Parents Behaving Badly: Gender Biases in the Perception of Parental Alienating Behaviors

Jennifer J. Harman, Zeynep Biringen, Ellen M. Ratajack, Pearl L. Outland, and Allyson Kraus
Colorado State University

According to gender role theory, individuals who confirm expectations associated with their gender roles are rewarded and judged against these expectations when they deviate. Parental roles are strongly tied to gender, and there are very different expectations for behaviors of mothers and fathers. This study examined how mothers' and fathers' behaviors that support or discourage a positive relationship with the other parent are perceived in terms of their acceptability. Two-hundred twent-eight parents completed an online survey assessing perceptions of acceptability of negative (parental alienating) and positive coparenting behaviors. Results provided support for our hypothesis: Although parental alienating behaviors were rated unacceptable, they were more acceptable for mothers than fathers. Expectancy violation theory can explain why parental alienating behaviors are not viewed as negatively when mothers exhibit them than fathers.

Keywords: divorce, gender roles, parenting, parental alienation, stereotypes

Gender role and gender schema theories both assert that there are stereotypical expectations for men and women with regards to their behaviors, and that men and women are judged against these expectations when they deviate from what is considered normative for both their role and the congruency between established gender and sex roles (e.g., Bem, 1981; Eagly & Steffen, 1984). Expectations for traditional parental roles are closely tied to the gender of those who fill them, and schemas further these expectations. Women are often expected to be mothers (the "motherhood mandate;" Russo, 1976) and are more socially valued as parents than men are as fathers (Weed & Nicholson, 2015). Mothers are also expected to be more nurturing and sensitive to their children than fathers, and they derive power from this role (Pratto, Lee, Tan, & Pitpitan, 2011). Fathers, by contrast, are expected to be "breadwinners" rather than involved coparents (Lee & Owens, 2002). Men are also expected to be independent, self-reliant and tough (Courtenay, 2000), and these masculine traits have not been associated with family life (e.g., Wood, Conway, Pushkar, & Dugas, 2005). Stereotypes about fathers are typically more positive than males in general (e.g., as teachers, moral overseers, Troilo & Coleman, 2008). However, there are still many negative stereotypes (such as "dead-beat" dads) about noncustodial or never-married fathers as being "bad" (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). Deviations from parental and gender norms result in negative judgments of parents (Gaunt, 2013), making this a particularly important issue for custody evaluators when making determinations about the "best interests of the child" in custody disputes.

Although men in many modern cultures are expected to be more involved as fathers than in the past and are as effective and "motherly" parents as women are (DeMaris & Greif, 1993; Paradise, 2012), there are still automatic associations between motherhood and being female that are much stronger than fatherhood and being male (Park, Smith, & Correll, 2010). Therefore, despite there being greater explicit endorsement of egalitarian parenting roles, automatic associations still often reflect traditional parenting beliefs that align with traditional gender roles. In addition, stereotypes associated with parenthood still result in different performance standards for mothers and fathers (Biernat & Manis, 1991). For example, expectancy violation theory (Jussim, Coleman, & Lerch, 1987) predicts that when a mother performs a behavior that confirms expectations of what mothers should do, she is rated positively (the Good Mother Stereotype; Russo, 1976). She also is typically rewarded for and encouraged to continue acting in ways that confirm motherhood role expectations. When the mother acts differently than expected (e.g., she is a noncustodial parent), then she is punished for her violation (e.g., Benard & Correll, 2010; Fischer, 1983). The endorsement of these differing standards are even evident in young children, who rate mothers as being more competent than fathers in the caretaking role (Sinno & Killen, 2009).

Postseparation Parenting

Stereotypes and biases about parenting practices and abilities are particularly important during child custody and coparenting conflicts after divorce or separation. Today, 40% of American children do not live in a home with their father (Lehr & Mac-

Millan, 2001), and mothers are awarded sole custody of children an estimated nine out of 10 times (Paradise, 2012). Although there are some indications that fathers are being awarded greater custody of children after divorce than in the past (DeMaris & Greif, 1993), clinical caseworkers, mental health providers, legal professionals, judicial officers, and other third parties involved with families in the judicial system often view fathers as being less effective parents than mothers. The perception of such professionals that maternal custody is in the "best interests of the child" has resulted in systematic paternal discrimination (Kruk, 1993), and divorced fathers are often demeaned, demoralized, and disenfranchised from their children, which makes it difficult for them to remain emotionally bonded to them (Nielsen, 1999).

In part, paternal discrimination may be due to societal expectations that men should be breadwinners and women should be primary caregivers (Coltrane & Parke, 1998). These traditional gender ideologies are unfortunately not realistic when there is often an economic necessity to have two incomes to support a family (Silverstein, 1996). Parental responsibilities among intact families are often shared, particularly when there are dual incomes (Horvath, Lee, & Bax, 2015). Men who interact a lot with their children, however, are praised more than mothers are because this behavior is less expected of them (e.g., Deutsch & Saxon, 1998).

When there are custody disputes after a relationship dissolves, parental behaviors are often examined under a microscope by third parties, such as family "investigators" (e.g., Child Family Investigators or Parental Responsibility Evaluators) who make parenting and custody recommendations to the court. Such recommendations are made after collecting data about the parents' parenting styles derived from sources such as interviews, parent–child interaction observations, and psychological tests. Guardian Ad Litems (GALs) are oftentimes ordered or required by the courts to represent the children in custody disputes; these GALS collect information from the parents and children, and make recommendations to the court on the children's behalf (Hansen, 1964; Muhlhauser, 1990). Legal professionals must also determine whether a parent's behaviors are justified, such as when a parent tries to limit time with the children and the other parent.

Although many third party evaluators such as social workers are ethically bound to be objective in their assessments (Luftman, Veltkamp, Clark, Lannacone, & Snooks, 2005), biases in perceptions and longstanding belief systems make recommendations for custody and enforcement of court orders highly subjective. For example, in a study of family service providers, researchers reported over half of female staff providers and 34% of male staff providers believed (unverifiably) that a quarter of fathers physically abuse their children (Russell et al., 1999). Likewise, child caseworkers in Australia exhibit many negative stereotypes about fathers, such as believing them to be uninvolved or uncommitted to their children (Zanoni, Warburton, Bussey, & McMaugh, 2014).

The majority of research on parental role expectations has focused on stereotypes associated with male and female parenting roles, and on whether certain parenting styles are more effective than others, such as whether a permissive parenting style results in better outcomes for children (e.g., educational achievement) than a more authoritative style. We are currently unaware of any study that has examined whether specific parenting practices are deemed more "acceptable" when they are enacted by a particular parent (mother or father). There are many positive behaviors parents can exhibit, such as maintaining a consistent sleep schedule with a child, or encouraging a child to complete a school project with the other parent. However, there are also many behaviors that are negative and intended to distance a child from the other parent, or to make a child more loyal to one parent than another. The purpose of the current study was to examine whether such negative parenting practices, or parental alienating behaviors, are viewed as more "acceptable" for one parent to exhibit than the other, especially if such practices are consistent with gender role expectations of being the "good" or "better" parent.

Parental Alienating Behaviors

The term *parental alienation* has had a controversial history (Luftman et al., 2005; Rand, 2010) and refers to a damaged or severed relationship between a child and a targeted parent, caused by the alienating parent (e.g., Gardner, 1998). For the current study, we focused on the behaviors that parents do to accomplish parental alienation. Therefore, we focused on a set of behaviors that one parent enacts with the intent to distance and damage a child's relationship with the other parent. Researchers have identified a number of parenting practices that parents use to damage a child's relationship with the other parent. These behaviors include badmouthing and criticizing the other parent (e.g., saying the other parent is dangerous), emotional manipulation (e.g., making a child feel guilty about their relationship with the other parent), creating unhealthy alliances with the child (e.g., having a child spy on the other parent), withholding or destroying gifts or property given by the other parent, and limiting contact with a child (e.g., intercepting phone calls, blocking visitation; Baker & Darnall, 2006; Kruk, 1993). Although third-party, court-appointed evaluators are encouraged to report such behaviors in their evaluations of families (Luftman et al., 2005), little is known about whether such behaviors are interpreted by such individuals as being alienating, or whether they are perceived as being justifiable.

Parental alienating behaviors are not uncommon; indeed, a large survey of American mental health and legal professionals found that approximately one-quarter of divorce cases involved concerns about parental alienation (Bow, Gould, & Flens, 2009). These behaviors are justified in cases where a parent is abusive or neglectful (estrangement). However, they are alienating when the reasons are not justifiable or the alienating behavior is a response to an infraction that is out of proportion to the actual danger the infraction poses to the family or children. Distinguishing between estrangement and alienation has been a challenge for legal and clinical professionals (Ellis & Boyan, 2010). For example, if a parent restricts a child from seeing the other parent due to allegations of physical abuse, this would be considered estrangement if the allegations were true; it would be considered alienation if the allegations were not substantiated.

Data drawn from expert custody recommendations in family courts indicate that when fathers are the alienating parent, their behaviors are perceived to be dangerous and serious, and they are regularly refused custody of their children (Lavadera, Ferracuti, & Togliatti, 2012). In contrast, even when mothers are found to engage in active alienation campaigns against the father, their behaviors go unmonitored and unchallenged by the courts, and mothers often retain custody because they are perceived to be the "ideal" parent. Cultural preferences about custody determinations

reflect traditional, patriarchal values and perceptual biases resulting in fathers being treated differently in family court than mothers.

Therefore, we propose that the perceived acceptability of alienating tactics will be gender biased. Given that mothers are afforded greater status for their parental role (e.g., "mother knows best"), we hypothesized that perceptions of a mother exhibiting alienating behaviors with her child to damage their relationship with the other parent would be perceived as comparatively more acceptable than if a father used the same tactics. We also explored a research question about positive parenting behaviors because two equally plausible predictions can be made. First, there has been some evidence that when fathers display positive parenting practices, they are "rewarded" or perceived to be "exceptional" parents due to violating norms about masculinity (e.g., being less nurturing than women are; Henwood & Procter, 2003). Due to this bias, ratings of positive parenting practices should be perceived as more acceptable for fathers than mothers, because women are "expected" to act as parents while men are not. Alternatively, expectancy violation theory suggests that individuals who conform to expectations are "rewarded" for their compliance (e.g., Benard & Correll, 2010) and are punished for deviating. If this theory were to be true, then positive fathering behaviors, which deviate from norms about masculinity, should be rated as less acceptable for fathers than mothers. Our research question, which accounts for the possibility of both effects, was Are positive coparenting behaviors perceived to be more acceptable for mothers or fathers to display?

Method

Participants

Two-hundred twenty-eight MTurk workers (147 female, 64.2%; 82 male, 35.8%; M_{age} 36.06 years, $SD = 11.67$) completed the experimental survey. MTurk is a website that connects "workers" with tasks and has been a popular source of participant recruitment for social science researchers because the samples tend to be more diverse than those recruited from other online samples and traditional university convenience samples (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011). The survey was posted as one of many possible jobs that workers could select, and the only prerequisite for the "job" was that the individual be a parent. As data quality is oftentimes an issue with MTurk samples (Paolacci & Chandler, 2014), we excluded responses from participants who did not complete survey questions related to their demographic characteristics (e.g., parental status, age) and who did not complete the ratings of parenting practices (94 respondents were excluded from the data set). We specifically recruited workers who were parents, and the mean number of children (biological and step/adopted children) they reported having was 3.76 (range 1–10). Many of the participants (25.3%) had never been married to the other parent of their child, 13.5% were divorced or widowed, 56.8% were currently married or in a domestic partnership, and 4.4% were legally separated.

Measures and Procedure

This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at Colorado State University. Participants evaluated a set of parenting behaviors as to their perceived acceptability on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*never acceptable*) to 5 (*always acceptable*) and were randomly assigned to rate this acceptability if a generic parent exhibited the behavior ($n = 81$), or whether a mother (mother condition, $n = 77$) or father (father condition; $n = 70$) exhibited the behavior (e.g., a mother/father tells a child the other parent is sick or dangerous). There are currently no reliable or validated measures of parental alienating behaviors, and current measures have not clearly distinguished between screening for potential alienation and the risk of reoccurrence (Fidler, Bala, & Saini, 2012). Therefore, we selected 58 behaviors cited in past research as being alienating for a child and the other parent (e.g., tell a child the other parent does not love them; Baker & Darnall, 2006) or were described by alienated parents involved in a separate structured interview study (e.g., contact social services and make false allegations about the other parent's behavior with a child; Harman & Biringen, 2016).

Perceived acceptability of parenting behaviors. Because of the large number of alienating behaviors that participants rated, we conducted an exploratory factor analysis using Varimax rotation to identify clusters of similar behaviors that we could analyze together. Seven factors with eigenvalues >1 emerged from this analysis, accounting for 68.95% of the total variance. The first factor accounted for the largest amount of variance (32.04 eigenvalue, 54.30% total variance) and contained 27 items that loaded heavily on it (factor loadings ranging from 0.55 to 0.86) and had factor loadings of <.30 on the other factors. The items loading on this first factor described alienating behaviors designed to align the children with one parent and portray the other parent in a negative light. Consequently, we named this factor *Loyalty/Negative Portrayal* and the items appear in Table 1. The second factor accounted for an additional 3.9% of the variance and contained seven items (factor loadings ranging from .62 to .68), all relating to interference with communication between the child and the other parent or their social network, and attempts to minimize contact or exposure to the other parent. This factor was labeled *Relationship Minimization,* and the items in this factor are also presented in Table 1. Factors 3 and 4 contained only two and three items respectively, and each accounted for only a small amount of variance in the model (<3%). In addition, the last three factors had either only one item that loaded on them (e.g., let a child choose whether to visit a parent), or no clear loadings for any of the items. Therefore, these remaining factors were not examined; we will not discuss them further. The reliability of the 27 items in the Loyalty/Negative Portrayal factor was high ($\alpha = .98$), and they were averaged together to create one factor score. The reliability for the seven items in the Relationship Minimization factor was also good ($\alpha = .89$) and so these items were averaged together to create one factor score. The means and standard deviations for each of these factors are also presented in Table 1 for all three experimental conditions.

Participants also rated a number of positive and neutral parenting practices (34 total) that are not potentially alienating. Nine of these items were positive coparenting practices (e.g., support the other parent in disciplining a child, encourage a child to do special projects together with the other parent). These items either had been identified by parents in the separate structured interview study (see above), or were adapted from a measure of coparenting behaviors developed by Mullett and Stolberg (1999). The reliability of these items was high ($\alpha = .91$), and they were averaged together to form a scale of positive

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics on Acceptability of Alienating Behaviors for Mothers and Fathers

Behavior	Mother condition	Father condition	Generic parent condition
Average of all loyalty/Negative portrayal behaviors (below)	1.85 (.84)	1.66 (.80)	1.68 (.83)
Tell a child the other parent does not love him or her.	1.73 (1.05)	1.53 (.91)	1.37 (.85)
Tell a child that someone else is his or her parent.	2.12 (1.12)	1.77 (1.05)	1.77 (1.01)
Badmouth the other parent's new family (e.g, step-parent) or extended family in front of a child.	1.78 (.96)	1.70 (.98)	1.59 (.90)
Belittle the other parent in front of a child.	1.76 (1.04)	1.57 (1.01)	1.51 (.93)
Belittle the other parent's job, hobbies, or values.	1.85 (.93)	1.63 (.87)	1.58 (.95)
Throw out or hide gifts for a child from the other parent.	1.90 (.94)	1.67 (.94)	1.67 (.94)
Rewrite past to minimize or distort a child's relationship with the other parent.	1.89 (1.14)	1.71 (.89)	1.71 (.94)
Refuse to communicate with other parent.	2.24 (1.11)	1.99 (1.07)	2.06 (.97)
Use a child as a messenger between parents.	2.15 (1.05)	1.93 (.94)	1.99 (1.09)
Withdraw love or show expressions of disapproval if a child is positive about the other parent.	1.71 (1.06)	1.57 (.94)	1.67 (1.16)
Make a child feel guilty about his or her relationship with the other parent.	1.59 (.97)	1.51 (.90)	1.55 (1.04)
Force a child to choose or express their loyalty to a parent.	1.84 (1.11)	1.63 (1.00)	1.67 (1.07)
Force a child to reject the other parent or signal to a child he or she should not approach the other parent at an event (e.g., a sporting event).	1.87 (1.11)	1.63 (1.00)	1.69 (1.05)
Reward a child for rejecting the other parent.	1.55 (.84)	1.46 (.85)	1.54 (.99)
Make a child dependent on one parent or be especially overprotective of the child.	2.21 (1.00)	2.20 (1.08)	1.98 (1.00)
Have a child spy on the other parent.	1.83 (1.05)	1.61 (.97)	1.66 (1.01)
Have a child keep secrets from the other parent.	2.11 (.92)	1.89 (.94)	1.93 (.91)
Yell at other parent in front of a child.	2.03 (1.02)	1.67 (.99)	1.80 (1.03)
Badmouth the other parent to teachers, friends, doctors.	1.90 (1.03)	1.65 (.92)	1.73 (1.06)
Create conflict between the child and the other parent.	1.58 (.97)	1.54 (1.03)	1.48 (.97)
Prevent the other parent from attending children's functions (e.g., school concerts).	2.24 (1.05)	1.93 (.91)	1.97 (1.03)
Undermine the other parent's authority with a child.	2.09 (.98)	1.87 (1.09)	1.70 (.83)
Make it appear the other parent is rejecting a child.	1.78 (1.05)	1.61 (1.04)	1.56 (.95)
Interfere with a child's counseling or social services.	2.03 (1.03)	1.86 (.87)	1.83 (.97)
Talk negatively about the other parent (e.g., on the phone), within earshot of a child.	1.82 (.98)	1.70 (.98)	1.62 (.92)
Break court orders about child custody arrangements between two parents.	1.85 (1.05)	1.70 (1.02)	1.88 (1.07)
Contact social services and make false allegations about the other parent's behavior with a child (e.g., sexual abuse).	1.64 (1.10)	1.59 (1.04)	1.60 (1.13)
Average of all relationship minimization behaviors (below)	2.40 (.73)	2.12 (.70)	2.04 (.76)
Ask a child's school to limit contact with the other parent.	2.53 (.95)	2.34 (1.26)	2.17 (1.01)
Limit a child's contact with the other parent's extended family (e.g., phone calls).	2.24 (.93)	2.09 (.93)	1.95 (.89)
Block a phone number used to contact a child, or turn off phone to limit contact by the other parent.	2.25(.91)	1.88 (.87)	1.81 (.91)
Intercept calls or messages from the other parent intended for the child.	2.37 (1.01)	2.41 (1.00)	1.94 (.87)
Limit mention and photographs of the other parent.	2.41 (.97)	2.18 (.97)	2.04 (.91)
Have family limit mention of the other parent to a child.	2.56 (.93)	2.21 (.96)	2.11 (1.08)
Have a child call someone else "Dad" or "Mom."	2.43 (1.01)	2.19 (.89)	2.29 (1.03)

coparenting behaviors. Descriptive statistics for each item and their averages are presented in Table 2. We used this variable to explore our research question as to whether such behaviors are more acceptable for mothers or fathers to exhibit. The neutral parenting behaviors were added as filler items for the survey, and were parenting behaviors that individuals could do without the cooperation of another parent (e.g., sending a child to time-out).

Parental alienating behaviors. Prevalence of parental alienating behaviors was also assessed by asking all participants to rate the alienating behaviors as to whether they know others who have done them, they themselves have done them, and whether the other parent has done them (all "yes" or "no" responses). Because of the length of the survey, only those alienating behaviors that were cited in Baker and Darnall (2006) as being mentioned over 30% of

the time by participants, and those behaviors that were mentioned frequently by participants in the separate interview study were rated (total behaviors = 43).

Traditional gender role attitudes. Finally, attitudes about traditional parenting practices were measured using 14 items adapted from the Gender Equitable Men Scale (Nanda, 2011). Each item (e.g., "Changing diapers, giving the kids a bath, and feeding the kids is a mother's responsibility") was rated on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). The alpha for these items was acceptable ($\alpha = .75$) and were averaged together. Men ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 0.52$) reported greater endorsement of the traditional parenting roles than women ($M = 2.37$, $SD = 0.50$), $t(130) = 3.78$, $p < .001$; however the means for both men and women were low, indicating quite egalitarian beliefs overall.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics on Acceptability of Positive Co-Parenting Behaviors for Mothers and Fathers

Behavior	Mother	Father	Generic parent
Average of all positive behaviors (below)	4.21 (.73)	4.34 (.70)	4.23 (.68)
Encourage a child to include the other parent on class projects or activities, such as interviews.	4.13 (1.05)	4.34 (.87)	4.17 (1.01)
Be flexible with the other parent on pick-ups and drop off times for a child when he or she transports them for a visit.	4.12 (.98)	4.24 (.94)	4.20 (.87)
Share positive stories of the other parent to a child.	4.24 (1.02)	4.43 (.88)	4.40 (.93)
Hang or allow pictures of the other parent in a child's room.	4.26 (.90)	4.29 (.86)	4.24 (.90)
Coordinate or plan birthday parties with the other parent.	4.27 (.94)	4.42 (.90)	4.15 (.88)
Communicate with other parent about disciplinary issues related to a child.	4.22 (1.05)	4.36 (.94)	4.21 (1.00)
Coordinate or cooperate with the other parent for the purchase of a gift for a child.	4.17 (.96)	4.39 (1.03)	4.14 (1.02)
Support the other parent in disciplining a child.	4.01 (.86)	4.09 (1.04)	4.07 (.79)
Encourage a child to do special projects together with the other parent (e.g., build something)	4.28 (.91)	4.41 (.75)	4.35 (.92)

Results

Prevalence of Parental Alienating Behaviors

Reports of witnessing or experiencing parental alienating behaviors are reported in Table 3. Among all parents (whether married, divorced, or separated), reports of others exhibiting Loyalty/Negative Portrayal behaviors ranged from 22.7% (forcing a child to reject the other parent or signal the child to not approach the other parent at an event) to 66.8% (yell at the other parent in front of a child). These percentages were similar for Relationship Minimization behaviors (e.g., limit mention and photographs of the other parent); all reported by 35–37% of the sample. Similarly, the prevalence of other alienating behaviors ranged from 20.5% of participants saying they knew of someone changing a child's name, to 62.9% of participants saying they knew someone who allowed a child to choose whether to visit the other parent.

We also examined whether parents who were divorced or separated from the other parent either committed each alienating behavior themselves, or reported the other parent as having done so ($n = 126$). Many of these parents reported being on the receiving end of numerous alienating behaviors: among the Loyalty/Negative Portrayal behaviors, 14.3% of these parents reported that their child was forced to reject them by the other parent, and 55.6% reported being yelled at by the other parent in front of a child. Between 21%–30% of parents reported having their relationship minimized by the other parent, and many reported being the target of other negative behaviors (e.g., other parent told the child he or she was sick or dangerous, 29.4%). Although these parenting behaviors are negative, a number of respondents did admit to doing many of them themselves (e.g., 19.8% admitted to belittling the other parent in front of a child).

Perceived Acceptability of Parenting Behaviors

To test our hypothesis that acceptability of parental alienating behaviors is gender biased, we conducted a series of analyses of variance (ANOVAs), with condition (ratings of a mother or father) and traditional parenting attitudes as predictors, and ratings of acceptability for the two types of alienating behaviors as outcomes. We first ran all analyses with comparisons between mothers and fathers because we hypothesized there to be differences in this comparison. We also included gender and relationship status with the parent of the participant's children as covariates because we

wanted to see whether perceived acceptability of the parenting behaviors was evident above and beyond such past experiences. Across all analyses, gender and relationship status were not statistically significant predictors in the models.

Loyalty/negative portrayal. Main effects were found for parenting attitudes, such that the more traditional the attitude, the greater ratings of acceptability there were for alienating behaviors, $F(28, 114) = 8.18$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.77$. As predicted, we also found a main effect for condition, $F(1, 114) = 8.19$, $p < .006$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.11$. Although these parenting behaviors were rated as generally unacceptable, it was more acceptable for mothers to exhibit the behaviors than fathers. The interaction between traditional parenting attitudes and condition was not statistically significant ($p > .05$), so there were no substantial differences in how such attitudes affected the reported acceptability of the behaviors across conditions.

Relationship minimization. Main effects were also found for traditional parenting attitudes, such that the more traditional the attitude, the greater ratings of acceptability there were for relationship minimizing behaviors, $F(28, 127) = 4.29$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.60$. As predicted, we also found a main effect for condition, $F(1, 127) = 9.12$, $p < .003$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.10$. These parenting behaviors were also rated as generally unacceptable, but it was more acceptable for mothers to exhibit these behaviors than fathers. The interaction between traditional parenting attitudes and condition was again not statistically significant ($p > .05$), so there were no substantial differences in how such attitudes impacted the perceived acceptability of the behaviors across conditions.

Positive coparenting behaviors. Finally, we explored our research question about whether positive coparenting behaviors were more acceptable for mothers or fathers to display. We conducted another ANOVA with condition (ratings of a mother or father) and traditional parenting attitudes as predictors, and ratings of acceptability for the positive coparenting behaviors as the outcome. We also included the same covariant (relationship status with other parent) as in the previous analyses. Although mean ratings of acceptability were higher for fathers ($M = 4.35$, $SD = 0.71$) than for mothers ($M = 4.20$, $SD = 0.72$), the difference was not statistically significant, $F(1, 126) = 2.13$, $p = .15$. Father's behaviors were rated as more acceptable when they were imagined to display positive coparenting behaviors than mothers, however the effect size was small, $\eta_p^2 = 0.02$, and observed power to detect differences was moderate (0.31).

Table 3
Reported Prevalence of Parental Alienating Behaviors

Behavior	Seen others exhibit (n = 229)	Self exhibited (n = 126)	Other parent exhibited (n = 126)
Loyalty/Negative portrayal behaviors			
Tell a child the other parent does not love him or her.	28.8%	11.9%	23.8%
Badmouth the other parent's new family (e.g, step-parent) or extended family in front of a child.	44.5%	12.7%	31.7%
Belittle the other parent in front of a child.	58.5%	19.8%	41.3%
Throw out or hide gifts for a child from the other parent.	30.1%	7.1%	19.0%
Rewrite past to minimize or distort a child's relationship with the other parent.	36.2%	11.9%	31.0%
Withdraw love or show expressions of disapproval if a child is positive about the other parent.	34.1%	11.1%	20.6%
Make a child feel guilty about his or her relationship with the other parent.	46.7%	11.9%	29.4%
Force a child to choose or express their loyalty to a parent.	29.7%	13.5%	22.2%
Force a child to reject the other parent or signal to a child he or she should not approach the other parent at an event (e.g., a sporting event).	22.7%	6.3%	14.3%
Reward a child for rejecting the other parent.	26.2%	10.3%	18.3%
Make a child dependent on one parent or be especially overprotective of the child.	36.2%	15.1%	27.0%
Have a child spy on the other parent.	33.6%	9.7%	23.8%
Have a child keep secrets from the other parent.	41.9%	15.9%	30.2%
Yell at other parent in front of a child.	66.8%	34.9%	55.6%
Badmouth the other parent to teachers, friends, doctors.	49.3%	19.8%	21.8%
Create conflict between the child and the other parent.	45.0%	5.6%	25.4%
Prevent the other parent from attending children's functions (e.g., school concerts).	34.5%	14.3%	25.4%
Undermine the other parent's authority with a child.	47.2%	15.9%	34.9%
Make it appear the other parent is rejecting a child.	39.7%	9.5%	22.2%
Break court orders about child custody arrangements between two parents.	36.7%	9.5%	31.0%
Contact social services and make false allegations about the other parent's behavior with a child (e.g., sexual abuse).	34.9%	7.1%	18.3%
Relationship minimization behaviors			
Block a phone number used to contact a child, or turn off phone to limit contact by the other parent.	35.8%	7.9%	21.4%
Intercept calls or messages from the other parent intended for the child.	36.7%	15.1%	30.2%
Limit mention and photographs of the other parent.	36.7%	10.3%	23.8%
Other alienating behaviors			
Realize a child is detached from one parent and so the other 'lets it be.'	42.4%	27.0%	24.6%
Tell a child the other parent is sick or dangerous.	38.0%	12.7%	29.4%
Confide in a child about relationship or marital problems.	37.1%	15.9%	29.4%
Confide in a child about court case and child support issues.	37.6%	16.7%	30.2%
Move away or hide the child from the other parent.	31.4%	8.7%	19.0%
Limit visitation or private time between a child and the other parent.	45.0%	15.1%	26.2%
Arrange fun activities (that a child would like) during the other parent's time with a child.	42.4%	24.6%	39.7%
Change a child's name	20.5%	12.7%	17.5%
Let a child choose whether to visit the other parent.	62.9%	42.1%	45.2%
Call, text, or visit a child more than 2 times a day during the other parent's time with a child.	32.8%	19.8%	28.6%
Monitor calls, emails, and text messages between child and the other parent.	44.5%	21.4%	31.7%
Throw out letters, delete emails or text messages sent from other parent to a child.	31.0%	8.7%	19.0%
Not allow a child to bring items back and forth between parent's homes.	39.3%	24.6%	31.7%
Not provide the other parent with information about a child's school, medical, or activity information.	36.7%	15.1%	21.4%
Not provide the other parent's contact information to others.	33.2%	19.7%	33.3%
Interrogate a child after visiting or spending time with the other parent.	45.9%	19.0%	29.4%
Badmouth the other parent to authorities (e.g., police).	45.9%	11.9%	29.4%
Do not allow 'alone' time with the other parent at pickup or during visitation time with a child.	27.5%	10.3%	19.8%
Change phone number or email address and do not tell the other parent.	34.9%	13.5%	27.0%

Post Hoc Analyses

Although our hypothesis was only concerned with comparisons between mothers' and fathers' parental behaviors, we decided to also compare the control, or generic parent condition ratings with the other parent conditions. There were not statistically significant differences across the three conditions for the loyalty/negative portrayal or positive parenting behaviors, however there were differences for the relationship minimizing behaviors, $F(2, 221) =$

5.01, $p < .01$. Simple contrasts revealed that only the comparison between the mother and generic parent conditions was statistically significant, $p < .01$; the comparison between the generic parent and father conditions was not, $p > .05$. Therefore, relationship minimizing parenting behaviors were rated as more acceptable for mothers to do when compared to fathers, who were viewed as being no different than a "generic" parent.

Discussion

In the current study, we tested expectancy violation theory (Jussim et al., 1987) with regards to the acceptability of different parenting behaviors practiced by mothers and fathers. Although parental alienating behaviors are negative and result in difficulties in the target parent being able to maintain a healthy relationship with a child (Lehr & MacMillan, 2001), we proposed that such negative behaviors would be rated as more acceptable if exhibited by a mother than a father. We found support for this hypothesis by testing two different types of alienating behaviors: behaviors aimed to increase loyalty to one parent while portraying the other in a negative light, and behaviors aimed to minimize the relationship with the other parent. The alienating behaviors themselves are not generally acceptable practices, but they were rated as being more acceptable when mothers do them than fathers. This finding lends support to expectancy violation theory, as mothers are not "penalized" as much for confirming their parental role expectations of being protective parents. This difference in rating may also reflect the belief that there are sometimes justifiable reasons for mothers to act that way ("dads are sometimes bad"), yet that same bias is not as easily applied in the reverse.

Although just posed as a research question, we also asked whether we would see ratings of acceptability differ by parental role for positive coparenting behaviors. We failed to find statistically significant differences in ratings of acceptability for mothers and fathers on these behaviors, however the means were slightly higher for fathers. These results should be interpreted with caution, but the pattern of means points to the possibility that when fathers act like positive parents, this goes against expectations and he is not punished for it; rather, he may be rewarded more than mothers who are confirming expectations. Mothers have historically been expected to care for children while fathers work outside the home, yet reversing the roles yields significant rewards for fathers. For example, Dyer, Day, and Harper (2014) found that when mothers worked outside the home for 45 hours or more per week, the fathers received substantial recognition for "picking up the slack" with child rearing duties. Mothers are merely expected to do these behaviors and receive no such gain in status. Similarly, when deciding to keep a child or put them up for adoption, single mothers are viewed as being biologically compelled to keep and raise their children, but single fathers are commended for their "expression of love" and "acceptance of responsibility" for the child when they choose to keep him/her (Miall & March, 2005).

It is possible that when fathers alienate their children from their mothers, their behaviors are viewed as more acceptable if they are able to get others to see the mother as "unmotherly" (e.g., mentally ill). Unfortunately, for fathers, this label is more difficult to have "stick" onto a mother than the deadbeat or "abusive" father characterizations that are often applied easily by alienating mothers. Although qualitative data has provided some preliminary support for these predictions (Harman & Biringen, 2016), more empirical research is needed to test them fully. Future research should also measure not just how acceptable particular parenting behaviors are, but how they reflect on the parenting abilities of the mothers or fathers themselves.

The sample surveyed in this study was recruited from MTURK workers who were also parents, which has its strengths and limitations. First, we recruited parents because we believed they would be more sensitive to the impact that positive and negative parenting practices would have on children than those who have not had the experience of being a parent. Therefore, this selection criterion provided a more stringent test of our hypothesis than if we surveyed those who (likely) have not had as much experience seeing or imagining how such practices would impact a child. Future research will need to examine whether these same biases exist among individuals who do not have children, or among caseworkers and other third party evaluators involved with custody evaluations to see whether the biases are stronger or weaker. We predict that the biases will still exist, because caseworkers who make custody evaluations and recommendations are oftentimes biased in their perceptions of paternal inadequacies (e.g., Russell et al., 1999). Indeed, Saunders and colleagues (2016) have found that core patriarchal and biased beliefs about the nature of interpersonal violence allegations (e.g., their veracity) affect recommendations of custody evaluators, and that more training is needed for such professionals to address these biases.

MTURK workers often participate in research for intrinsic rather than purely monetary reasons (Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010) and are older than college-aged samples (~30 years old, similar to our sample). They are also typically more educated, underemployed, less religious, and less conservative than the general population (Paolacci & Chandler, 2014). Although these characteristics are important to consider when determining the generalizability of our findings, they also imply that more conservative and less educated samples, which tend to adhere to more traditional gender norms (Gonsoulin & LeBoeuf, 2010), would demonstrate even greater gender biases in their ratings of acceptability of negative parenting behaviors. Replication of our effects with other samples would be fruitful to examine these possible population differences.

There has not been a national representative survey published yet on parental alienating behaviors to determine prevalence. Estimates of its prevalence have shown great variability (e.g., <10% of divorce cases; Baker, 2007, to 25% or more; Bow, Gould, & Flens, 2009), and there are many local (e.g., meet-up groups) and national movements with millions of members that have formed to address parental alienation and family court reform (e.g., Divorce Corp's Family Law Reform). In a recent representative poll of North Carolina adults, Harman, Leder-Elder, and Biringen (2016) have found prevalence of parental alienation at 13.3% of adult parents, which represents approximately 22 million or more adults in the United States alone. Our convenience sample here reported a wide range of specific alienating behaviors that they have seen other parents do, and many who are no longer with the parent of their child also reported they have been targeted by the tactics themselves. Given the severe and devastating impact of this problem on families (e.g., psychologically, economically), a study using more representative samples of parents is needed to obtain a more accurate picture of prevalence and impact.

Implications

Family court systems are extremely taxed, with backlogs of cases and substantial delays for families awaiting settlement of custody disputes. While there is a lack of empirical evidence on precisely how overburdened the family court system is, the Bureau of Justice reported extremely high numbers of domestic relations cases annually, with 647,475 in New York and 399,097 cases in Pennsylvania in 2012 alone (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2015). Such high caseloads often result in prolonged litigation processes. For example, in Ontario, Canada, it takes 1.08 years on average for a judge to hear a case after a social worker submits his or her custody recommendation report (Semple, 2011). Legal professionals, too, recognize such problems. In a survey of family court judges and attorneys, the largest complaint of both groups was the excessive amount of time taken to return recommendations. The second most frequently identified concern by both groups was a lack of objectivity and supporting data in child custody reports (Bow & Quinnell, 2004).

Potentially because of such high caseloads, custody determinations and decisions on postdecree custody disputes are impacted heavily by subjective (and often implicit) biases about how acceptable, or "good" different parenting practices are. Our study demonstrates that parents hold the bias that parental alienating behaviors are generally not acceptable, but are more acceptable for mothers to do than fathers. These biases are deeply engrained and difficult to change, as they are rooted in patriarchal beliefs that women are more nurturing and capable parents than fathers (Harman & Biringen, 2016). Caseworkers, psychologists, GALS and other court appointed officials are often trained to be mindful of such biases, but research demonstrates that they still exist and do impact perceptions of parents (e.g., Russell et al., 1999), and many evaluators' reports are often biased, accepted as "fact," and weighed heavily in court decisions. Although attorneys and judges may believe consciously that divorced mothers and fathers deserve to be treated equally, they may revert to the use of heuristics (e.g., mother knows best; "men are more likely to be aggressive"; "I know the evaluator and trust his/her credentials"), which are fueled by traditional parenting stereotypes. By using these heuristics to help guide their work and decisions rather than objectively considering all the facts, the consequences for children and families are substantial. A better understanding of how biases specifically affect custodial recommendations and judicial interventions to address postdecree parental disputes is needed.

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