

PERCEPTIONS OF NEGATIVE ATTRIBUTES OF
NEVER-MARRIED CUSTODIAL MOTHERS AND FATHERS:
A COMPARISON STUDY

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MASTER OF SCIENCE

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ABSTRACT

Haire, Amanda Rae, M.S., Department of Human Development and Family Science, College of Human Development and Education, North Dakota State University, November 2010. Perceptions of Negative Attributes of Never-Married Custodial Mothers and Fathers: A Comparison Study. Major Professor: Dr. Christi McGeorge.

The present study examined the differences in the perceptions of the negative attributes of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers. The existing literature indicated that never-married single mothers and fathers were perceived differently; however, no previous study has examined perceptions of negative qualities that society assigns to never-married custodial single mothers and fathers. Thus, this study examined participants' perceptions of the negative attributes of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers and applied a feminist framework to determine what gender based differences existed in these perceptions. The results of the thematic analysis suggested that participants' perceptions of never-married single mothers and fathers' negative attributes varied primarily by gender of the single parent. Moreover, the results of the thematic analysis also suggested that participants' perceptions of the negative attributes of single mothers are primarily personal in nature while the perceptions of single fathers are situational. The results further suggest that participants' perceptions focused on the composition of a healthy family as well as reflected negative beliefs about single mothers' sexuality and not single fathers'. Suggestions for future research and clinical implications are also offered.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Researchers have documented many negative societal attitudes about single parents as a group (Bennett & Jamieson, 1999; Bryan, Coleman, Ganong & Bryan, 1986), specific attitudes about single mothers (Bennett & Jamieson, 1999; Jarrett, 1994, 1996), and single fathers (Bennett & Jamieson, 1999; Goldscheider & Kaufman, 2006). For example, Bryan and colleagues (1986) reported that never-married single parents were perceived more negatively and were rated less positively than married parents on all five factors (i.e., social evaluation, satisfaction, security, personal character, and stability) that they studied. In addition to these findings, Jarrett (1996) studied the impact of negative societal perceptions on single mothers and found that these perceptions can have a negative effect on mother-child interactions. Furthermore, Amato (2000) commented that the prevailing accepted form of family is that of the mother as the nurturing caretaker and the father as the financial provider. Troilo and Coleman (2008) also found that “nuclear family” remains the dominant accepted form of the family (p. 224).

Researchers have also explored the self-perceptions of single mothers (Jarrett, 1994; 1996) and single fathers (Chima, 1999; Emmers-Sommer, Rhea, Triplett, & O’Neil, 2003; Greif & DeMaris, 1990; Nieto, 1990). The research on single fathers’ self-perceptions (DeMaris & Grief, 1997; Emmers-Sommer, et al, 2003; Nieto, 1990) suggested that single fathers report that they are held in “high positive regard” and rate themselves as having high levels of self-esteem and few doubts about their personal adequacy as parents (Nieto, 1990, p. 31). Thus, this research suggested that single fathers receive both positive societal perceptions and report high levels of positive self-perceptions. On the other hand researchers have documented that while single mothers perceive themselves to be good,

responsible, and competent mothers, single mothers reported that society primarily focuses on the perceived negative attributes of single mothers (Jarrett, 1994; 1996). Thus, never-married single mothers report that society describes them in terms of perceived negative attributes instead of focusing on the positive attributes they actually possess. This research suggested that while single mothers report positive self-perceptions, their experience of societal perceptions is highly negative in nature. Thus, the societal experiences of never-married single mothers and fathers appear to differ significantly and in ways that could impact their own parenting and self-worth.

This is significant because there are currently millions of never-married single parents and this group is the fastest growing population in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Additionally, the majority of never-married single parents are single mothers. In particular, there are four times as many female headed households than male headed households in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). While a significantly smaller group of parents, single father headed households are growing at a much faster rate than single mother headed households (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Specifically, although the exact number of never-married custodial single parents is not known, the Census data for 2006 estimated that the overall number of single mother headed households is 10.4 million and the overall number of single father headed households is 2.5 million in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). These growing trends represent a significant change in household structure and reflect the importance of better understanding the negative societal perceptions experienced by this group of parents.

In particular, it is important to explore the discrepancy in societal perceptions of never-married single mothers and fathers. This discrepancy is especially important to

consider because an individual's identity can be negatively affected when negative stereotypes are held about a person or group of people (Steele, 1997). Moreover, negative stereotypes have the possibility of becoming internalized by individuals or groups, which can lead to "underperformance" in situations even when the stereotype may not be true of the individual's abilities and competence (e.g., even when the individual is a good and skillful parent) (Steele, 1997, p. 614). The impact of negative stereotypes has been referred to as stereotype threat, which is based on the concept of "working memory interference" which leads to mental confusion and then to underperformance in social settings and relationships (Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008, p. 342). Furthermore, negative perceptions can become oppressive and have a transformative effect on individuals and families. Oppression works to classify and have power over people who are placed in minority groups through a "culture of silence" as well as through institutional structures that place greater and lesser value on groups of people (Freire, 1970; Hanna, Talley, & Guindon, 2000). Because single parent headed households are viewed as less valuable by the larger society, this group of parents can experience oppression and a loss of power due to the negative stereotypes that our society promotes about them (Amato, 1990).

Given the discrepancy in the existing research findings of how never-married single mothers and fathers perceive that society views them (Jarrett, 1994; 1996; Nieto, 1990), it would be important to better understand the negative societal perceptions of never-married single mothers and fathers in order to begin to explore the impact these perceptions have on single mothers and fathers and their families. Thus, this study utilized thematic analysis to examine written responses to an open ended question to better understand if and how

negative societal perceptions vary between never-married custodial single mothers and fathers.

Introduction to Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework guiding all aspects of this exploration of the negative perceptions of single mothers and fathers was feminism. While there are multiple 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 these three tenets were also used to guide this study: 1) women are oppressed by other groups in society that are held at a higher value (e.g., White heterosexual males), 2) women need to be encouraged and supported while working to change the patriarchal structures and systems that oppress them, and 3) each woman’s experience is important and valuable (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1983; Baber & Allen, 1992).

Furthermore, Enns (2004) noted that the feminist perspective involves a “commitment to ending all forms of domination, oppression, and privilege that intersect with sexism and gender bias, including (but not limited to) racism, classism, colonialism, heterosexism, ethnocentrism, white supremacy, ageism, and ableism” (Enns, 2004, p. 8). Moreover a feminist perspective allows for the critique of the roles that men and women perform based on socially constructed gender roles as well as the critique of the ways in which men and women are perceived in society. Feminism works to acknowledge and change the ways that women are oppressed by limited societal gender roles and works to provide opportunities for men and women to deviate outside of societal gender roles

without the negative effects of stereotypes and perceptions that influence and limit both men and women (Baber & Allen, 1992; hooks, 2000; Steele, 1997).

The daily lives of women and men are transformed and lived in response to the structures and institutions that support patriarchy. These structures of oppression are played out in women's and men's relationships with other people, in their relationships with themselves, and with the possibilities for their future (Baber & Allen, 1992; hooks, 2000; Steele, 1997). Feminism as a theoretical framework for this study is 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, thus allowing 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.

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 societal negative perceptions of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers as well as the self-perceptions of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers.

First, I review the literature pertaining to the negative perceptions of single parents in general. The second section of the literature review focuses on the research involving the negative societal perceptions of never-married single mothers. The third section of the literature review focuses on the research involving the negative societal perceptions of never-married single fathers. The fourth section of the literature review focuses on the research involving the self-perceptions of never-married single mothers and in the fifth section I review the research involving the self-perceptions of never-married single fathers.

Negative Perceptions of Single Parents

It is important to note that a segment of the literature on single parents does not specify the gender of the single parent. Thus, in this section I will review the literature on negative 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. For example, Bryan and colleagues (1986) examined the beliefs of undergraduate students about different types of families (i.e., remarried, married, divorced, widowed, or never-married) and found that never-married parents were perceived less positively than all of the other groups of parents. Furthermore, Rhodes and Johnson (2000) studied societal perceptions that are held about marginalized groups of individuals (i.e., people of color, women, poor and working-class

people, and single parents) using a sample of 116 graduate students studying social work. These researchers found that students perceived that each of the groups experienced oppression with the exception of single parents. The participants also struggled to identify any strengths associated with single parents as a group; however, they were able to identify strengths that they associated with people of color and women.

In addition to the studies conducted by Bryan et al. (1986) and Rhodes and Johnson (2000), Usdansky (2009) studied portrayals of never-married single parents and divorced parents by analyzing and coding 365 magazine articles and 267 scholarly journal articles that were published between 1900 and 1998. Usdansky (2009) found that a majority (i.e., 64% in magazines and 60% in scholarly journal articles) portray never-married single parents as “harmful to individuals, institutions, or society” (p. 214). While unfavorable portrayals 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 century.

Although these studies did not specify the gender of the single parent, within my theoretical framework of feminism it is important to wonder if the participants still assigned a gender to the single parent prior to answering the survey questions used for these studies. Did the participants in the Bryan et al. (1986) and Rhodes and Johnson (2000) studies truly describe a genderless single parent or do their responses reflect an assumption on the gender of the single parent? Additionally, the high prevalence of single mothers as compared to single fathers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006) may contribute to participants in previous studies envisioning the genderless single parent as a single mother. Thus, given the demographic trends and my feminist framework I believe that these

participants were not describing a genderless single parent, but were actually describing their perceptions of a single mother.

Negative Societal Perceptions of Single Mothers

Researchers suggested that societal perceptions of never-married single mothers are primarily negative and focus on what is wrong with single mothers (Rhodes & Johnson, 2000). In particular, researchers have found negative attitudes towards single mothers that include the perception of single mothers as unhappy, deviant, troubled, and having poor child rearing abilities (Ganong & Coleman, 1995; Ganong, Coleman, & Riley, 1988). In addition to these findings Ganong et al. (1988) also revealed negative attitudes about single mothers' morals, which included stereotypes about single mothers having "unconventional" attitudes, not valuing marriage, and being "liberal and promiscuous" (p. 338). The negative attitudes and stereotypes highlighted by Ganong and colleagues (1988) are consistent with more recent research that finds single mothers to be viewed more negatively than other groups of parents (Bennett & Jamieson, 1999; Ganong & Coleman, 1995; Ganong, et al., 1988; Rhodes & Johnson, 2000).

In particular, Ganong and Coleman (1995) surveyed undergraduate students enrolled in a family relations course about the characteristics of four types of mothers (i.e., married, stepmothers, divorced, and never-married), and found that stereotypes of married mothers contained nearly all positive characteristics (e.g., "forgiving, protective, warm, and caring"), while stereotypes of never-married single mothers held the strongest negative characteristics (e.g., "unpleasant, poor child rearing abilities, and failures in marriage") (p. 508). In addition to never-married single mothers being viewed with highly negative stereotypes, never-married mothers were also viewed as having very few positive

characteristics, and were additionally stereotyped as living below the poverty level, with little hope for the future and as “troubled deviants” (p. 508). Ganong and Coleman (1995) also noted that the tendency for never-married single mothers to be stereotyped with more negative characteristics may lead social service programs to implement more restrictive and punitive policies as opposed to more supportive policies or programs.

In another study examining perceptions of never-married single mothers, Ganong and colleagues (1988) studied nursing students’ perceptions of never-married pregnant clients versus married pregnant clients and found that the perceptions varied depending on marital status. Participants in the study reported that never-married clients were more likely to be viewed negatively with many negative personal characteristics (e.g., promiscuous, unhappy, lonely, troubled and unable to raise a child) and with no positive personal characteristics. Although the nursing students were told that the unmarried or married mother was a healthy female in her eighth month of pregnancy, students’ reported that it was more likely for the never-married single mother to have complications in her pregnancy if hospitalized.

Jarrett (1996) interviewed 82 never-married African American women who were currently receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) who were living in economically low neighborhoods. Jarrett found that never-married mothers were viewed as abnormal and as persons who take advantage of welfare (AFDC) and are incapable of taking care of their children. Furthermore, Jarrett (1994) found that in a similar study of never-married mothers who were receiving welfare participants reported that the social services workers routinely treated them with questioning remarks and in harassing ways.

These findings are troubling because these studies look at perceptions of individuals who will have the potential to have direct care roles (e.g., nurses, social service providers, etc.) in the lives of individuals and families who may belong to oppressed and marginalized groups of people. These findings are also troubling because stereotype threat involves individuals internalizing perceptions of others (e.g., nurses, doctors, teachers, therapists), which in these studies could mean that single mothers may internalize these negative perceptions (Steele, 1997).

Negative Societal Perceptions of Single Fathers

The findings reported in the literature suggested that societal perceptions of single fathers focus on the perceptions that single fathers may be incapable of raising children (Bennett & Jamieson, 1999; Grief, 1995; Troilo & Coleman, 2008). In particular, Grief (1995) argued that single fathers are viewed through a lens that assumes women should be the children's caregivers while men should be the financial provider. Grief (1995) further noted that this negative view from society leads to single fathers experiencing anxiety and doubt about their ability to appropriately raise a child.

Troilo and Coleman (2008) examined undergraduate college students' perceptions of seven types of fathers (e.g., married, adoptive, divorced residential, stepfathers, divorced non residential, never-married, and gay fathers) and found that never-married single fathers were viewed the most negatively of all of the groups they studied. Along with never-married fathers being perceived most negatively, never-married fathers were also rated lower on almost all of the parenting traits and were ranked higher on negative personal characteristics (e.g., arrogant, immature, promiscuous, and uninvolved).

Bennett and Jamieson (1999) surveyed 200 undergraduate psychology students about their perceptions of four different male and female parent groups (i.e., married, divorced, step and never-married parents). These researchers found that never-married mothers were perceived more negatively than that of the other groups; however, never-married fathers were perceived as having more negative personality traits when compared with never-married mothers. Additionally, Bennett and Jamieson (1999) found that never-married parents as a group were viewed as having inadequate abilities to parent their children. In addition, Goldscheider and Kaufman (2006) analyzed data collected during the 1992-1994 wave of the National Survey of Families and Households (NSFH) to determine attitudes toward never-married fathers in comparison to never-married mothers. Both the male and female participants in the NSFH study were more likely to report that men should already be married when they become a parent and were less likely to endorse the idea that women should already be married when they have children.

Although negative societal stigma appears to be present with regard to never-married single fathers, Amato (2000) noted that children in single father families have a higher standard of living than that of their single mother counterparts. This in part reflects a societal trend in which women earn less than men and highlights the importance and complexity of the stressors that further marginalize women. Although it is also important to note that negative perceptions of never-married single fathers exist (Amato, 2000; Emmers-Sommer, et al., 2003; Goldscheider & Kaufman, 2006; Grief, 1992; Troilo and Coleman, 2008), researchers argued that never-married single fathers appear to be buffered from negative societal perceptions by widespread positive self-perceptions (Emmers-Sommer, et al., 2003; Grief, 1992; Grief & DeMaris, 1990; Nieto, 1990). Furthermore, Nieto (1990)

found that single fathers perceive that society views them positively, which is a direct contradiction to the literature reviewed in this section. Thus, if single fathers do indeed perceive that society views them positively then the existence of these negative perceptions may not impact the single fathers personally.

Single Mother Self-Perceptions of Negative Attributes

Researchers have found that never-married single mothers' self-perceptions are generally positive (Jarrett, 1994; 1996; Smith, 1997); however a closer look at the literature revealed that single mothers also report experiencing negative stigma from society and view this negative stigma as a harmful force in their lives (Jarrett, 1996; Nieto, 1990; Smith, 1997). Smith (1997) found that although never-married single mothers rated themselves as satisfied with their role as a mother, they rated married mothers as more satisfied with motherhood than themselves. Thus, this finding could illustrate the societal belief that being a married mother is the ideal to strive for and that any form of mothering that does not occur within the context of heterosexual marriage is in some way sub-standard. Beyond not meeting the ideal standard for family structure and thus not being an ideal parent, single mothers also experience stereotype threat, which I described previously as a cognitive process that interferes with performance as the single mother comes to believe that the stereotype defines who she is as a parent (Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Therefore, due to these negative societal perceptions single mothers may come to socially isolate, experience feelings of self-doubt and anxiety, and underperform in social relationships not because of their abilities or personal characteristics, but because of the power of the negative societal stereotype of what it means to be a single mother (Schmader, Johns, & Forbes, 2008; Steele & Aronson, 1995).

Moreover, this finding is consistent with other literature that stated that although single mothers perceive themselves to be competent and skilled, negative societal perceptions impact these mothers in more negative ways such as internalized oppression, which can lead to lack of self-acceptance and can eventually lead to self-loathing (Steele, 1997).

Jarrett (1994) interviewed 82 never-married African American single mothers who were currently receiving AFDC and who lived in low-income neighborhoods. Jarrett (1994) found that this group of never-married mothers both idealized the idea of the “traditional” mother and father family structure while simultaneously perceiving negative stigma from society regarding their never-married single mother status and inability to conform to idealized family structures. Furthermore, Jarrett (1996) also found that this group of never-married mothers experienced both negative societal stigma related to receiving welfare, while perceiving themselves to be skilled and capable parents (e.g., responsible). It is interesting to wonder how this group of single mothers was able to experience stereotype threat, but still maintain their own sense of competence.

Jarrett (1996), in another study, also found that although never-married single mothers were able to perceive themselves as good, competent and skilled mothers, they reported that society’s negative images of them impacted the way they were treated by others. The interviews conducted by Jarrett (1996) illustrated that from these single mothers’ perspectives they feel that society only perceives the negative attributes of never-married single mothers and highlights those instead of focusing on their ability to help their families even in poverty stricken neighborhoods. In this study Jarrett appeared to have identified examples in which others are being influenced by negative stereotypes of single

mothers, but the single mothers themselves appear to have once again found a way to preserve their own sense of self-worth.

The implications of these findings may indicate that self-perceptions for never-married single mothers could be similar in many ways to that of married mothers, however, my feminist framework suggests that social stigma and the effects of stereotype threat may have lasting effects on how single mothers perceive how others view them and consequently on how they view themselves in some areas.

Single Father Self-Perceptions of Negative Attributes

Much of the research has indicated that single fathers' self-perceptions are generally positive (DeMaris & Greif, 1997; Emmers-Sommer, et al., 2003; Grief, 1992; Grief & DeMaris, 1990); however, the literature also documented a few areas of concern for single fathers (Emmers-Sommer, et al., 2003; Grief & DeMaris, 1990; Nieto, 1990; Richards & Schmiede, 1993). The research indicated that the areas of concern in a single father's life may be more related to perceptions of negative situations than perceptions of negative self-attributes.

For example, in a study by Greif and DeMaris (1990) the researchers surveyed 1,132 single fathers in Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia. The majority of the participants in the sample (72%) reported that they were comfortable in their single father role; however Greif and DeMaris (1990) focused their study on the 28% who reported they felt uncomfortable with their role as a single father. When looking at this sub-sample of 28% of the participants the researchers found that single fathers' discomfort increases when their relationships with their children are under stress and when their children's visitation with the ex-partner is not amicable. It is interesting to note several things about these

findings. First of all, the reports of discomfort in the Greif and DeMaris (1990) study appear to be more situational and may not necessarily reflect negative self-perceptions. It may be that single fathers have higher levels of positive self-perceptions and experience situational discomfort over things they cannot control (e.g., ex-partner, visitation decisions). Thus it is important to highlight that single mothers' negative self-perceptions may be related to their own negative self-perceived attributes while single fathers' negative self-perceptions are related to aspects of being a single parent and not to the quality of their character.

In another study exploring single fathers' self-perceptions, Nieto (1990) interviewed 20 custodial single fathers to explore single fathers' self-perceptions of their parental status as a single parent and found that while the majority of the single fathers reported favorably about their ability to parent, many of the single fathers in the study also reported that they experience anxiety about their own expectations to fulfill all the roles associated with being a single father (e.g., meal preparation, children's personal hygiene). It appears that although some of the single fathers experienced anxiety there was minimal uncertainty on whether or not the roles could be performed (e.g., "It's kind of scary, but I know I can handle it") (p.39). This finding reflects the lower levels of negative self-perceptions that single fathers report in comparison to that of single mothers. Moreover, Nieto (1990) found that the single father participants in his study described their households as, "healthy, wholesome" and "the best thing for the children" (p. 29). In addition to the single fathers' positive description of their households they also reported that society views single fathers in "high regard" (p. 31); thus, the single fathers in this study appear to not experience negative social stigma. These findings also support the

argument that single fathers' negative self-perceptions appear to be more connected to aspects of being a single father and not about their personal qualities or parenting abilities.

Furthermore, Emmers-Sommer and colleagues (2003) studied single fathers' perceptions of the single father role and documented single fathers' preferences for two parent heterosexual families. Specifically, using open-ended questions the researchers identified that the five single fathers in this study were unanimous in stating that a family is constituted by the traditional one mother one father family structure. This finding reflects literature that the two-parent traditional family structure is the preferred and appropriate family structure according to societal norms (Amato, 2000). These participants also reported they wanted society to be more understanding of their parental status and appreciate them more for their efforts to be good parents. These researchers also noted that single fathers perceive the need to fulfill dual roles as both the breadwinner of the family and the caretaker of the family. Along with the difficulties in balancing roles, single fathers indicate that they feel they need to prove themselves and expressed frustration in society's negative assumptions of single fathers (Emmers-Sommer et al., 2003). Additionally, single fathers reported that as single fathers they are perceived as not equal to the mother in the court system.

Richards and Schmiede (1993) studied the problems and strengths that single mothers and fathers self reported. By using open-ended questions regarding the perceptions of strengths and problems faced by single mothers and fathers the researchers found that single fathers in the sample reported that role demand and task overload were common challenges for them. Single fathers also reported that scheduling a personal social life and

tasks related to being a single parent were challenges. Finally, both single fathers and mothers reported that they sometimes felt “lonely and out of place” (p. 280).

While some single fathers report anxiety in their role as a single father and report challenges associated with role demand, task overload and stress related to having a personal life, it is important to consider that the negative self-perceptions of single fathers may be more related to situational circumstances or stressors and not to inherent characteristics or ability. Based on my feminist framework this difference is important to consider because a feminist perspective allows for the critique of the ways in which men are more highly valued by society and additionally how men come to perceive themselves as more valuable (Baber & Allen, 1992; hooks, 2000; Steele, 1997). Patriarchy and the effects of patriarchy transform and mold perceptions of oneself and others. I would argue that the effects of patriarchy transform society’s beliefs of single mothers differently than those of single fathers. For example, the interviews conducted by Jarrett (1996) highlighted the idea that although single mothers perceive themselves to be good and competent parents they view society as only focusing on the negative stereotypes of never-married single mothers. While single mothers report that they perceive society to view them negatively (Jarrett, 1996), single fathers report that society views them with high regard (Nieto, 1990). From my feminist perspective it can be hypothesized that the positive regard that single fathers perceive from society is further positively enhanced by the effects of patriarchy and male privilege whereas research suggested that society perceives single mothers as deviant (Ganong & Coleman, 1995). Again as discussed previously, these negative societal perceptions can be internalized by single mothers and thus create added negative self-perceptions.

Research Question

Given my literature review, it is clear that previous studies have not compared societal perceptions of never-married custodial single mothers to never-married custodial single fathers. Additionally, previous researchers have not systematically nor directly studied societal negative perceptions of single mothers or fathers. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to examine the differences in negative perceptions of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers. The following research questions were examined. Do the negative societal perceptions of never-married custodial single parents vary based on gender? If the perceptions do vary then how do they vary?

Definitions

For the purposes of this study never-married single mothers were defined as mothers who have never been legally married and have custody of their children who are under 18 years of age. Never-married single fathers are also defined as fathers who have never been legally married and have custody of their children who are under 18 years of age.

CHAPTER THREE

METHOD

Participants

Sample Recruitment

This study utilized secondary data analysis. In particular, this study used data from a larger vignette and survey 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 in an effort to sample the general public, namely: (1) professional and community email listservs, (2) announcements on local television stations, and (3) fliers posted throughout an Upper Midwestern community.

Participant Description

The larger dataset was comprised of 873 participants with 445 participants completing the single mother version of the survey and 428 completing the single father version of the survey. For this study, the single mother sample was comprised of 409 participants who answered the question being analyzed for this study. The single father sample for this study was comprised of 360 participants who answered the relevant question for this study. Thus, the total sample for this current study is 769. The majority of the participants for both samples were women, White, and not parents. The age range for the single mother sample was 18 to 75 years with a mean age of 31.06 (SD = 12.77), while the age range for the single father sample was 18 to 74 with a mean age of 30.37 years (SD = 13.56). The sub-samples are further described in Table 1.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Sample

Characteristics	<u>Single Mother Survey</u>		<u>Single Father Survey</u>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Gender				
Female	302	73.8	259	71.9
Male	106	25.9	99	27.7
Race/Ethnicity				
Latino/a	7	1.7	1	.3
African American	3	0.7	4	1.1
Native American	5	1.2	5	1.4
Asian American	8	2.0	6	1.7
White	378	92.4	338	93.9
Biracial/Multiracial	6	1.5	5	1.4
Middle Eastern/Arabic	2	0.5	0	0
Relationship Status				
Single, never-married	190	46.5	180	50.0
Cohabiting	19	4.6	25	6.9
Married	176	43.0	137	38.1
Separated	4	1.0	1	.3
Divorced	17	4.2	10	2.8
Widowed	1	0.2	5	1.4
Other	1	0.2	1	0.3

Table 1. (continued)

Characteristics	<u>Single Mother Survey</u>		<u>Single Father Survey</u>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Highest Level of Education				
Grade School	0	0	4	0.8
High School/GED	29	7.1	23	4.2
Two year or tech training	21	5.1	18	5.0
Some college	175	42.8	176	48.9
College degree	86	21.0	62	17.2
Graduate/professional degree	98	24.0	76	21.1
Student at University/College				
No	154	37.7	32	36.7
Yes	254	62.1	226	62.8
Current Work Status				
Full-time	166	40.6	120	33.3
Part-time	151	36.9	150	41.7
Seasonal/temporary	34	8.3	33	9.2
Unemployed/not working	43	10.5	41	11.4
Retired	5	1.2	4	1.1
Homemaker	10	2.4	11	3.1
Disability	0	0	0	0

Table 1. (continued)

Characteristics	<u>Single Mother Survey</u>		<u>Single Father Survey</u>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Where Participants Live				
Urban/city	335	81.9	287	79.7
Rural	73	17.8	71	19.7
Other	0	0	0	0
Yearly Gross Income				
None	9	2.2	12	3.3
Under \$5,000	83	20.3	82	22.8
\$5,000-\$14,999	101	24.7	90	25.0
\$15,000-\$24,000	38	9.3	30	8.3
\$25,000-\$29,999	22	5.4	14	3.9
\$30,000-\$39,999	37	9.0	21	5.8
\$40,000-\$49,999	27	6.6	22	6.1
\$50,000-\$74,999	46	11.2	50	13.9
\$75,000-\$99,999	21	5.1	20	5.6
\$100,000-\$200,000	19	4.6	14	3.9
Over \$200,000	3	0.7	2	.6

Table 1. (continued)

Characteristics	<u>Single Mother Survey</u>		<u>Single Father Survey</u>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Type of Household Raised In				
Step-family/blended family	33	8.1	19	5.3
Two biological parent family	334	81.7	305	84.7
Single-mother family	25	6.1	17	4.7
Single-father family	4	1.0	1	.3
Grandparent(s)	1	0.2	1	.3
Foster family	0	0	0	0
Adoptive family	4	1.0	5	1.4
Relative(s)	1	0.2	0	0
Other	7	1.7	11	3.1
Have Children				
No	240	58.7	224	62.2
Yes	168	41.1	135	37.5
Children Live with Participants				
No	20	4.9	21	5.8
Yes	149	36.4	113	31.4
Do not have children	156	38.1	157	43.6
Did not answer	84	20.5	69	19.2

Table 1. (continued)

Characteristics	<u>Single Mother Survey</u>		<u>Single Father Survey</u>	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Participant is a single parent				
No	355	86.8	315	87.5
Yes	40	9.8	33	9.2

N = 409 Single Mother Survey; *N* = 360 Single Father Survey.

Data Collection

Procedure

As mentioned previously, the data for this current study were part of a larger research project that examined societal beliefs about never-married custodial single mothers and fathers. For the larger project and this current project, participants were asked to complete online questionnaires. In particular, participants were first provided with a consent form; if the participants decided to submit their completed survey they indicated consent. After consenting, participants were randomly assigned to read one of two vignettes about a never-married custodial single mother or father. The two vignettes were identical, except for the gender of the single parent (See Appendix A and B). Specifically, the vignette included a positive parenting example where a problem arose and the parent solved the problem. After reading the vignette the participants were asked to complete three Likert scale questionnaires focused on beliefs about never-married custodial single mothers or fathers. The first questionnaire focused specifically on initial perceptions of the vignette parent. The second and third questionnaires asked the participants about their general beliefs about never-married custodial single mothers or fathers. Upon completion

of the three measures participants completed a series of demographic questions and then three open ended questions, one of which will be used for this study. The two open ended questions not used for this study were: (1) What do you see as the positive qualities or characteristics of single mothers [fathers]?; and (2) What do you see as the challenges or struggles experienced by single mothers [fathers]? Finally, it is important to note that the participants were not compensated for participating in this study.

Measure

The open-ended question used for this study stated: (1) What do you see as the negative qualities or characteristics of single mothers [fathers]?

Data Analysis

Feminist thematic analysis was used to analyze the secondary data for this study. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis “is a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p. 79). Braun and Clarke also noted that thematic analysis goes further and interprets aspects within the data. In particular, feminist thematic analysis involves coding the data in a way that is aware of gender based differences in how society perceives men and women. Additionally, as I was immersing myself in the data and then coding the data, I was aware of the societal structures and beliefs that privilege men and at the same time disadvantage women (Baber & Allen, 1992; Enns, 2004; hooks, 2000). This feminist lens allowed me to be sensitive to mother blaming or pathologizing as well as ideas associated with the “heroic” father. Further, my feminist lens also helped me to be cognizant of the idealizing that exists within our society of the two parent heterosexual family structure. Thus, in my reporting of the results and my interpretations of my results I was informed by the above feminist beliefs.

The six phases of thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke (2006) are as follows: (1) familiarize yourself with the data, (2) generate initial codes, (3) search for themes, (4) review themes, (5) define and name themes, and (6) produce the report. For the most part the process outlined by Braun and Clarke was followed for this current study. I began the analysis by reading through the data three times. I then generated initial codes, which are keywords or phrases, that represented possible differences between the descriptions of single mothers' and fathers' negative attributes. I proceeded by identifying initial examples that could fit each of the codes. At that point, I met with my advisor for peer debriefings (Daly, 2007; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), with the purpose of adding greater credibility to my coding process and to ensure that my coding was informed by the feminist framework that guided this study. During those meetings, my advisor coded sections of the data that I was struggling to code, sections of the data that I was confident in my coding, and randomly selected sections of the data. My advisor coded these sections without knowing how I had coded them in an effort to "check" my coding and, thus, help to ensure that I was accurately representing the ideas in the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

After a series of peer debriefings, I read the data again and began to link related codes to one another in effort to begin the process of identifying categories. Once I identified what I thought were categories I again met with my advisor for peer debriefing to discuss the categories that I had identified and the categories that my advisor identified. During these peer debriefings we also discussed how my feminist framework guided my identification of categories within the data. After we had agreed on the categories, I began the process of identifying the themes within each category as well as the sub-themes that existed within themes. Thus, the data were divided into three separate sections: (1)

categories, (2) themes, and (3) sub-themes. Categories represent a level of patterned responses within a set of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Themes also represent a patterned response but comprise a more detailed analysis of the categories. Sub-themes further delineate responses within themes.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Utilizing the process of feminist thematic analysis, I identified three categories that each represent differences in participants' perceptions of the negative attributes of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers. The categories are: (1) inability to meet children's gender specific needs, (2) mothering is inherent and fathering is not, and (3) negative attributes for mothers and fathers differ. Each category is described below and illustrated by themes and sub-themes. The themes and sub-themes are illustrated by verbatim quotes from the data.

Inability to Meet Children's Gender Specific Needs

Participants commented on the idea that there were specific needs that daughters have that single fathers were not able to meet and specific needs that single mothers could not provide either daughters or sons. While these ideas are both captured by the category of being unable to meet certain gender specific needs of children, the ideas varied based on the type of needs identified. Thus, this category is comprised of two themes and a number of different sub-themes. The first theme is that single fathers have a difficult time with "girl activities," which appeared to mean to my participants that there were certain needs that daughters have or tasks that are involved in raising daughters that single fathers would be unable to meet or perform; and that these needs are best met by mothers. This theme is illustrated by the following quotation, "[single fathers find it] "hard to deal with situations with daughters." Participants defined the idea of "girl activities" in two primary ways, which represent the two sub-themes within this larger theme. The first sub-theme is the inability to keep or maintain a home. The quotations that illustrate this sub-theme appear to

focus on the perception that never-married custodial single fathers lack basic life skills or are unable to perform daily household tasks such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry. This sub-theme is illustrated by the following quotations: “[single fathers might not know how to do] some of the activities usually associated with mothers (food prep, mending clothes);” “lack of household skills;” “single fathers don’t pay attention to the small stuff like mothers do. Safety for example. Also compassion and nutrition;” “it would be hard [for single fathers] to answer questions they [children] might have and to see that they are dressed so they are not the butts of jokes from other kids in school.” These quotations illustrate a belief that there are basic life skills that single fathers inherently do not possess, but that single mothers do possess. This belief about single fathers’ negative attributes may not be about their single parent status, but rather a belief about gender. From my feminist framework it is possible to infer that the participants’ comments about single fathers and mothers being responsible for separate duties is likely a product of an oppressive patriarchal system that systematically and narrowly defines the roles of men and women. This patriarchal system limits men and women and impacts the way society views what is possible or appropriate for men and women to do as parents. Additionally the binary notion of gender strictly limits the role of the mother as the nurturer and the father as the provider and thus also fuels the notion of the essentialism of fatherhood and motherhood (Silverstein, 1996; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). The perception of fatherhood and motherhood as essential means that children raised in single parent headed households are inherently deprived and that single parents are always inadequate.

The second sub-theme, under this theme of single fathers having a difficult time with “girl activities,” is single fathers have an inability to address issues of menstruation

and puberty with their daughters. This sub-theme is illustrated by the following quotations: “[it would be] difficult to be a single father of a young girl at the time when she passes through puberty and struggles to learn to be a woman – All the love in the world doesn’t get you through that one very well. Men are simply not women and cannot relate to a young daughter as well.” This quotation appears to illustrate a belief that despite the love of a father, only mothers can provide guidance about issues of menstruation and puberty to young girls. This belief that only mothers can provide guidance through puberty may not be related to their parenting status (e.g., single parent, married parent) but illustrates again a belief regarding the gender of the parent providing the guidance. The feminist framework that guides this study leads me to believe that societal perceptions are often guided by patriarchal values and beliefs that restrict certain abilities of mothers and limits what is possible or appropriate for fathers to talk about and understand. While it was interesting to note the concern about girls’ menstruation and puberty it is also noteworthy to mention the complete absence of comments regarding mothers raising boy during puberty. One would hope that the love of a parent regardless of gender during adolescence would be a source of support and would assist a child through the many changes experienced during puberty.

The second theme under the category of inability to meet children’s gender specific needs is that single mothers cannot provide a male or fatherly influence, which appeared to mean to my participants that a male or fatherly influence is necessary for children and only men or fathers can provide that influence. This theme is illustrated by the following quotations, “[Single mothers] cannot fill the role of a male/father figure for their children” and, “Children miss out on the father’s role in the family aspect of life. Fathers represent a sort of safeness that may be sometimes not there with only the mother raising the child.”

Participants expanded on the idea of a “male or fatherly influence” in two primary ways, which represent the two sub-themes within this larger theme. The first sub-theme is the inability of mothers to provide a tough emotional presence. The quotations that illustrate this sub-theme appear to focus on the belief that men and women provide opposing dichotomous emotions for children (e.g., tough vs. nurturing, over-protective vs. encouraging independence), and is illustrated by the following quotation: “[Single mothers are] too protective of their children. The children need a father’s tough emotional presence as well in a family.” Again, this sub-theme is clearly based on gender assumptions that limit the emotions that women are allowed or able to express and reinforces the notion that in order to develop in a healthy manner children need two opposite gendered parents.

The second sub-theme, under this theme of single mothers not being able to provide a male or fatherly influence is that children lack a role model who teaches them a set of male skills. This sub-theme regarding male skills is illustrated by the following quotations, “their kids won’t have a dad, which I think is very important in order to learn about different things easily. . .” and “. . . make sure that someone of the opposite sex is involved to teach them all about life for example, the child’s father, grandfather, uncle someone.” It is interesting to note that while the importance of “male skills” is mentioned throughout this data, the participants do not actually define “male skills” rather referring to those “male skills” in vague terms such as “different things.” From my feminist framework, this ambiguous mention of male skills without specific detail may be interpreted as a gender specific social stereotype where all men have a skill set or emotional range that is stereotypically masculine (e.g., tough). Interpreting from my feminist framework, this stereotypical view of men as tough evades specific or detailed description due to the

pervasive nature of the stereotype and its subsequent perceptions as being valuable in raising healthy children. Additionally the lack of definition for the role of the father is limiting to men as they are provided with no guidance for how to be a good father and by not having a clear role fathers can be perceived as unimportant (Silverstein; Silverstein & Auerbach). However, the skill sets of single mothers were clearly defined in my data. For example, single mothers were described as performing or completing tasks such as food preparation, mending clothes, and housekeeping. The descriptions of single mothers' roles were specific and clearly defined while the skill set of single fathers was ambiguous as if we actually do not know what fathers do, but we know it is important. Again this sub-theme illustrates the feminist notion of male privilege, which involves privileging and prioritizing men and their actions over women and their actions.

Mothering is Inherent and Fathering is not

While describing the negative attributes of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers, participants commented on the belief that women inherently possess abilities that allow them to care for children while men do not. The notion that mothering is inherent and natural, but that fathering is unnatural and requires training represents the second category in my findings. It is also important to note that the ideas in this category support a belief that single mothers for the most part are viewed as superior parents to single fathers; again this is due solely to their gender.

The theme within this category addresses the concern that single fathers do not possess nurturing abilities, but that single mothers are innately able to nurture their children. The following quotations illustrate this theme, “[Single fathers] don’t have the same nurturing qualities women learn in our society or maybe [have] less early childhood

experience” “[Single fathers] aren’t quite as in tune with feelings of children as a mom would be” “[Single fathers] cannot provide the same nurturing that a mother could” and “Children miss the nurturing of a mother.” These quotations that comprise the theme that single fathers do not possess “nurturing qualities” appear to reflect societal norms and stereotypes of men and women rather than the actual abilities of single mothers and single fathers. Within this theme is a sub-theme about how single fathers’ lack of “nurturing qualities” specifically impact daughters. The following quotations illustrate this sub-theme: “[Single fathers provide] too much of a paternal influence/lack of a maternal influence, especially on female children” “Sometimes young girls don’t get the security /understanding that mother would give” and “[Single fathers are] too hard on their kids, not sensitive to daughter’s needs.” From my feminist framework it is possible to interpret these perceptions as once again being fueled by stereotypical views regarding gender roles and beliefs about what men and women are able to offer children. Moreover, the participant’s comment regarding single father’s being “too hard on their kids” may also reflect the narrowly defined stereotyped role that fathers are placed in, namely that of disciplinarian, which leaves little room for nurturing or caretaking (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). This sub-theme is also based on the assumption that all young girls being raised without a mother are automatically disadvantaged and are at a deficit compared to their female peers with a mother and a father. Additionally, the beliefs being reflected in this sub-theme may reflect ideas about the fragility and sensitivity of girls, which further supports patriarchal ideas about girls and women being weaker or less than men and boys and thus needing more careful parenting. Finally, this sub-theme also reflects an assumption that daughters

being raised by a never-married custodial single father have no contact with their mother or another mother figure.

Negative Attributes for Single Mothers and Single Fathers Differ

The third and final category reflects participants' ideas about how the negative attributes possessed by single mothers and fathers differed. The participants' comments regarding the negative attributes of single mothers appeared to be connected to her personhood while participants' comments regarding the negative attributes of single fathers were primarily connected to situational events or circumstances and not his personhood. Thus, this category is comprised of several themes and a number of different sub-themes that are illustrated by verbatim quotes.

The first theme is that single fathers are dependent on others while single mothers are too independent. The first set of quotations illustrate the idea that single fathers are dependent on others to raise their children: "I think that it is easy for a single father to give up his role as a father and expect others to take care of the child..." "...I think that single fathers may rely on other people to help out, whereas mothers often go it alone" "Some [single fathers] are devoted to being a dad...other's shirk their responsibility" "[Single fathers] may be more likely to push the child/children off on to a relative if they feel it is too hard to raise them on their own" and "[Single fathers] may pass their children off to someone else." The previous quotations suggest that participants viewed single fathers as dependent upon others whereas the following quotations suggest that single mothers are viewed as too independent. "[Single mothers are] unwilling to allow others to assist them in things" "[Single mothers are] unyielding, workaholic" "[Single mothers become] so self-sufficient they never give another person the chance to help" "[Single mothers] can become

over-independent and refuse help when help is either offered and or needed” and finally, “[Single mothers] tend to be over self-sufficient.” My feminist framework leads me to wonder if single fathers are allowed to ask for any assistance. If they do ask for assistance are they immediately perceived as being too dependent, because asking for help goes against the male stereotype of being self-sufficient and independent? These quotations about men being too dependent may reflect societal belief about it not being acceptable for men to ask for help as well as reflect societal beliefs about men not being fit parents on their own. Alternatively the societal perception that women are more communal or dependent on others leaves little room for women, single mother or not, to be viewed as independent or self-sufficient, thus deviating from the societal expectation for women. Additionally, for women, the act of stepping into a male-dominated world independently would go against what is stereotypical for women. Thus, societal expectations are based on the notion that women will need help and when some single mothers do not ask for help they may be perceived as deviant.

Another theme under this category is that the negative attributes assigned to single fathers appear to be situational and have less to do with their personhood than those assigned to single mothers. Thus, my participants described single fathers’ negative attributes as situational and these views are captured by the following three sub-themes, namely that (1) single fathers do not pay child support, (2) single fathers have a difficult time finding child care, and (3) single fathers will have a difficult time finding another partner or a difficult time with dating.

The first sub-theme under the theme that the negative attributes for single fathers are primarily situational, as described by my participants, is that single fathers do not pay

child support. This sub-theme is reflected in the following quotations. “Well some of them do not pay child support or pay their children any attention or pick them up when they are supposed to,” and “It totally depends on the father. Some single fathers do not pay child support or even care to spend time with their children; others are very consistent with this.” The quotations from the participants seem to reflect a belief that one of the negative attributes of single fathers is that they do not pay child support and potentially reflects an assumption that one of the ways that a single father takes care of his children is by providing money to them. This sub-theme is particularly interesting given that participants were asked to describe the negative attributes of never-married *custodial* single fathers and given that they are custodial parents I am unclear as to whom these single fathers would pay child support or why the assumption would be made that they owe child support. This sub-theme appears to reflect a strong belief that single fathers are not custodial parents and that even in dual parent heterosexual families my participants may be influenced by the assumption that the primary role of a father is to provide financial support (Nieto, 1990).

The second sub-theme under the theme that the negative attributes for single fathers are situational is that single fathers have a difficult time finding childcare. The quotations that reflect the idea that single fathers have a difficult time finding childcare are as follows, “[It would be difficult to find] daycare when at work,” and “Hard to find work, adequate childcare, and still spend quality time with their children. Lots to do and no one to share the burden with.” These comments from my participants regarding the perceived negative attributes of single fathers have little to do with their personhood but are rather about negative situations that might arise related to balancing work and childcare. Due the narrow and often rigid gender roles that define fatherhood, fathers are seen as providers and thus

must work to support themselves and their children so it make sense that participants would perceive fathers as needing daycare and having difficulties finding appropriate childcare. Furthermore, the fact that participants did not perceive single mothers as having difficulties with childcare is not surprising as participants may not assume that single mothers need to work as the role of mother is frequently not associated with financially providing for her family.

And finally the third sub-theme under the theme that the negative attributes of single fathers are situational is the perception that single fathers have a difficult time finding another partner or a difficult time with dating, which is illustrated by the following quotations. “May be distracted by trying to find another significant other;” “More concerned about their dating life, too lenient;” “Limited social life;” and “Hard to get a woman to date him because he has prior obligations, so much responsibility, and lack of time” The comments from my participants suggest that a negative attribute that never-married custodial single fathers may possess is that they will have a difficult time dating or finding another partner and that their pursuit for another partner may have a negative impact on their parenting as it might restrict the time they have for their children. These comments reflect perceptions of single fathers that can be negative but are certainly not related to his personhood but rather a situation that could be difficult or challenging.

These three sub-themes appear to reflect more situational qualities that would be challenging or negative for the single father but are not connected to a single father’s personhood or personal ability and are therefore not as damaging. From my feminist framework I could interpret that single fathers are buffered from society’s negative

perceptions of their personhood due to a positive regard for male culture and the existence of male privilege.

The third theme under the category that negative attributes for single mothers and single fathers are different is that single mothers' negative attributes are inherent to her personality or personhood. Specifically my participants described the following negative attributes which are the seven sub-themes within this theme. The first sub-theme is that single mothers are perceived as neglectful. The following quotations illustrate this idea that single mothers are neglectful: "Overexertion, negligence;" "Sometimes I believe that single mothers neglect certain areas of their children's lives, just because of the fact that they are around less;" and "[Single mothers] may be neglectful." The second sub-theme is that single mothers are perceived as irresponsible and immature. This sub-theme is reflected in the following quotations: "Sometimes single mothers are children themselves and are irresponsible as parents;" "Possibly immature, careless, negative self-image;" "...with the number of single mothers today it implies poor decision making and irresponsibility;" and "Someone who is irrational blames her problems on her family." The third sub-theme focuses on the perception that single mothers have mental health challenges. These quotations illustrate this sub-theme "[Single mothers are] tired, frustrated, stressed out, homes un-kept, old car that probably needs repair, low self-esteem, problematic relationships, families that won't/can't help, poor health;" "[Single mothers] have a hard time dealing with things because they have no one else there for them. Depression is common;" "May feel insecure;" and "If the single mom becomes depressed that is very damaging to the kids." The fourth sub-theme is that single mothers are perceived as making poor choices. This sub-theme is illustrated by the following quotations: "[Single mothers]

may have been reckless at one time;” “[Single mothers have] low self-esteem, poor decision making at some point in life;” “Bad decision making;” and “Most of them had their children, ‘by accident.’ How bright is that? It is unfair to the children. Despite the fact that they may be loved, their family and financial situation cannot be as strong as if their mother had planned more for the future.” The fifth sub-theme is that single mothers are perceived as promiscuous, which is illustrated by the following quotations: “[Single mothers] take risks sexually and in relationships;” “[Single mothers] had children out of wedlock;” “Largely the lack of responsibility they showed by not saving sex until they were married;” and “[Single mothers] are seen as fragile or loose.” The sixth sub-theme under negative attributes are inherent to single mothers’ personality is that single mothers are insecure. This sub-theme is supported by the following quotations: “[Single mothers] may feel insecure;” “Worrisome, somewhat insecure;” and “[Single mothers have] unresolved anger issues with men, distrustful, overwhelmed, very little self-confidence.” The final sub-theme is that single mothers are perceived as having little hope for the future, which is illustrated by the following quotations: “Stressed out easily, pessimistic;” “Exhausted and discouraged;” and “[Single mothers are] stressed about having to do it all. Knowing that they don’t do anything right.”

These seven sub-themes are in stark contrast from the previous sub-themes describing single fathers’ negative attributes. While single fathers struggle to pay child support, find adequate childcare, and balance dating with being a single parent, the above descriptions of single mothers describe them as terrible and inadequate people, not as individuals in a challenging situation. While some of the quotations could be tied to their single parent status, the majority are about whom single mothers are as people. In this way,

the stereotype of the heroic yet unnatural single father who has “stepped up” in what must be a bad situation to parent his children is reinforced at the same time that the stereotype of the deviant and troubled single mother who is unable to properly parent her children is also reinforced. From my feminist framework it is possible to interpret that these negative societal perceptions of never-married custodial single mothers stem from a patriarchal belief system that prizes White heterosexual men over women. Many of the comments regarding the perceived negative attributes of single mothers are not primarily connected to their status as single mothers but as women who have deviated from the societal norm of a two parent heterosexual family. This patriarchal system that prizes men over women is hurtful to both women and men as it forces them into narrowly defined roles that limit the range of acceptable emotional, physical and mental opportunities for men as well as women.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

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

Discussion of Main Findings

While I was able to identify a number of categories, themes, and sub-themes, there are four main findings that occur across all of the results: (1) the essential nature of gender, (2) differences' in the perceptions' of never-married single mothers and fathers, (3) focus on sexuality for women and not men, and (4) societal qualifications of the healthy family.

The Essential Nature of Gender

Throughout the identified categories, themes, and sub-themes the importance of gender is clearly documented as participants appear to be making assumptions about never-married custodial single parents based on their gender more often than their status as a single parent. Since feminists have long argued that gender is one of the ways we organize our perceptions and expectations of people, it may be that my findings are as much about gender as they are about single parent status (Acker, et al., 1983; Baber & Allen, 1992; Enns, 2004; hooks, 2000). In particular, it appeared that my participants' perceptions of the negative attributes of never-married single mothers and fathers are not primarily guided by their status as a single parent but are rather guided by patriarchal stereotypes of what is appropriate for women and men. As discussed earlier, Amato (2000) noted that the prevailing and acceptable stereotyped role for mothers is as the caretaker or nurturer and the role for fathers is as the financial provider or breadwinner. In many ways, the findings of my study appear to fit within these stereotypes. For example, my participants appeared

to perceive single mothers as being nurturing while single fathers were perceived as lacking the ability to nurture and care for children.

Thus, even though I specifically asked participants to identify negative attributes of single parents, sometimes it was difficult to determine if participants were reflecting on negative attributes of single parents or reflecting on negative attributes that all fathers and mothers may struggle with due to having their behaviors limited by stereotypical gender roles. For instance, is it that single fathers struggle to discuss puberty with daughters or is it that my participants are reflecting a societal notion that fathers as a group are perceived to struggle to discuss puberty with daughters. Given my feminist framework, it is important to acknowledge that gender does not determine whether or not a parent is able to discuss puberty, but again this reflects the narrow roles we place women and men in and how we as a society define what people are capable of based on gender. Furthermore, the essential nature of gender in the minds of my participants could also be illustrated by the descriptions that single fathers have a difficult time with “girl activities” and single fathers find it “hard to deal with situations with daughters.” Again, these descriptions may not actually reflect on what single fathers are able to offer their daughters, but reflect a societal belief that fathers in general have a hard time connecting with and meeting the needs of daughters.

It seems important to note that in general the role of a father is not as well-defined compared to the role of a mother (Silverstein, 1996; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). This lack of a well-defined role is limiting and hurtful to men as they are perceived by society as only being financial providers and disciplinarians, which restricts interactions with their children and hinders their direct involvement in the parenting process. Scholars have

argued that it would be beneficial to both women and men if the role of the father was more clearly defined to include direct interactions with children beyond discipline or financial support (Enns, 2004; hooks, 2000; Silverstein; Silverstein & Auerbach).

Because gender appears to be a driving force in how we view and perceive people it is important to interpret my data from a feminist framework as such a framework allows for a critique of narrowly defined gender roles, which in the case of my current study places unfair critiques on what single mothers and fathers are able to do for and provide for their children. My feminist framework allows for a critique of those roles and acknowledges the ways that women and men are oppressed by patriarchal ideals (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1983; Baber & Allen, 1992; Enns, 2004; hooks, 2000). Therefore, from a feminist perspective, the findings for my study do not reflect the actual negative attributes that all never-married custodial single mothers and fathers may live with, but instead reflect the current societal beliefs about men and women and their perceived parenting abilities, based on a binary essentialist framework.

One side note that seems important to highlight, is that my finding that gender is a essential and primary force in how society perceives and judges single parents may also support how gender non-specific research on single parents, that I reviewed in my literature review, may not be helpful. While gender non-specific research aims to generate information about single parents in general, my assumption is that participants are applying an essentialist notion of gender on single parents when responding to surveys and thus may render that research less useful. In conclusion, while my research question aimed to ask the perceived negative attributes for never-married single mothers and fathers the data appear to capture a larger belief about what is appropriate for a women and men when engaging in

the act of parenting and reveals the larger patriarchal societal structure that guides people's perceptions of not only who women and men are but who they can and should be and what they can subsequently be (Acker, Barry, & Esseveld, 1983; Baber & Allen, 1992; Enns, 2004; hooks, 2000).

Differences in the Perceptions' of Never-Married Single Mothers and Fathers

Another main finding that I would like to highlight is related to the specific ways that the negative attributes of never-married single mothers and fathers identified by my participants differed. More specifically, the negative attributes for never-married custodial single fathers appeared to be more situational in nature, while the negative attributes of single mothers were primarily about their character or who they were as people. For instance, single fathers were described as having a difficult time finding child care and as struggling with dating or finding a new romantic partner. These descriptions of single fathers' negative attributes are more about challenges that single fathers could experience and do not reflect negatively on who they are as individuals. In contrast, my participants described single mothers in terms such as neglectful, immature, insecure, and poor decision makers. These descriptions are not about challenges they experience but are about the quality of their personhood and thus reflect a sharp contrast in how single mothers and fathers are described. This contrast is not surprising given the existing literature. Before connecting this main finding to the existing literature it seems important to note that not only did my participants report more personally based negative attributes for never-married custodial single mothers they also reported quantitatively more negative attributes for single mothers than fathers. This finding could reflect my participants' bias based on

gender and again reflects a societal belief that values men and the roles of men over women.

Specifically, this notion that single fathers' negative attributes are tied to the challenges of being a single parent is consistent with existing literature on single fathers' self-report of negative attributes. In particular, Nieto (1990) found that the anxiety that single fathers reported was related to situational factors such as meal preparation and children's personal hygiene and not due to personal deficits or perceived flaws in character. Furthermore, Nieto reported that his participants were not only comfortable in their single parent role but also reported that society viewed them (single fathers) in "high regard" (p. 31). In addition, participants in the Grief and DeMaris (1990) study reported that the discomfort they experience in the single father role was primarily due to situational events or circumstances. Both of these studies illustrate how single fathers also experience their negative attributes as situational and not about who they are as parents. While my findings are consistent with the Grief and DeMaris and Nieto studies regarding never-married single fathers' self-perceptions, it appears that my findings are somewhat inconsistent with literature that found that single fathers were perceived as having more negative traits when compared to single mothers (Bennett & Jamieson, 1999). My current findings are also somewhat inconsistent with literature that found that participants viewed single fathers as being incapable of raising children (Bennett & Jamieson, 1999; Grief, 1995; Troilo & Coleman, 2008) However, my findings regarding the personal nature of the perceived negative attributes of single mothers appears to be consistent with existing literature that found that society views single mothers as unhappy and deviant, and as having poor child

rearing abilities, and having little hope for the future (Ganong & Coleman, 1995; Ganong, Coleman & Riley 1988).

From a feminist framework one can interpret that the perceived negative attributes for single mothers are more personal due to the pervasive nature of patriarchy and the devaluation of women and those in oppressed roles. Because the never-married single mother is not buffered from societal perceptions by male privilege she is attacked personally and perceived as deviant and abnormal, which thus allows her to be viewed as insecure, as making poor decisions and as neglectful. Moreover, feminists have argued that men are privileged and valued over women even when men are engaged in less than ideal roles (e.g., never-married single father vs. heterosexual married father) (Acker, et al., 1983; Baber & Allen, 1992; Enns, 2004; hooks, 2000). Thus, my data appear to support the idea that patriarchy works to privilege men, which can be evidenced by the situational nature of the perceived negative attributes of never-married custodial fathers versus the very personal nature of the perceived negative attributes of never-married single mothers. Another factor that may facilitate the critiques of single mothers being more personal in nature is the belief that mothering is inherent for women and thus the very act of being a mother is a part of her personhood. Therefore, it might make sense that the critiques of single mother are personal and are about her personality as being a mother is personal and defines who she is from a societal perspective.

Focus on Sexuality for Women and Not Men

Another main finding that is important to highlight is the fact that participants commented on never-married single mothers' sexuality and sexual behaviors, but made no mention of single fathers' sexuality and sexual behaviors. For example, my participants'

comments regarding the negative attributes of never-married custodial single mothers included the belief that single mothers are promiscuous and sexually “loose.” Additionally participants commented that never-married custodial single mothers were irresponsible for having sex before they were married, while not sharing similar comments about single fathers. This finding is consistent with the existing literature as Jarrett’s (1996) participants reported that society views them as needing to engage in prostitution to take care of their children, which supports this myth to an extreme extent of the sexually immoral single mother. Additionally Ganong et al. (1988) found that participants viewed single mothers as licentious, unconventional and having corrupt morals while these same participants did not comment on single fathers’ sexual behaviors. However, Troilo and Coleman (2008) reported that their participants perceived single fathers as promiscuous, which contradicts my finding and the findings of Ganong et al. (1988).

These findings focused on women’s sexuality but not men’s make evident the bias toward the patriarchal belief system that guides peoples’ perceptions of the roles of men and women. Particularly, gender stereotypes emphasize the importance of women being sexually chaste, but allow for men to be more sexually active (Baber & Allen, 1992; Enns, 2004; hooks, 2000). When women are perceived as being sexually active outside of the structure of heterosexual marriage, they are viewed negatively. However, men do not experience the same negative perceptions when they are sexually active prior to or outside of the bounds of heterosexual marriage. Thus, my participants’ description of never-married custodial single mothers’ sexuality as “loose” demonstrates the larger societal belief system that limits the sexuality of women. Additionally feminists have argued that women’s sexuality is often policed by social stigma and sexism in order to maintain gender

inequality, and male privilege, which further hinders the social acceptance of never-married single mothers (Baber & Allen, 1992; Enns, 2004; hooks, 2000). Finally, this perception of never-married single mothers as promiscuous appears to distinguish them from the perceptions of single fathers but also may represent a unique perception of the negative attributes that also distinguish them from divorced and widowed single mothers.

One other interesting finding related to women's sexuality is the fact that the sexuality of daughters was discussed in terms of their process of puberty; however the sexuality of sons was never discussed. This finding again highlights the focus on women's sexuality and the importance that sexuality is perceived to play in the lives of girls and women. While my participants expressed much concern that single fathers would not be able to assist their daughters through the mysterious process of women's puberty, there was no discussion of single mothers experiencing challenges helping their son's through puberty. It possible that my participants feared that if daughters were not carefully guided or policed through puberty that they would become promiscuous and created more single mother headed families.

Societal Qualifications of the Healthy Family

The last main finding that I identified across my results involves perceptions of what constitutes a healthy family. While my study attempted to highlight participants' perceptions of the negative attributes of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers, a closer look at the data indicates that both single mothers and fathers are being compared to an idealized two parent heterosexual married family. My participants appear to be defining a healthy family in terms of heteronormative assumptions, which thus limit the definition of a healthy family to a mother and a father and further explain that children

need both a mother and a father (Oswald, Blume, & Marks, 2005). Thus, based on these perceptions neither the single mother nor the single father, can on their own, raise healthy children.

These findings on the qualifications or specifications for a healthy family are consistent with existing literature that states that the prevailing and acceptable form of the family consists of two heterosexual married parents (Amato, 2000; Oswald et al., 2005). This finding is also consistent with Smith (1997) that found that while never-married single mothers rated themselves as satisfied with their single parent role they rated married mothers as more satisfied signifying that the idealized stereotype of the two parent married heterosexual family is the family structure to strive to attain. Additionally Jarrett (1996) found that single mothers reported feeling societal pressure to marry or include a male partner in order to raise their children appropriately even when they reported feeling confident about their parenting without a male partner. Jarrett also noted that many single mothers become stigmatized by society because they had deviated from the ideal family structure.

In particular, my findings suggest that not only are single parents not meeting what is socially appropriate but also suggests that other types of families are also seen as less than ideal (e.g., gay and lesbian families, step families, cohabitating partners with children) for raising healthy children. These social stereotypes define anything that departs from the two parent heterosexual married family as deviant or abnormal. Thus, many families must face negative societal perceptions, which as discussed at the beginning of this thesis have the possibility of becoming internalized by individual parents or families. This internalization of negative perceptions can lead to “underperformance” in parenting and

family life even when the negative perceptions may not be true of the individual's or family's abilities and competence (e.g., even when the individual is a good and skillful parent) (Steele, 1997, p. 614). Furthermore, negative perceptions can become oppressive and have a transformative effect on individual parents and families. Oppression works to classify and have power over people who are placed in minority groups through a "culture of silence" as well as through institutional structures that place greater and lesser value on groups of people (Freire, 1970; Hanna, Talley, & Guindon, 2000). Because single parent headed households are viewed as less valuable by the larger society, this group of parents can experience oppression and a loss of power due to the negative stereotypes that I have documented in this study (Amato, 1990).

Clinical Implications

There are several implications from this study regarding clinical work with never-married custodial single parents and all families that "deviate" from the idealized two parent heterosexual married family form. One of the first clinical implications from the present study includes being aware of the perceived negative attributes that are often placed upon never-married single mothers and fathers in an effort to not perpetuate them. Being aware of the negative stereotypes that are pervasive and harmful to single parents allows for the therapist to begin addressing them in her or his work with single parents in more inclusive ways.

While being aware of the perceived negative attributes in order to avoid perpetuating them is important, it is only the first step in addressing how the perceptions of the negative attributes of single mothers and fathers may influence how therapy is conducted. The next step in not perpetuating negative stereotypes is addressing and better

understanding how the societal perceptions of the negative attributes of single parents intersects with the beliefs and values of the therapist. Therapists need to understand how their beliefs, values and perceptions about parenting, healthy families, and what children need to be successful influences their clinical work with all families but in particular with single parent headed families. Further, therapists need to explore how their own beliefs and values are shaped by the larger societal messages they receive about what is healthy and normative in family life, which also includes reflecting on how societal negative perceptions of single mothers and fathers influence their own beliefs. This exploration involves the gender, race, or sexual orientation of the therapist and the status, power or privilege the therapist has in the therapy room. For example, when working with a never-married single mother a female therapist may understand explicitly how gender impacts the single mother's daily life but may need to further examine how societal perceptions and stereotypes about being a single parent influence the therapist's thoughts regarding this client's parenting skills, financial situations, and relationships.

Another important clinical implication may involve being aware of the perceived negative attributes of never-married single mothers and fathers in order to more fully understand and address their influence on the lives of the single parents themselves. Opening up space in the therapy room for the single mother or father to voice her or his experience of societal stigma may also allow for the deconstruction of how societal stigma has influenced or impacted her or his life.

Lastly, being aware of the perceived negative attributes of single parents and understanding the emphasis on the idealized family form may help therapists be more inclusive in their work with families. For example, clinicians could use more inclusive

terms or not make assumptions about parental status when talking to clients in therapy or provide more options for parental status when advertising, on paperwork, questionnaires or surveys.

It is my hope that this study has allowed for an exploration of the perceived negative attributes of never-married single mothers and fathers in order to better understand not only how they differ but also how clinicians can address and begin to eliminate the negative perceptions and stereotypes that are harmful and damaging to people. It is also my hope that the clinical implications discussed in this section are part of a larger discussion about the ways that clinicians and all people can become part of eliminating oppressive societal stereotypes that are damaging to all types of people.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study had a number of important strengths, there are two limitations or weaknesses that need to be addressed. The main limitation of this study was the sample composition. While participant recruitment attempted to gather a wide range of participants, the majority of the sample was White, female and single. The majority of participants also had some connection to a university; however, the mean age of the participants was older, signifying that this is not necessarily a sample of traditionally aged college students. Due to the sample composition the generalizability of the study is limited to some extent. Another limitation of the study was that the qualitative data was collected electronically preventing the researchers from asking follow-up or clarifying questions of the participants, which to some extent limited the richness of the data. However, the electronic data collection method allowed for a larger sample to be collected than a traditional qualitative data collection procedure would have facilitated.

Suggestions for Future Research

The results of this study offer a number of suggestions for future research. For example, researchers could address some of the limitations outlined in this study by collecting data from a more diverse sample. Another suggestion for future research would be replicating the larger study by using other groups of single parents (i.e., divorced and widowed single parents) and comparing the perceived negative attributes identified in this study with the perceived negative attributes of divorced and/or widowed single parents. This would allow researchers to begin to identify how negative stereotypes of single mothers and fathers varied both by gender but also by pathway to single parenthood. Additionally, researchers could interview never-married single mothers and fathers about how the perceived negative attributes identified in this study fit with their lived experience and/or impacted their parenting. For example, when individuals view single mothers as abnormal or deviant does that, in any way, impact the way that single mothers parent or engage with their children? This research would provide additional understanding into the influence or importance of societal beliefs and perceptions on single mothers and fathers and their children.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine the differences in the negative perceptions of never-married custodial single mothers and fathers and explore how those perceptions varied by the gender of the single parent. While a person's marital/relationship status often conjures expectations, assumptions and biases, this study supports the notion that gender is as often, if not more often, the primary way we organize our thoughts and assumptions about people. From a feminist perspective, these expectations, which are

based on gender, often precipitate the narrowly defined roles and attributes we assign mothers and fathers and limit what we see as possible for mothers and fathers. When women are undervalued and demeaned it allows for the perpetuation of negative stereotypes, social stigma, and gender inequality. Additionally, when men are placed in rigidly defined roles it also allows for the perpetuation of stereotypical gender socialization, continued gender inequality and oppression for those in minority positions. My hope is that continued research on the impact of societal perceptions will allow for both the critique of the ways we limit women and men as well as ways that people can begin to expand existing descriptions of never-married single mothers and fathers to see them as committed and competent parents. It is also my hope that findings from the current study can aid in opening up the dialogue about the discrepancies in how women and men are viewed by society and in turn how they view themselves.

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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, 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!" 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!"

APPENDIX C

TABLE OF CATEGORIES, THEMES AND SUB-THEMES

Categories:	Themes:	Sub-themes:
Inability to meet children's gender specific needs	Single father's have a difficult time with girl activities	Single fathers are unable to keep or maintain a home
		Single fathers are unable to deal with menstruation or puberty
	Single mother's cannot provide a male or fatherly influence	Single mothers are unable to provide a tough emotional presence
		Children who live with single mothers will lack a role model who teaches them a set of male skills
Mothering is inherent and fathering is not	Single fathers do not possess nurturing abilities	Single father's lack of nurturing abilities impacts girls specifically
	Single mothers are innately able to nurture their children	
Negative attributes for single mothers and single fathers differ	Single fathers are dependent on others while single mothers are too independent	
	The negative attributes assigned to single fathers appear to be situational	Single fathers do not pay child support
		Single fathers have a difficult time finding child care
		Single fathers will have a difficult time finding another partner or a difficult time dating
	Single mother's negative attributes are inherent to her personality or personhood	Neglectful
		Irresponsible and immature
		Mental health challenges
		Poor choices
		Promiscuous
		Insecure
		Little hope for the future