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Moms at Work and Dads at Home: Children’s Evaluations of Parental Roles

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Children’s evaluations of two parental roles, working outside the home, and staying home to take care of children, were assessed in second (M = 7.13 years, SD = .39) and fifth grade (M = 10.42, SD = .57) students (N = 121). Children viewed it as acceptable for both mothers and fathers to work full-time, and used personal choice and social conventional reasons as justifications. In contrast, children found it less acceptable for fathers to stay at home than for mothers to stay at home, and they used gender stereotypes about domestic roles as justifications. With age, children were more flexible in their reasoning and used fewer stereotypes in their evaluations; children from traditional family structures used more stereotypic expectations than did children from non-traditional ones. Overall, children’s interpretations of competence in a caretaker role was highly contingent on the gender of the parent.

Gender stereotyped expectations, particularly about balancing career and child-rearing obligations, are pervasive in current U.S. society (Fuegen, Biernat, Haines, & Deaux, 2004; Milkie, Mattingly, Nomaguchi, Bianchi, & Robinson, 2004). In fact, despite women’s increased role in the workforce in the United States, division of labor in the home is still fairly traditional and fulfills many gender stereotypes (Sabattini & Leaper, 2004; Okin, 1989). For instance, Levant, Slattery, and Loiselle (1987) found that mothers spend significantly more time than fathers in child care and do more of the traditionally feminine household chores, whereas fathers do more of the traditionally masculine chores. Beyond modeling gender differentiated roles, parents are important contributors to children’s understandings of gender roles (Deutsch, Servis, & Payne, 2001; Eccles, Jacobs, & Harold, 1990; Leaper, 2000; Witt, 1997). Parents who view themselves as more traditional in their family roles often endorse their children’s acquisition of gender stereotypical roles and behaviors (Ruble & Martin, 1998). Yet, little work has been conducted to evaluate how children view these parental roles, particularly as a function of their own family structure.

Past research investigating children’s evaluations of gender exclusion focusing on peer activities (e.g., girls excluding a boy from doll-playing) has used the Social Cognitive Domain theory (Smetana, 2006; Turiel, 1983) to examine the types of reasons that children use when evaluating peer decisions to exclude others on the basis of gender (Killen, Pisacane, Lee-Kim, & Ardila-Rey, 2001; Killen & Stangor, 2001). These reasons include unfairness when judging that exclusion is wrong, or conventions and stereotypic expectations when judging that...
exclusion is legitimate. Killen, Lee-Kim, McGlothlin, & Stangor (2002) investigated social judgments about exclusion from peer groups and clubs, and found an age-related increase in a concern about group functioning, which was used, at times, to justify exclusion. With age, there was an increased focus on the discomfort that arises when someone in the group does something that violates conventional behavior, particularly in the area of gender. While gender stereotypes become more flexible with age (e.g., girls can play baseball), there is clearly an age-related increase in the broader concerns about group functioning and what makes a group “work well.” In fact, Horn (2003) demonstrated that exclusion based on gender norms expands during the adolescence years to include decisions made by social cliques (e.g., the criteria for joining a club) and school organizations (e.g., student council decisions about leadership). What underlies these judgments is an increased awareness about groups, which at times reflects notions of equality (Killen, Henning, Kelly, Crystal, & Ruck, 2007), and, at other times, notions of group norms that perpetuate traditions that may be stereotypic.

Children’s and adolescents’ struggles to understand gender norms in the school context may stem from their emerging notions of gender roles in the family context. Yet, no research that we know of has examined age-related patterns regarding children’s social and moral reasoning about parental roles (based on gender), such as the “caretaker” and “breadwinner,” in the home. Thus, we used the Social Cognitive Domain theory to investigate age-related patterns regarding how children evaluate parental expectations regarding gender-related parent roles, specifically, working outside the home or taking care of children in the home.

The social reasoning approach has typically involved the use of “direct” and “explicit” methods to measure children’s evaluation of gender exclusion. In this study, we were interested in using an “indirect” method to assess gender stereotypes about parental roles, in addition to our direct assessments regarding social reasoning about decisions by parents to stay at home or go to work. Social psychology research on gender roles has developed “indirect” methods to assess standards toward which males and females are held in different roles. In fact, research with adults has shown there are implicit shifting standards regarding males’ and females’ competence in work-related tasks (Biernat, Manis, & Nelson, 1991). When individuals judge a person’s abilities, behaviors, or personality attributes in a subjective manner (e.g., very bad to very good), they often are judging against some abstract comparison that varies by individual (Biernat & Manis, 1994). Often these variations can be attributed to stereotypic views of a particular group, such that a very good for one group may differ greatly from a very good for another group. This phenomenon of changing one’s standards dependent upon the comparison group in mind is known as the Shifting Standards Theory (Biernat & Manis, 1994; Biernat, Manis, & Nelson, 1991). Social psychological studies have shown that adults alter the standards they use, based on the gender of the worker, to judge others’ competence and ability with regard to occupational accomplishments (Biernat & Fuegen, 2001; Biernat & Kobrynowicz, 1997).

Work conducted by social psychologists, however, has not studied the developmental origins of these stereotyped standards (for an exception, see Bem, 1989). Developmental research has shown that children are aware of the presence of gender stereotypes in male and female roles, and even children as young as three years old are aware of these stereotypes (Huston, 1985). Stereotypic knowledge increases with age (Martin, Wood, & Little, 1990), with preschool children identifying appropriate toys for the genders and early elementary school children making associations between gender and personality characteristics and occupations. In addition, children have been shown to judge professions based on societal expectations and will judge the status of these jobs based on gender, with female jobs being less prestigious than male jobs (Liben & Bigler, 2002; Liben, Bigler, & Krogh, 2001). The research noted above highlights that, with age, children become more aware of stereotypes and have different expectations of male and female roles. Most of this research, however, has focused on gender occupations rather than on parental roles in the home. By using the Shifting Standards measure, it was possible to assess whether children use different standards when evaluating parental roles in the home as they do with occupations and to assess this information indirectly.

In addition, research conducted with adults on the issue of gender roles has not examined the social and moral reasoning underlying these standards or stereotypes. Many social psychological theories have examined the motivations or reasons for adults’ use of stereotypes. For instance, some theories have focused on the issue of power status and social dominance (Pratto, Stallworth, Sidanius, & Siers, 1997), whereas others have focused on traits of males and females that are considered to be innate, which then would make men and women better for specific roles (Glick & Fiske, 2001; Neff & Terry Schmidt, 2002; see Fiske, 1998 for full review). This research, mainly with adults, has shown that gender stereotypes and expectations could be the main reason why parents remain in stereotypical gender roles. Research on this point, however, has not looked at how individuals reason about the issue of equality in this division of roles. If reasoning about these parental roles is similar to children’s reasoning about peer gender roles and norms, then it is possible that these roles may be seen as important to family functioning or may be seen as an unfair division of labor (Killen, Margie, & Sinno, 2006). Without knowing the reasons why the roles continue to be divided, research cannot offer solutions for making the roles more equitable.
Drawing on these separate streams of research by developmental and social psychologists, the aim of this study was to investigate whether children believe that parents should have the opportunity to work outside of the home due to personal choice, when children believe that parents should subordinate personal choice considerations to family group functioning, and whether children apply concepts of fairness and equity to parental roles in the home and in the workforce. In addition to measuring social reasoning, the current study also investigated the standards to which mothers and fathers are held when partaking in caretaker and breadwinner roles using a modification of the shifting standards methodology (Biernat & Manis, 1994).

An integrative approach helps to uncover how individuals weigh stereotypic expectations and concerns about fairness and equality regarding gender roles and obligations (Killen et al., 2006; Killen, Sinno, & Margie, 2007). Understanding how children evaluate parental roles is important because gender stereotypes about adult roles may impact children’s future professional aspirations and influence educational choices (Eccles, Barber, & Jozefowicz, 1999; Eccles, Jacobs, & Harold, 1990; Tenenbaum & Leaper, 2003). Research with children has also shown that interest and self-competence in certain academic domains, such as math and language arts, influence future career choices (Jacobs, Lanza, Osgood, Eccles, & Wigfield, 2002; Mau & Domnick, 1995). For example, self-efficacy in high school math has been found to correlate with choosing math related majors in college (Hackett, 1985).

Goals and Hypotheses

Thus, the goals of the present paper were to investigate whether children would differ in their judgments and reasoning about career and caretaker roles based on gender of the parent in the role, and the context in question. To achieve these goals, we focused particularly on parental roles of wanting a full-time job and staying home to take care of a baby (for the Shifting Standards measure, we use gender stereotypic examples from the world of work outside the home [being an auto mechanic] and the domestic world at home [cooking dinner]). These general roles and specific tasks were chosen because of research indicating that mothers, although accepted in the workforce, are still viewed differently than fathers, such that their primary focus should still continue to be the family (Bridges & Etaugh, 1995; Fuegen et al., 2004; Gorman & Fritsche, 2002). In addition, fathers continue to be viewed in general as the breadwinner of the family rather than as the primary caretaker (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001; Williams & Cooper, 2004).

Regarding differences in the general roles of parents, we expected that children would judge the desire to work a full-time job as acceptable for both parents due to the prevalence of mothers in the workforce (Raley, Mattingly, & Bianchi, 2006). In contrast, because the caretaker role is less pervasive for fathers in the United States (Deutsch & Saxon, 1998) and there exist many stereotypes about the natural competence of fathers in this role (Neff & Terry-Schmidt, 2002), we expected that children would be less likely to judge a father who desired to stay at home with a new baby as acceptable. We expected that children’s social reasoning would highlight the differences in their ratings and also differ based on gender of parent in each role. It was expected then that children would be more likely to use gender stereotyped reasoning when mothers and fathers desired stereotypical roles and would use more personal choice or social conventional reasoning when parents desired counter-stereotypical roles.

When comparing how well different tasks are performed by parents, we expected that children would not differ in their rating of parents’ competence based on gender of parent. This expectation was made based on shifting standards theory, which shows that subjective measures do not often reflect the standard against which individuals are judged (Biernat & Manis, 1994). We did, however, expect that children demonstrate their shifting standards through differences in the objective assessment of who would be better at each task. We expected that this would match with the stereotypic expectations, as it is a more indirect assessment of their acceptance for gender flexibility in career and domestic roles.

In addition, we expected differences in children’s social reasoning regarding each task, and we expected that these differences would vary by gender of parent and by task. We hypothesized that, similar to the general roles, children would be more likely to use gender stereotypes in the stereotypical female task of making dinner for the family. Research examining children’s responses to adult occupations and activities, including being an auto mechanic or watching children, found that children were more flexible with those that were masculine rather than feminine, regardless of participant gender (Liben & Bigler, 2002). Therefore, we expected that children would be more accepting of a mother who takes on masculine roles than a father who takes on feminine roles.

We also hypothesized that outcomes for both general roles and specific tasks would be affected by two main variables: (1) age and (2) structure of family work status. First, regarding age, the current study investigated differences in reasoning about, and standards for, parental roles in second and fifth graders. These ages were chosen based on previous research from the Social Domain Theory (see Smetana, 2006, for review), highlighting the complexity in reasoning capabilities that occurs with age. Research from this perspective has shown that
children become more capable of using context of the situation to reason about social situations and coordinate social domains of knowledge. In addition, Carter and Patterson (1982) and Stoddard and Turiel (1985) have shown a U-shaped curve with age (from 5 years old to 13 years old) in regard to children’s acceptance of cross-gender activities, including adult occupations. Based on this work, we chose to examine part of this trajectory with 7- and 10-year-olds and expected that fifth-grade children would be more flexible than second-grade children in their acceptance of parents desiring counter-stereotypical roles. Although as noted by developmental research that children become more knowledgeable of gender stereotypes with age (Liben & Bigler, 2002; Ruble & Martin, 1998), work on children’s social reasoning about gender roles has shown mixed results about their reliance on using stereotypes and their increasing awareness of competing domains of morality and personal choice. Therefore, we expected that second graders would be more likely to use their stereotype knowledge to reason about parental roles while, fifth graders who have more cognitive skills to coordinate several domains of social knowledge would be more likely to begin to use the full context of the situation and reveal greater flexibility in their expectations of parental roles.

Second, because previous studies have shown that family structure and social experience have an impact on children (Deutsch, Servis, & Payne, 2001; Hoffman & Youngblade, 1999), we also investigated whether the structure of children’s own family’s work status would create differences in evaluations of parental roles. Specifically, based on the research noted above, we predicted that children from traditional families (i.e., ones in which the mother stays at home or works part-time) would be more likely to judge it as unacceptable for the father to desire to stay at home. Children from traditional families were also expected to have more stereotypes about the abilities of fathers to take care of children than were children from nontraditional families (i.e., ones in which the mother and father work full-time, the mother and father work part-time, or the father stays at home).

METHOD

Participants

Sixty-seven second graders (M = 7.13 years, SD = .39; 34 girls, 33 boys) and 54 fifth graders (M = 10.42, SD = .39; 27 girls, 27 boys) participated in this study. The students were from four public schools in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. Participants reflected a range of ethnic backgrounds representative of the community (53% European-American, 20% African-American, 10% Latin-American, 5% Asian-American, and 12% other). All students were from similar socioeconomic backgrounds (middle- to middle-low incomes). Parental consent was obtained for all participants. As part of the demographic information, as well as to obtain information for one of the variables (Family Work Status), participants were asked about their own family work arrangement at the end of the interview session (“Does your mom work outside of the home?” “Does your dad work outside of the home?”). All but 11 children provided family arrangement information. Thus, analyses were conducted with N = 121 participants for all assessments, except for the analyses pertaining to family arrangement, N = 110.

Procedure

Students were individually interviewed in quiet rooms at school for approximately 30 minutes. All interviews were conducted by trained female research assistants. Children were informed that all responses were confidential and anonymous and that they could choose to discontinue the interview at any time. In addition, it was made clear to the children that their responses held no weight in their academic grading and that they could ask questions at any time. Once the interview was complete, students were escorted back to their classroom.

Measures

During the interview, all participants completed two tasks: (1) the Children’s Reasoning about Parental Roles Interview (CRPR; Sinno & Killen, 2005), and (2) a modified version of the Shifting Standards Scale (SSS; Biernat & Manis, 1994). The measures were administered in the same order for all children (CRPR then SSS).

Children’s Reasoning about Parental Roles Interview (CRPR)

Participants were administered a semistructured interview involving four hypothetical scenarios (Sinno & Killen, 2005). Two scenarios focused on a female-stereotyped parental role (i.e., taking care of a new baby) and two scenarios focused on a male-stereotyped parental role (i.e., working full-time outside the home). For each type of scenario there was one version in which the mother was interested in the role and one version in which the father was interested in the role. In each scenario, the target parent was interested in changing his/her current role (from working to staying home, or from staying home to working); for example, a stay-at-home mother desires to get a full-time job. See Appendix A for full scenarios.

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Within each scenario the following assessments were made: (1) **Evaluation of Role decision:** “Is it all right or not all right for the mother/father to want a full-time job?”; “Is it all right or not all right for the mother/father to want to stay home?” with responses being either “all right” or “not all right”; and (2) **Justifications:** “Why?” or “How come?” after each evaluation.

**Shifting Standards Scale (SSS)**

For the **Shifting Standards Scale**, modified from Biernat and Manis’ (1994) adult scale, children were asked to rate parental jobs in terms of parents’ ability to perform a task competently. Specifically, participants were administered a short questionnaire involving two types of hypothetical situations. One situation dealt with an occupational role (i.e., being an auto mechanic and getting a raise) and the other dealt with a caretaker role (i.e., working full-time and cooking dinner three times a week after coming home). Since both situations were presented for a mother and for a father completing the task, participants were presented with four scenarios in all. See Appendix A for full scenarios.

Two assessments were administered for each scenario: (1) **Evaluation of Parent’s Competence**: “How good or bad is [the parent] at the task?” rated on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (very, very bad) to 7 (very, very good); and (2) **Justification of Rating**: “Why?” or “How come?” After the four scenarios were evaluated, children were asked to make a direct comparison of the parents in each role, referred to as **Evaluation of Comparisons** (i.e., “Who would be better at working as an auto mechanic?”). The children had the option of the mother, the father, or both. After their decision was made, children were asked to justify their response, referred to as **Justification of Rating** (i.e., “Why?” or “How come?”). The Evaluation of Parent’s Competence was used as a subjective measure for SS and the Evaluation of Comparisons was used as an objective measure for SS. Justifications were used to complement the rating and judgments of children’s shifting standards and to add depth to the results of this measure.

**Coding Justification Responses and Reliability**

Coding for justifications to the CRPR was based on the Social-Cognitive Domain model (Killen et al., 2006; Smetana, 2006; Turiel, 2002) and pilot data. Five coding categories were created for Justifications about Evaluation of Role Decision: “Moral,” “Social conventional,” “Gender stereotype,” “Personal choice,” and “Uncodable” (see Appendix B); analyses were only conducted on categories for which proportions were greater than .10.

Each evaluation could receive more than one code if it contained two or more distinct portions of reasoning from different categories. No responses were triple-coded because there were no instances of more than two justifications being used at once. Two advanced researchers independently coded justifications for 25% of the data in order to test reliability of the coding system. Interrater reliability was 89% (Cohen’s kappa = .87). Two coders code 25% of the same interviews and compare their codes. Disagreements over codes were resolved through discussion and decision rules were made based on these discussions. The same two coders completed the other 75% of the interviews using the decision rules.

Coding for **Justification of Rating** were based on previous work conducted in social psychology with adults (Fuegen et al., 2004) as well as pilot data. Three coding categories were used for each question that asked children to justify their rating of a parent’s competence in a given role: “Personal effort,” “Gender stereotype,” and “Uncodable” (see Appendix B). The same method for coding used in the justifications for the CRPR responses was used for these justifications. Interrater reliability was 98% (Cohen’s kappa = .94).

**RESULTS**

Hypotheses were tested with repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA). All follow-up tests were conducted using *t*-tests. Preliminary analyses revealed no gender of the participant differences; therefore, gender of the participant was collapsed. Analyses were conducted to test for grade differences and differences based on children’s family information regarding parental work status. Researchers using a Social Cognitive Domain approach to analyzing categorical judgment and justification data have successfully used similar data analysis procedures in their studies (see Killen, Lee-Kim, & McGlothlin, 2002; Nucci, 1996; Smetana, 1986; Tisak, 1995; Turiel, 1998; Wainryb, Shaw, Laupa, & Smith, 2001). A recent review of analytic procedures for this type of data indicated that ANOVA-based procedures are appropriate compared to log-linear analysis for this type of within-subjects design (see Wainryb et al., 2001). For all ANOVAs conducted, in cases where assumption of sphericity was not met, corrections were made using the Huynh-Feldt method.

Results are organized in the following manner to coincide with the order of our measures. First, children’s evaluations of parental roles in the CRPR are discussed, followed by their justifications or reasoning about their evaluations. Second, children’s subjective ratings for the SSS are discussed, followed by their objective judgments to test the Shifting Standards theory in children. Last, children’s justifications for their responses to the shifting standards measures are discussed.
Children’s Reasoning about Parental Roles

Evaluation of Role Decision

It was hypothesized that children would find it more acceptable for mothers to stay at home with children and for fathers to want to work outside the home, and that age and family work status would have an effect on these findings. In order to test hypotheses regarding children’s evaluations of a mother who desires to change her current role in the family, a 2 (Grade: second, fifth) × 2 (Family Work Status of Participant: traditional, nontraditional) × 2 (Scenario: mom wanting to work, mom wanting to stay at home) ANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor was conducted on judgments of role decision (see Table 1 for means and standard deviations). As expected, there was a main Scenario effect, F(1, 106) = 8.21, p < .01, ηp² = .07, with children judging it as more acceptable for mothers to want to stay at home than for mothers to want to get a full-time job. Note here that children’s evaluations overall match gender stereotype expectations, but that main effects were also found for both Grade, F(1, 106) = 3.87, p < .05, ηp² = .04, and Family Work Status, F(1, 106) = 3.87, p < .05, ηp² = .04.

These findings confirmed our hypotheses that with age and with a more nontraditional family, children became more flexible toward a parent who desired to switch their current role. Interestingly, an interaction effect was found for Family Work Status and Scenario, F(1, 106) = 9.96, p < .01, ηp² = .09, which revealed that family status was related, in particular, to children’s judgments about a mother who desired to get a full-time job. Specifically, a majority of the children stated that it would be all right for the mother to want to stay at home (approximately 90% for both traditional and nontraditional children); however, children from nontraditional families were also more likely than children of traditional families to judge that it was acceptable for mothers to desire to get a full-time job. This confirmed our hypothesis that children would be accepting of mothers wanting a job outside the home. This finding was related, though, to the parental working status of the children’s home.

In order to test hypotheses regarding a father’s desire to change his current role, a 2 (Grade: second, fifth) × 2 (Family Work Status of Participant: traditional, nontraditional) × 2 (Scenario: dad wanting to work, dad wanting to stay at home) ANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor was conducted on judgments of role decision (see Table 1 for means and standard deviations). As expected, there was a main Scenario effect, F(1, 106) = 7.70, p < .01, ηp² = .07, with children stating that it was more acceptable for a father to want to get a full-time job than for a father to want to stay at home. This finding once again matches gender stereotypic expectations overall. In addition, there was a Grade × Scenario interaction, F(1, 106) = 6.88, p < .01, ηp² = .06, with fifth graders judging it more acceptable than second graders for the father to want to stay at home. This again confirms the hypothesis of flexibility in parental roles increasing with age. Unlike the mothers’ desires to switch roles, however, there were no effects found for family status. This may reflect the strength of the male “breadwinner” expectation in society.

Finally, we tested our hypotheses that children would be more willing to accept mothers’ counter-stereotypic decisions (working) than fathers’ counter-stereotypic decisions (staying at home). A 2 (Grade: second, fifth) × 2 (Family Work Status of Participant: traditional,

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role by Parent</th>
<th>Domestic</th>
<th></th>
<th>Work</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Father</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Grade by Family Status</strong></td>
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<td>Traditional</td>
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<td>.74 (.43)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
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<td>.64 (.48)</td>
<td>.74 (.43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth grade</td>
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<td>.90 (.28)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>.98 (.14)</td>
<td>.85 (.36)</td>
<td>.92 (.25)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. N = 110. Evaluation of Role Decision Rating: Not all right = 0; All right = 1. Standard deviations are in parentheses.
nontraditional) × 2 (Scenario: mom wanting to work, dad wanting to stay at home) ANOVA with repeated measures on the last factor was conducted on judgments of role decision. There was no scenario main effect, \( F(1, 106) = 1.25, p < .5, \eta^2_p = .06 \) (80% of children judged mothers’ decisions to want to work as acceptable and 75% judged fathers’ decisions to stay at home as acceptable). In this comparison, a significant Grade effect, \( F(1, 106) = 5.25, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .05 \) appeared, showing once again that children’s flexibility about roles increases with age (second grade: \( M = .71, SD = .04 \); fifth grade: \( M = .85, SD = .04 \)). Interestingly, although there was no main scenario effect, there was an interaction for Scenario and Family Work Status, \( F(1, 106) = 7.14, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .06, \) indicating that family status had a significant effect on children’s judgments concerning mothers’, but not fathers’, desires to switch roles. Children from nontraditional families (\( M = .92, SD = .04 \)) were more likely than children from traditional families (\( M = .70, SD = .06 \)) to accept the mother’s counter-stereotypic decision. Although the presence of women in the workforce has increased greatly, parental employment decisions and children’s experience continues to affect how children judge a mother’s decision to work. Regardless of family work status, however, children are less willing to accept a father who wants to stay at home than a mother who wants to work.

**Justifications of Role Decision**

It was hypothesized that children’s justifications about parental roles would be multifaceted, in that they would use more gender stereotypes when parents desired stereotypical roles and more social conventional or personal choice reasoning when they desired counter-stereotypical roles. The proportions of justifications for evaluating role decisions were: Moral = .06; Social Conventional = .53; Gender Stereotype = .15; and Personal Choice = .23 (see Appendix B for examples). The low use of moral reasoning was similar to previous studies showing that cross gender behavior is viewed in social conventional, not moral terms (Carter & Patterson, 1982). Due to the low frequency (.06 < .10), analyses were not conducted on moral justifications.

In the job context for both mother and father, children were most likely to use social conventional and personal choice justifications to explain their judgments. A 2 (Grade: second, fifth) × 2 (Family Work Status of Participant: traditional, nontraditional) × 2 (Scenario: mom wanting to work, dad wanting to work) × 2 (Reasoning: social conventional, personal choice) ANOVA with repeated measures on the last two factors was conducted on justifications of role decision. A main effect for Reasoning was found, \( F(1, 106) = 22.01, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .17, \) with social conventional justifications being used more than personal choice (\( M = .56, SD = .04; M = .28, SD = .03 \), respectively). In addition, a three-way interaction of Family Work Status × Scenario × Reasoning was found, \( F(1, 106) = 5.65, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .05 \). Children from traditional families justified their judgments concerning a father’s decision to work as a matter of social conventions (\( M = .67, SD = .08 \)) (e.g., “Dads need to work to make money for the family”) rather than as an issue of personal choice (e.g., “He should work if he wants to”) (\( M = .15, SD = .07 \)). This finding confirmed our hypothesis in that fathers are considered to be the main breadwinners of the family but only by the children from traditional families. Children from nontraditional families were more likely to use social conventional than personal choice reasoning, regardless of the gender of the parent who wanted to work.

In the domestic context for both mothers and fathers, children predominantly used social conventional and gender stereotype justifications. In order to test the hypotheses that there would be differences based on gender of the parent desiring to stay at home, a 2 (Grade: second, fifth) × 2 (Family Work Status of Participant: traditional, nontraditional) × 2 (Scenario: mom wanting to stay at home, dad wanting to stay at home) × 2 (Reasoning: social conventional, gender stereotype) ANOVA with repeated measures on the last two factors was conducted on justifications of role decision. Similar to the findings for the job context, a main effect for Reasoning was found again, \( F(1, 106) = 11.67, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .10, \) with social conventional reasons (\( M = .47, SD = .04 \)) being used almost twice as much as gender stereotypes (\( M = .25, SD = .04 \)). In addition, a Grade × Reasoning interaction effect was found, \( F(1, 106) = 3.93, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .05, \) with second graders (\( M = .31, SD = .05 \)) more likely than fifth graders (\( M = .19, SD = .05 \)) to use gender stereotypes to explain their judgments. In other words, children’s flexibility about gender roles increased with age. Finally, an effect for Scenario was found, \( F(1, 106) = 3.79, p < .05, \eta^2_p = .04, \) with children using more gender stereotypes in the scenario in which the mother wants to stay at home (\( M = .29, SD = .45 \)), than when the father wants to stay at home (\( M = .21, SD = .40 \)). Thus, children were more likely to reason that mothers should stay at home because “mothers’ know best. They, of course, know more than dads would.” For fathers, children were more likely to use social conventional reasoning about the practicality of the situation (e.g., “Well, someone needs to stay at home with the kids”).

Children’s social reasoning about parental roles was indeed multifaceted. As expected, children used more personal choice and social conventional reasoning for parents’ desire to take on counter-stereotyped roles, with more personal choice being used for a mother
desiring to work outside the home and more social conventional reasoning being used when a father desired to stay at home. Unexpectedly, gender stereotypes were used more when the mother wanted to stay at home, but not when the father wanted to work.

Shifting Standards Scale

Evaluation of Parents’ Competence: Ratings

It was hypothesized that children’s competence ratings would mirror adults’ responses in the SSS in that children would not differentiate between mothers and fathers’ competence. Mothers and fathers were rated similarly in both task situations (see Table 2 for means and standard deviations), with no significant differences. To further test this theory, children were asked to directly compare parents in each role.

Evaluation of Comparisons: Judgments

In the objective measure of direct comparison, it was expected that when children were asked to directly compare parents on the tasks of working outside the home and doing domestic work, children would be more likely to choose the parent who stereotypically fit the role. We expected this finding because of past research showing that children will categorize gender-stereotyped tasks based on societal expectations, and therefore may have shifting standards for parental tasks as well. In order to examine differences in judgment, a 2 (Grade: second, fifth) × 2 (Family Work Status of Participant: traditional, non-traditional) × 2 (Scenario: auto, dinner) × 2 (Gender of Parent: mom, dad) ANOVA was conducted with repeated measures on the last two factors. Findings confirmed our hypotheses and revealed a Scenario × Gender of the Parent effect, \( F (1, 105) = 20.06, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .16 \), showing that children were more likely to choose the father than the mother as being a better auto mechanic (\( M = .48, SD = .05 \), for father; \( M = .22, SD = .04 \), for mother) and more likely to choose the mother than the father as being better at making dinner (\( M = .52, SD = .05 \), for mother; \( M = .17, SD = .04 \), for father.) In order to have more information about why children demonstrate shifting standards, children were asked to justify their response and it was expected that in these responses, differences based on gender of the parents would emerge.

Justifications for Shifting Standards

It was expected that children would use gender stereotypes to justify their choices for parental competence at a stereotypical task. It was found, however, that most children used personal effort when reasoning about the task of a parent working as an auto mechanic. Frequencies for justifications of parental competence ratings revealed that a vast majority of children used personal effort as a justification for competence in the auto mechanic context for both a mother (96%) and a father (91%), with the differences not being significant, \( F (1, 106) = .854, p < .5, \eta^2_p = .15 \). These frequencies highlight that working outside the home is judged by many children as a personal task or accomplishment, regardless of gender of parent in the role. For both parents, children rated them as equally competent.

 Frequencies of justification use in the domestic context were more variable; therefore, analyses about differences in justifications based on gender were conducted for this context. In order to examine these hypotheses, a 2 (Grade: second, fifth) × 2 (Family Work Status of PARENTAL ROLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role by Parent</th>
<th>Cooking Dinner</th>
<th>Auto Mechanic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Father</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second grade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>6.60 (.154)</td>
<td>6.70 (.98)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional</td>
<td>7.07 (.122)</td>
<td>6.84 (1.50)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6.91 (.34)</td>
<td>6.80 (1.33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth grade</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>5.95 (.184)</td>
<td>5.79 (1.58)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional</td>
<td>6.03 (.169)</td>
<td>6.00 (.150)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6.00 (.173)</td>
<td>5.92 (1.52)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6.28 (.170)</td>
<td>6.26 (1.37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional</td>
<td>6.58 (.154)</td>
<td>6.45 (1.55)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>6.48 (.159)</td>
<td>6.38 (1.48)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: \( N = 110 \). Rating of Parents’ Competence: 1 = very, very bad; 7 = very, very good. Standard deviations are in parentheses.
Participant: traditional, nontraditional) × 2 (Scenario: mom making dinner, dad making dinner) × 2 (Reasoning: personal effort, gender stereotype) ANOVA was conducted with repeated measures on the last two factors. Findings revealed a main effect for Reasoning, $F(1, 106) = 154.58, p < .001, \eta^2_p = .59$, with children more likely to justify a parent’s competence as due to personal effort than to gender stereotypes (see Table 3 for means and standard deviations). In addition, a Reasoning × Scenario effect was found, $F(1, 106) = 6.82, p < .01, \eta^2_p = .06$, revealing that gender stereotypes were used more when the parent in the domestic role was the mother than when it was the father. These findings together confirm our hypothesis that although children refer to parents’ personal effort more than to gender stereotypes overall, they use more stereotypes about the domestic context. Children were more likely to rate a mother as competent at the domestic role because, “She’s a mom, that’s what they do best,” than a father who they may judge as competent, “Because he’s working hard at making dinner for everyone.”

### Summary

When examining contexts involving mothers, there was more flexibility in the realm of the working world, and children viewed these decisions by mothers as a matter of personal choice. In contrast, children viewed fathers as less competent in the domestic context and used more gender stereotypes about the mother in the caretaker role. For this reason, children used more gender stereotypes about the caretaker role, including staying at home and making dinner, in that the mother is the one who is judged as more competent in this role and to a much higher extent than fathers. Age and family work status were found to have an effect on children’s social reasoning responses about the general parental roles; however, there were no grade or family work status differences found in the shifting standards results. This may be an indication that when using a more indirect measure, children seem unaware of their shifting standards about parental roles, regardless of age and family background.

### DISCUSSION

The findings extend the existing literature regarding children’s understanding of adult roles by demonstrating that the gender of the parent affects children’s evaluations and reasoning about parental career and domestic roles. In addition, the present study found that age and family employment decisions contribute to children’s social evaluations of parental roles. Boys and girls judged parents’ desires to work full-time as acceptable, but their reasoning for the acceptability differed for mothers and fathers. For mothers, children reasoned that it was the mother’s personal choice to want a job, whereas for fathers children judged that it was necessary for family financial reasons. Perhaps due to the increased presence of women in the workforce (Raley et al., 2006), children found it acceptable for mothers to take on this counter-stereotypic role. Children’s reasoning that fathers should have a job for financial reasons matched closely with societal expectations of males to be the family breadwinner (Williams & Cooper, 2004). Evaluations of parents in the domestic role showed a more dramatic difference, however, in that a large proportion of the children judged it as unacceptable for the father, but as acceptable for the mother, to stay at home. Again, for the mothers, children were likely to use personal choice as a justification of their

### TABLE 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role by Parent</th>
<th>Personal Effort</th>
<th>Gender Stereotypes</th>
<th>Personal Effort</th>
<th>Gender Stereotypes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mother</td>
<td></td>
<td>Father</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade by Family Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second graders</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>.70 (.47)</td>
<td>.30 (.47)</td>
<td>.80 (.41)</td>
<td>.15 (.37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional</td>
<td>.79 (.41)</td>
<td>.18 (.39)</td>
<td>.82 (.39)</td>
<td>.18 (.39)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fifth graders</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>.79 (.42)</td>
<td>.21 (.42)</td>
<td>.95 (.23)</td>
<td>.05 (.23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional</td>
<td>.79 (.42)</td>
<td>.21 (.42)</td>
<td>1.00 (.00)</td>
<td>.00 (.00)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>.74 (.44)</td>
<td>.26 (.44)</td>
<td>.87 (.34)</td>
<td>.10 (.31)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nontraditional</td>
<td>.79 (.41)</td>
<td>.20 (.40)</td>
<td>.90 (.30)</td>
<td>.10 (.30)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>.77 (.43)</td>
<td>.23 (.42)</td>
<td>.89 (.32)</td>
<td>.10 (.31)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. $N = 110$. Proportions cannot exceed 1.0. Justifications = Personal Effort; Gender stereotypes. Standard deviations are in parentheses.
judgments. For the fathers, however, children were more likely to use gender stereotypes, such as “He wouldn’t know what to do,” or “Mothers are naturally better at caring for kids,” to explain why the father should not stay at home.

These findings reflect previous research with adults revealing that there are certain tasks that people believe are natural for males and females (Neff & Terry-Schmidt, 2002). The variability in reasoning in regard to gender of parent and role in question in the current study additionally highlights that, as predicted by Social Cognitive Domain theory, children’s reasoning about stereotyped roles is multifaceted and that they take several components into consideration when thinking about who may be good at certain tasks (Killen et al., 2006).

A novel aspect of this study is that children were applying more freedom of choice to the breadwinner family role than to the caretaker role in the family. Women’s movement into the workforce has likely influenced how children reason about career goals of mothers and fathers. Yet, children are less likely to frame the domestic role as one of “equal opportunity” for mothers and fathers. In this context, children are more likely to adhere to gender stereotypes that mothers are better in the role of caretaker than fathers. Currently, in the United States, the role of caretaker continues to be linked to mothers, with very few fathers staying at home with their children (Brescoll & Uhlmann, 2005; U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). This societal situation may have an impact on how children are reasoning about caretaking roles, and our findings indicate that societal stereotypes are revealed in children’s social reasoning about gender roles.

When comparing parents directly in career and domestic tasks in the Shifting Standards portion of the study, differences were found in children’s reasoning based on gender of the parent and the task in question. Domestic roles were not viewed in terms of equality. Supporting the Shifting Standards theory (Fuegan et al., 2004), children’s ratings in subjective measures did not reveal differences in ratings of parental competence; however, there were differences in children’s objective measure of direct comparison of parents in each role. Interestingly, though, differences in children’s social reasoning about parental roles were only found for the caretaker role. Children thought that mothers would be better at cooking dinner and that most fathers would not be good because they would not know how to cook dinner. This provides evidence that shifting standards begin early in development, and complements current work in social psychology that has been conducted with adults (Biernat & Kobra\nnowicz, 1997; Fuegan et al., 2004).

It appears, however, that children’s standards shift depending on the context, since the current study found that children reasoned about domestic roles but not career roles in a pattern reflective of Shifting Standards theory. More specifically, in the task of auto mechanic, children reasoned that mothers and fathers should be judged equally based on personal effort. The information provided in the task of auto mechanic involved a clearer message of competence (a “raise”) than did the information provided in the cooking dinner task, and therefore it is possible that children used personal effort reasoning more in this context for this reason. This asymmetry in the description of the tasks should be eliminated in future studies. Although there was an asymmetry in presentation, however, most children use personal effort in the cooking task as well as the auto mechanic task. Yet, more gender stereotypes were used in the cooking dinner task and significantly varied by parent in the role. These findings extend the literature of shifting standards by incorporating a developmental approach and highlighting that children’s reasoning about parental roles is dependent on the context.

Family work status, indicating whether parents’ employment arrangement was more traditionally or nontraditionally structured, was related to children’s evaluations. A nontraditional family work structure was indicative of a more flexible child response towards both career and domestic roles. In contrast, children from more traditional families were more likely to see it as unacceptable for a mother to want a full-time job or for a father to want to stay at home and take care of a new baby. These findings are similar to research on family socialization, which indicates that children who have parents who share responsibility for childcare and do not base their activities on gender stereotypes often have a gender-free model of family life styles (Deutsch et al., 2001).

As this research would suggest, the current study found that this difference in family work status was more apparent in the domestic caretaker role than in the career role. Children then may be accustomed to this environment and responding to societal expectations about gender roles in the home (Leaper, 2000; Ruble & Martin, 1998). Specifically, children from traditional families were more likely to use stereotypes when evaluating the scenarios in which a mother wanted to stay at home. Interestingly, although they were less accepting than children from nontraditional families, children from traditional families thought that it was acceptable for a mother who stays at home to get a full-time job. These findings indicated that although children of traditional families may continue to use gender stereotypes when reasoning about parental roles in the area of domesticity, they are cognizant of equality in the working world. These findings provide a window into how social life in the home can contribute to children’s social interpretations of everyday social roles. Further work needs to be conducted on family work status when it is more particular...
in its qualifications. Because of the family background of the children in the present sample, it was only feasible to create two groups (traditional and nontraditional). However, families in the United States are varied in their structure and it would be interesting to examine how the range of family arrangements affects social reasoning.

Children's reasoning was also found to vary with age. Specifically, children in the present study became more flexible in their reasoning about the appropriateness of roles for both parents. With age, children were better able to use context to reason about the social situation of parental roles based on gender expectations. The present study indicates that second graders were more likely to rely on their increased base of stereotype knowledge of appropriate roles for mothers and fathers (Ruble & Martin, 1998). In contrast, fifth graders were using the context of the situation and their increased ability to coordinate several different domains of social knowledge to move beyond reliance on stereotype knowledge to a more flexible view of mothers' and fathers' roles in the family (Smetana, 2006). In particular, and similar to previous research on social reasoning, children in fifth grade focused more on personal choice of the parent than on social conventions or gender stereotypes (Nucci et al., 1996). This study did not show a shift to a greater focus on moral reasoning such as unfairness as other social domain studies have (Horn, 2003; Killen et al., 2007); however, it is possible that fifth graders are still in the midst of developing the ability to coordinate several social domains. In addition, moral concerns such as fairness may be more difficult to apply to a context with which children have not yet experienced (that of being a parent) than to a context in which they have more familiarity, such as a peer group. The child–parent relationship reflects less reciprocity and social exchange than does the child-peer relationship, and this may contribute to differences in the use of moral reasons in these two contexts (see Smetana, 2006).

Nonetheless, this age-related change was more apparent in the domestic role than in the career role. Older children, although not a large proportion, were more likely to view it as acceptable for fathers to stay at home with a new baby for reasons of personal choice. Younger children were more reluctant to offer personal choice as a reason for the father to stay at home. More often, younger children held onto stereotypic responses of fathers being unable to take care of a new baby. Even if older children did not find it acceptable for the father to stay at home, their reasoning focused more on financial reasons, highlighting that fathers often earn more money and therefore should continue to work in order to provide for the family. This age difference may be due to the finding that children are more willing to be flexible about male-oriented tasks and behaviors than female-oriented behaviors (Liben & Bigler, 2002).

In addition, it may be more difficult to reason about this context because they have more social experience with women in the workforce than men staying at home.

Implications

The central findings of this study revealed that children are aware of parental roles and of the gender-differentiated roles that reflect societal expectations (Leaper, 2002). In addition, children reason about these social issues in complex and multifaceted ways. How children think about these gender issues at a young age may later affect how they function in their roles as parents. Understanding children's reasoning about gender stereotypes and parental roles in the home and in the workforce can help to create a more egalitarian-oriented society. Given that many gender stereotypes are implicit and pervasive, it is important to understand when children apply their gender-stereotypic expectations to parental roles in the home and in the workforce and when they rely more heavily on the issues of fairness and equality of gender roles (Killen et al., 2006).

Moreover, recent research on father involvement has shown that children benefit when fathers are involved in domestic duties and parenting (Tamis-LaMonda & Cabrera, 2005). Changing societal expectations about gender roles will help encourage fathers to be more involved, as well as communicate these expectations to children. Given that father involvement is related to healthy social development for both boys and girls (Tamis-LaMonda & Cabrera, 2005), it is imperative that stereotypes about fathers' lack of competence in the home and domestic environment be changed. Associating nurturing and caring traits to fathers is a first step towards enabling mothers and fathers to have the opportunities to fulfill both domestic and workforce roles.

Understanding the ways in which stereotypic expectations emerge in children's development and how children understand these expectations will address issues regarding children's expectations of their own options for the future (Eccles et al., 1999; Wigfield, Eccles, Schiefele, Roeser, & Davis-Kean, 2006). Research that elucidates how children evaluate these issues can be used to encourage greater flexibility in family arrangements, and to enrich the opportunities children have when contemplating the balance of work and family life.

REFERENCES


Children’s reasoning about parental roles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent</th>
<th>Role/Task</th>
<th>Scenario</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Career</td>
<td>Julie’s mom is a stay-at-home mom and now she wants a full-time job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Career</td>
<td>Jen’s Dad is a stay-at-home dad and now he wants a full-time job.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Caretaker</td>
<td>Gloria’s Mom and Dad both have full-time jobs, but now they are going to have a new baby and someone needs to stay at home because they cannot pay for a nanny or day care. Gloria’s mom wants to stay at home and take care of the children.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Caretaker</td>
<td>Debbie’s Mom and Dad both have full-time jobs, but now they are going to have a new baby and someone needs to stay at home because they cannot pay for a nanny or day care. Debbie’s dad wants to stay at home and take care of the children.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Shifting standards scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parent</th>
<th>Task</th>
<th>Scenario</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Auto mechanic</td>
<td>Sally is a mother who likes cars and has a job as an auto mechanic. After her first year of work, Sally gets a raise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Auto mechanic</td>
<td>Matt is a father who likes cars and has a job as an auto mechanic. After his first year of work, Matt gets a raise.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>Cooking dinner</td>
<td>Amanda is a mother who works full-time and she often makes dinner three times a week after she comes home from work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Cooking dinner</td>
<td>Derrick is a father who works full-time and he often makes dinner three times a week after he comes home from work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. The gender of the child in the scenarios of the CRPR matched that of the participant.

APPENDIX A

Scenarios Used in Interview
## Justification Coding Categories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moral</td>
<td>References maintenance of fairness or equal treatment of persons</td>
<td>“The father should get to stay at home because it’s only fair to give him a chance.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social conventional</td>
<td>References issues of family practicality, or family financial stability</td>
<td>“It would be good for the family because they could have more money if both parents have a job.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender stereotype</td>
<td>Appeals to labels attributed to an individual based on gender and gender expectations</td>
<td>“The father can’t stay at home because only mothers know how to do that.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal choice</td>
<td>Appeals to individual preferences or prerogatives</td>
<td>“The mom can get a job if she wants to, it’s up to her.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncodable</td>
<td>Does not adequately answer the question</td>
<td>“The child should get a job and help out.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal effort</td>
<td>References effort to explain competence in the given task</td>
<td>“The mother is very good at being an auto mechanic because she works long hours.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender stereotype</td>
<td>References a gender expectation to explain competence in the given task</td>
<td>“The father is a little good at making dinner because it is the mother who usually does all the housework.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncodable</td>
<td>Does not adequately answer the question</td>
<td>“The mother is very good because the child likes cars.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>