

Introduction

American research findings show (DeJean et al. 2012, Haire & McGeorge 2012) that there is a double standard in the perception of single mothers and single fathers. This double standard has two aspects, as on the one hand, single fathers are perceived more positively in the eye of the public than single mothers, on the other hand, single mothers are seen as more competent in child-rearing than single fathers. These two perceptions are supported by traditional gender roles:

- (1) while single fathers take an untraditional role of men by becoming the primary caregiver of their children, they are more likely to be seen as positive characters (and even as a hero) than single mothers, while single mothers are often seen as failing in one of their traditional roles – keeping the family together
- (2) while caring responsibilities are traditionally connected to women, single mothers are perceived as being more competent in child-rearing compared to single fathers

This research tests the existence of the double standard in Hungary, and interprets the results based on the stereotype content model (SCM) (Fiske et al. 2002).

The stereotype content model

SCM states that the social perceptions of groups are often mixed based on two dimensions, warmth and competence. High-status groups are perceived as being competent, cooperative groups are seen as being warm.

In the case of single parents, stereotypes show that single mothers are seen as competent but less warm, while single fathers are seen as warm but less competent. These perceptions bring an additional perspective to the gender-related understanding of SCM (e.g. Connor and Fiske 2018) which states that women in traditional roles (e.g. mothers, housewives) are seen as warm but not competent, while women in less traditional roles (e.g. managers) are seen as competent but not warm. Stereotypes show an inversed form regarding single mothers and fathers, as competence is understood within and not outside the family.

References

Connor, R. A., & Fiske, S. T. (2018). Warmth and competence: A feminist look at power and negotiation. / DeJean S. L., McGeorge, C. R. & Carlson T. S. (2012). Attitudes Toward Never-Married Single Mothers and Fathers: Does Gender Matter? / Fiske, S. T., Cuddy, A. J. C., Glick, P., and Xu, J. (2002). A model of (often mixed) stereotype content: Competence and warmth respectively follow from perceived status and competition. / Haire, A. R., & McGeorge, C. R. (2012). Negative Perceptions of Never-Married Custodial Single Mothers and Fathers: Applications of a Gender Analysis for Family Therapists.

Hypotheses

Based on the SCM the research tests the following hypotheses:

- (1) Single fathers have a more positive (warm) public image than single mothers.
- (2) Single mothers are perceived as more competent to rear children than single fathers.
- (3) The double standard could be explained by attitudes towards traditional gender roles.

Data and methods

- (1) An open-ended question was asked to test the first hypothesis about the general perception of single mothers and fathers: *In your opinion, how the Hungarian society perceives single mothers / single fathers? Please, provide three words.* The question was asked on a representative sample (N=1200) that was split in half; one part of the respondents received the question about single mothers, while the other received the question about single fathers.

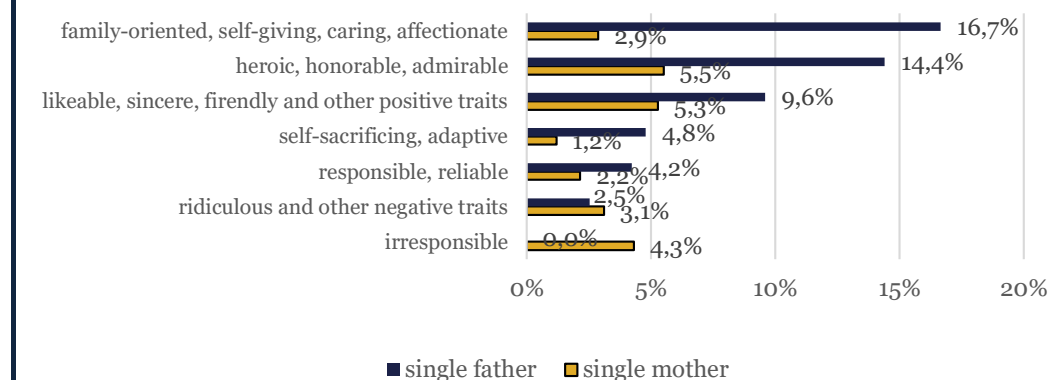
- (2) To test the second and third hypotheses, I used the Hungarian database of the International Social Survey Programme (2012) (representative sample; N=1000) that included the following statements: “A single mother can bring up her child as well as two parents together”; “A single father can bring up his child as well as two parents together” (agreement was measured on a 5-point scale). Besides comparing the results of these two statements, I also analyzed how attitudes towards traditional gender roles affect the acceptance of these statements.

- (3) For the investigation of the third hypothesis, I also used an open-ended question (quota sample based on gender, age, education, region, settlement type N=506). First, respondents were asked to answer the following question: *In your opinion, rearing a child alone is more difficult for a mother or for a father?* The answer categories were the following: 1) it is more difficult for a mother 2) it is more difficult for a father 3) it is difficult to the same extent for a mother and a father. Afterwards, respondents were also asked to explain their answers.

Results

- (1) Positive stereotypes connected to the warmth dimension were mentioned more often in the case of single fathers, as a larger share of respondents described them as heroic, family-oriented, responsible, self-sacrificing and likeable (single mothers N=416; single fathers N=354).

Stereotypes connected to warmth



- (2) Almost 30% agreed with the statement that a single mother could bring up a child as good as two parents, while only 18% believed the same about single fathers. Results showed that not only the perceived competence inside the family (caring role), but also the perceived competence outside the family (breadwinner role) explain the perceived competence of single parents.

- (3) 9,4% of the respondents believed that it is harder for single mothers, 15,2% replied that it is harder for single fathers and 70,9% believed that it is hard to the same extent for mothers and fathers (4,3% could not decide). Regarding single fathers, respondents mainly emphasized that mothers are better caregivers of children than fathers, while regarding single mothers, respondents highlighted single mothers' worse economic condition compared to single fathers.

Conclusion

The results proved the existence of the double standard in Hungary: single fathers are seen as more warm than single mothers, while single mothers are seen as more competent in child-rearing than single fathers. Attitudes towards traditional gender roles explain the double standard, however, not only the perceived competence in caring roles, but also the perceived competence in financing a family explain single parents' perceived competence to rear a child alone. Nevertheless, a larger share of the public find single mothers competent to child-rearing, which result underlines that competence inside the family is the dominant perception.