Molly (5). Both children live with Tim full-time. One evening last week while Tim was in the kitchen getting dinner ready and washing the dishes from breakfast that morning, he heard Andy and Molly start fighting about what TV shows they wanted to watch. Andy said he wanted to watch a show on the science channel about whales and Molly wanted to watch her favorite cartoon show. Andy shouted at Molly, "We're not watching that stupid cartoon. That show is for babies!" Molly started to cry and yelled back at Andy, "I'm not a baby and my cartoon isn't stupid! We always have to watch what you want!" Tim walked from the kitchen into the living room and said "Andy, please tell Molly you are sorry for making fun of her how and for calling her a baby. You both have shows you want to watch, but you'll have to take turns because you can only watch one thing at a time. How about letting Molly watch her show before dinner, and then you can watch what you want after Molly goes to bed?" "Molly always gets her way!" shouted Andy, "It's not fair!" Tim paused for a minute and then said, "How about we just turn off the TV, go eat dinner, and then we can all play outside at the park for a while until it starts to get dark?" That would be more fun than watching those same boring TV shows anyway!" Molly and Andy looked at Tim, and then at each other. "The park! The park!" exclaimed Molly, wiping the tears off her cheeks. "I want to go on the swings." "Can we play soccer for a little bit when we're at the park?" asked Andy, still sounding a little frustrated. "I suppose we can do that," agreed Tim. "Now let's go eat dinner before it gets cold!"

Table C 1
Characteristics of the Sample

Characteristics	Single Mother Version		Single Father Version	
	n	%	n	%
Gender				
Females	325	73.9	303	71.1
Males	115	26.1	123	28.9
Ethnicity				
European American/White	403	91.4	400	93.7
Asian/Asian American	12	2.7	12	2.8
Bi-racial/Multi-racial	8	1.8	5	1.2
Latino(a)/Hispanic	7	1.6	1	0.2
Native American	6	1.4	5	1.2
African American/Black	3	0.7	4	0.9
Middle Eastern/Arabic	2	0.4	0	0
Relationship Status				
Single, never-married	212	48.2	210	49.2
Cohabitating	24	5.5	28	6.6
Married	180	40.9	170	39.8
Separated	5	1.1	1	0.2
Divorced	17	3.8	11	2.6
Widowed	1	.2	6	1.4
Other	1	.2	1	0.2

Table C 1
Characteristics of the Sample (continued)

Characteristics	Single Mother Version		Single Father Version	
	n	%	n	%
Highest Level of Education				
Grade school	0	0	5	1.2
High school/GED	30	6.8	28	6.6
Two-year degree/technical training	22	5.0	22	5.2
Some college	193	43.8	199	46.7
Completed college degree	90	20.4	73	17.1
Graduate or professional degree	106	23.8	99	23.2
Where Participants Live				
Urban/city	360	82.0	353	82.9
Rural	79	18.0	73	17.1
Type of Household Raised In				
Step-family/blended family	37	8.4	22	5.2
Two biological parent family	360	80.9	365	85.5
Single-mother family	26	5.9	20	4.7
Single-father family	4	.9	1	0.2
Grandparent(s)	1	.2	1	0.2
Adoptive Family	4	.9	7	1.6
Relative(s)	1	.2	0	0
Other	8	1.8	11	2.6

Table C 1
Characteristics of the Sample (continued)

Characteristics	Single Mother Version		Single Father Version	
	n	%	n	%
Income				
None	9	2.1	12	2.8
Under $5,000	87	20.0	92	21.9
$5,000 - 14,999	115	26.5	100	23.8
$15,000 - 24,999	41	9.4	36	8.6
$25,000 - 29,999	22	5.1	18	4.3
$30,000 - 39,999	37	8.5	29	6.9
$40,000 - 49,999	28	6.5	29	6.9
$50,000 - 74,999	50	11.5	60	14.3
$75,000 - 99,999	21	4.8	27	6.4
$100,000 - 200,000	20	4.6	15	3.6
over $200,000	4	0.9	3	0.7
Current Work Status				
Full-time	175	39.7	159	37.2
Part-time	172	39.0	172	40.3
Seasonal/Temporary	35	7.9	37	8.7
Unemployed/Not working	44	10.0	42	9.8
Retired	5	1.1	5	1.2
Homemaker	10	2.3	12	2.8

n = 445, single mother version and n = 428, single father version.

Table C 2
Categories, Themes, and Sub-Themes

Categories:	Themes:	Sub-themes:
Single mothers and father provide differently for their children	Single mothers provide skills and single fathers provide income	Single mothers provide self-sufficiency, time management, resourcefulness, and organization
		Single fathers earn more than single mothers
	Single fathers provide a good male role model	Single fathers are playful
		Single fathers provide discipline and exert authority over children
	Single mothers provide a model of how to work hard and prioritize children	Single mothers want children to be independent and want them to have a better life/set a good example
		Single mothers sacrifice for their children and put themselves last
Societal stigma is stronger for single fathers	Single fathers must overcome social stereotypes of being a single male with children	
	Single mothers are more socially accepted	
	Single fathers are different and stand up for what they believe	
	Single mothers can withstand the prejudice against them because they are the 'norm'	
Single fatherhood is more of a choice than single motherhood	Fathering is an option and mothering is necessary	Single fathers are dedicated to fatherhood and take their role seriously
		It is hard for single fathers to get custody
	Single fathers are willing to parent (active choice) and mothers are expected to parent	Single fathers care enough about their children to raise them (could have walked away)
		Single mothers are primary, inherent nurturers

Table C 2

Categories, Themes, and Sub-Themes (continued)

Single fathers have to be mothers and single mothers have to balance roles	Single fathers perform tasks traditionally done by mothers	Single fathers keep up the house
		Single fathers provide emotionally (sensitive, compassionate, supportive) to their children
	Single fathers take on role of two parents	Single fathers are financial providers and homemakers
	Single mothers manage work/family life demands	Single mothers must manage their time effectively to support their children, while also making a living