

The supermom trap: Do involved dads erode moms' self-competence?

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Abstract

Increasingly, husbands have been expected to share equally in the task of childrearing, especially when their wives are employed. This study examined reactions to these changes in a sample of 78 dual-earner couples with 8-month-old infants. When wives felt that their husbands were skillful caregivers, greater husbands' contribution to caregiving was associated with lower self-competence among wives. In contrast, wives' caregiving behavior was unrelated to their husbands' self-competence. None of these effects emerged for the self-liking component of self-esteem. Thus, despite increasingly egalitarian sex roles, employed mothers (but not their husbands) seem to be trapped between their desire for help with childrearing and the threat to their personal competence posed by failure to meet socially constructed ideals of motherhood.

The women's liberation movement ushered in a new egalitarianism wherein women of all stripes were encouraged to join the workforce. Husbands of these women have been expected to share in the task of childrearing. A corollary, albeit unstated, assumption was that employed mothers would welcome fathers' involvement in caregiving, as this would enable them to devote much needed time to their careers. The research reported in this article represents a partial test of this corollary assumption. In particular, recognizing that child care is an important source of self-competence for mothers, we ask if sharing child care duties with fathers might decrease mothers' feelings of self-competence. We set

the stage for our analysis by describing recent changes in patterns of childrearing.

Changes in the childrearing landscape

Today it is not unusual for mothers to enter the paid labor force before they celebrate their baby's first birthday. The labor force participation rates among married mothers of infants aged 1 year or younger in two-parent families became a record-high 61.8% in 1998, doubled from 30.8% in 1975, and fell slightly to 55.8% in 2005 (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1999, 2006). This dramatic burgeoning of maternal employment has not only changed the childrearing landscape but also called for a rapid modification of the father's parenting role.

But if the movement of mothers into the workforce has been dramatic, the movement of fathers into the nursery has not. Even when mothers hold a paying job, fathers still spend far less time than mothers doing housework and child care (Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006). Surprisingly, dual-earner mothers seem ambivalent about their husbands' involvement. Indeed, employed mothers were less likely to be satisfied with child care arrangements when their husbands were a major source of child care (Glass, 1998). We were interested in the roots of such ambivalence.

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Roots of ambivalence among employed mothers

Eagly's (e.g., Diekman & Eagly, 2008; Eagly & Karau, 2002) role congruity theory may help explain why women seem ambivalent about their husbands' involvement in child care. Eagly and colleagues note that individuals are motivated to align their behavior with the societal, interpersonal, and personal demands of roles, and a failure to fulfill the role expectations would result in both intrapersonal (e.g., negative affect) and interpersonal (e.g., ridicule from others) consequences. For instance, socially constructed concepts of motherhood portray mothers as devoted to the care of others and self-sacrificing for others' sake (Arendell, 2000). As a result, women are still expected to be primary caregivers, an expectation that they fulfill behaviorally by assuming most of the responsibility for child care (Bianchi et al., 2006). The question that we address here is what happens when couples fail to fulfill these social expectations such that husbands skillfully perform child care while wives work outside the home.

Although past researchers have not examined the impact of child care arrangement on self-esteem, there is evidence linking failure to engage in gender-normative behaviors to self-esteem losses (Guerrero Witt & Wood, 2008; Josephs, Markus, & Tafarodi, 1992). However, the links between child-rearing arrangements and self-esteem may represent a special case. That is, when fathers skillfully assume the role of caregivers, they may threaten mothers' feelings of competence but leave their feelings of being loved intact. Understanding how this pattern might emerge requires an appreciation of the distinction between the self-competence and self-liking components of self-esteem.

Two dimensions of self-esteem

Based on the assumption that agency and communion represent universal dimensions that underlie much of human behavior and thought (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007), self-esteem researchers have identified two components of global self-esteem that correspond

to agency and communion (e.g., Franks & Marolla, 1976; Gecas, 1971). Tafarodi and Swann (1995) labeled these components *self-competence*—an evaluation of one's ability to bring about desired outcomes—and *self-liking*—an evaluation of one's goodness, worth, and lovability. Supporting this distinction, research indicates that self-competence and self-liking predict unique outcomes (e.g., Bosson & Swann, 1999; Tafarodi & Milne, 2002).

It is easy to imagine how child care arrangements could influence women's self-competence but leave their self-liking intact. That is, if wives view their husbands as skillful caregivers, the longer the husbands spend as exclusive caregivers, the less agentic the women may feel. Because caregiving may be so central to many mothers' feelings of self-worth, perceived deficits in this arena should actually degrade their feelings of self-competence. Furthermore, insofar as women believe that they are responsible for caregiving, there may be nothing they can do to compensate for handing over caregiver responsibilities to their husbands. If so, then women's own child care hours and their husbands' perceptions of their parenting skills may fail to insulate women's self-competence against the threat posed by displays of competent caregiving by fathers. At the same time, women feel that their husbands' contributions to caregiving are a sign of their love and devotion, so such activities may reaffirm their self-liking.

To test this reasoning, we asked both members of couples to complete measures of child care arrangements and two components of self-esteem. In addition, videotaped discussions between spouses about parenting were coded to assess their perceptions of partners' parenting skills. As established in past research (Bianchi et al., 2006), we expected that mothers would report longer hours in child care than fathers. More importantly, we expected that the more time husbands spend caregiving, the lower wives' self-competence (but not self-liking) should fall when wives perceived the caregiving of competent husbands as a self-esteem threat.

Furthermore, we expected that this relationship would prevail even when controlling for wives' own child care hours and their husbands' feedback on the wives' parenting. Finally, if expectations regarding fathers' caregiving roles are indeed less rigidly defined by society, neither child care arrangements nor perceptions of spouses' parenting should be associated with fathers' self-esteem.

Method

Participants

Couples ($N = 78$) were recruited through birthing classes, public service radio announcements, and fliers distributed at maternity stores in a large Southwestern city. In return for their participation in the study, couples were offered a \$50 savings bond for their child. Only English-speaking, cohabitating couples in the third trimester of pregnancy with their first child participated. Couples identified themselves as employed and well educated (51.3% of fathers and 65.4% of mothers had a bachelor degree or more). The average working hours per week were 44 and 35, husbands and wives, respectively. The most commonly reported total family income category was over \$60,000 (30.8%), although 19.2% of families' income was below \$30,000. The mean age for mothers was 30.4, with ages ranging from 17 to 42, and the mean age for fathers was 32.5, with ages ranging from 20 to 51. Most participants were Caucasian (85.9% of fathers, 83.3% of mothers) or Hispanic (10.3% of fathers, 7.7% of mothers).

Procedure

All families were visited in their homes. While one parent was observed interacting with the child, the other parent completed self-report questionnaires, including a measure of self-esteem. A child care arrangement questionnaire was completed jointly and mailed in. Couples were then interviewed concerning their perceptions of their partners' parenting skills.

Measures

Self-esteem

Both wives and husbands individually completed 20 items from Tatarodi and Swann's (1995) Self-Liking/Self-Competence Scale (SLCS). The SLCS measures two distinctive dimensions of global self-esteem. *Self-liking* is the degree to which individuals approve of themselves relative to others, or their sense of social worth. *Self-competence* assesses the degree to which individuals feel capable of and effective in accomplishing their desired goals. On scales ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), people responded to items such as "I like myself" and "I feel worthless at times" for the *self-liking* component, and "I am a capable person" and "I deal poorly with challenges" for the *self-competence* component. The items were summed after reverse coding negatively worded items (self-liking $\alpha = .89$ for mothers and $.94$ for fathers; self-competence $\alpha = .80$ and $.90$, respectively).

Hours spent in child care

The parents jointly completed a chart covering a typical week by identifying the hours the child spent each day from 6 a.m. to 11 p.m. with the mother only, the father only, with the mother and the father together, and in nonparental child care, as well as each parents' work hours. The index of *solo child care* reflected the number of hours per week parents spent with their infant by themselves.

Perceptions of spouses' parenting

During the home visit, parents were asked to talk about their spouses' strengths and weaknesses as a parent. Five trained coders rated the videotaped conversations using 7-point scales that assessed how parents perceived their spouses' parenting in four domains: emotional engagement, physical involvement, responsibility, and overall parenting skills. High scores on emotional engagement reflect spontaneous displays of verbal and physical affection, for example, kissing and hugging the baby, coming back home as soon as possible, and saying "I love you." High scores

on physical involvement reflect the degree to which one believes one's spouse is capable of conducting instrumental caregiving, such as feeding and diaper changing. High scores on responsibility reflect how well one believes one's partner handles situation in which parent's intervention is necessary in terms of socialization and safety. High scores on overall parenting skills reflect an overall opinion of one's spouse's general behavior as a parent. The sum of scores in the four domains was used to construct a summary score of spouse's parenting skills.

Each domain of parenting was assessed on the quantity and quality of descriptions stated by spouses in the videotaped discussion. Simply identifying what their spouses do was insufficient to justify giving either low or high scores in each domain. Instead, the statements needed to be coherent, believable, and supported by clear examples to be given

extreme scores. As each discussion was coded by the same number of randomly assigned raters, a one-way random effects model of the intraclass correlation coefficients (ICCs) was used to calculate interrater reliability, and these ratings were reliable for both mothers (ICC = .77) and fathers (ICC = .75).

Results

Preliminary analyses

Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for independent and dependent variables are presented in Table 1. As expected, mothers' solo child care hours per week were almost 3 times as long (28.7 hr vs. 9.7 hr) as fathers' solo child care hours per week, $t(73) = 7.80$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.31$. Husbands' perceptions of their wives' parenting skills were higher than wives' perceptions of their husbands' parenting skills,

Table 1. Means, standard deviations, and intercorrelations for independent variables and dependent variables

| Variables | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Mother | | | | | | | | |
| 1. Solo child care hours | — | | | | | | | |
| 2. Perception of father's parenting | -0.09 | — | | | | | | |
| 3. Self-competence | -0.11 | -0.02 | — | | | | | |
| 4. Self-liking | -0.05 | -0.13 | 0.57*** | — | | | | |
| Father | | | | | | | | |
| 5. Solo child care hours | 0.09 | -0.16 | -0.06 | -0.15 | — | | | |
| 6. Perception of mother's parenting | 0.03 | 0.69*** | -.05 | -0.02 | -0.30** | — | | |
| 7. Self-competence | -0.03 | 0.26* | 0.12 | -0.15 | 0.15 | 0.13 | — | |
| 8. Self-liking | -0.02 | 0.14 | 0.16 | -0.01 | -0.02 | 0.03 | 0.68*** | — |
| <i>M</i> | 28.74 ^a | 21.18 ^b | 42.96 ^c | 37.57 ^d | 9.71 ^a | 23.64 ^b | 42.97 ^c | 40.39 ^d |
| <i>SD</i> | 19.62 | 3.71 | 4.28 | 6.93 | 9.49 | 2.42 | 5.75 | 7.38 |

Note. Paired-sample t tests were conducted to compare means of mothers' and fathers' each variable. Results from mean comparisons with the same superscript were ^a($t = 7.80$ ***), ^b($t = -8.07$ ***), ^c($t = -0.02$), ^d($t = -2.27$ *).

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

$t(76) = -8.07, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.80$. Although husbands and wives did not differ on self-competence, $t(66) = -0.02, ns$, Cohen's $d = 0.00$, husbands were more likely to report higher self-liking than wives, $t(66) = -2.27, p < .05$, Cohen's $d = 0.39$. Neither the self-liking nor self-competence scores of mothers were correlated with the corresponding scores of husbands ($r = .12$ for self-competence and $r = -.01$ for self-liking). However, mothers' perceptions of their husbands' parenting skills were highly correlated with fathers' perceptions of their wives' parenting skills ($r = .69, p < .001$).

Primary analyses

The actor-partner interdependence model with a multilevel approach (Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) was used to derive independent estimates of each participant's contribution to the outcome variables (actor effects) as well as the contribution of each participant's spouse to the outcome variables (partner effects). To control for interdependency, relationship partners were nested within the dyad. All of the predictor variables were centered by each grand mean prior to analyses, which meant that intercepts represented self-esteem scores for the average person regardless of gender. Also, family income, education, and work hours were entered as covariates.

To test our hypothesis that skilled husbands' contribution to child care erodes wives' self-competence, a cross-product term was calculated by multiplying a set of centered predictor variables: actors' perceptions of their partners' parenting and partners' solo child care hours. Because we were specifically interested in whether the two-way interaction was significant within gender, the two-intercept model of a multilevel approach was employed. Moreover, we wished to control for an alternative hypothesis that an actor with low self-esteem triggers the partner's solo child care hours, particularly when the partner believes that the actor's parenting skills are low. To this end, we entered another cross-product term between partners' perceptions of the actors' parenting and partners' solo child care hours into the model.

Finally, as suggested by Aiken and West (1991), simple slopes were plotted using cut-offs 1 *SD* above and below the mean.

Self-competence

As can be seen in Table 2, both actor effects and partner effects were associated with mothers' self-competence. Mothers reported higher competence when they were working longer hours ($b = 0.13, p < .01$) and when their husbands attained higher education ($b = 1.07, p < .05$). Even after the effects of both actors' and partners' demographic characteristics were taken into account, the expected interaction between actors' perceptions of the partners' parenting skills and partners' solo child care hours for mothers emerged ($b = -0.05, p < .01$). Moreover, this interaction effect prevailed even after controlling for the interaction term between partners' perceptions of the actors' parenting skills and partners' solo child care hours. As displayed in Figure 1, when mothers perceived fathers' to be competent caregivers, increased father solo child care hours were related to lower self-competence in mothers. In contrast, when mothers perceived fathers to be relatively incompetent caregivers, increased father solo child care hours were unrelated to mothers' self-competence. Decomposition of the interaction revealed that mothers with favorable perceptions of their husbands' parenting ($b = -0.62, p < .05$), and mothers with husbands who provided longer solo child care hours ($b = -0.17, p < .01$) were more likely to report lower self-competence. At the same time, mothers' own solo child care hours and their husbands' perceptions of mothers' parenting skills were unrelated to mothers' own self-competence.

Consistent with our predictions, the interaction between actors' perceptions of the partners' parenting skills and partners' solo child care hours was nonsignificant for fathers. Moreover, none of the main effects were linked to fathers' self-competence, including demographic characteristics. Fathers' perceptions of their wives' parenting skills, their wives' perceptions of fathers' parenting skills, and the amount of their wives' and fathers'

Table 2. Actor and partner effects and interaction effects on self-competence and self-liking

| | Self-competence | | Self-liking | |
|---|-------------------|------|--------------------|------|
| | B | SE | B | SE |
| Wife's family income | -0.13 | 0.50 | -1.24 | 0.94 |
| Actor effects | | | | |
| Wife's education level | 0.75 [†] | 0.44 | -0.81 | 0.83 |
| Wife's work hours | 0.13** | 0.04 | 0.17* | 0.08 |
| Wife's perception of husband's parenting | -0.62* | 0.26 | -0.65 | 0.46 |
| Wife's solo child care hours | 0.02 | 0.03 | 0.00 | 0.05 |
| Partner effects | | | | |
| Husband's education level | 1.07* | 0.45 | 2.48** | 0.85 |
| Husband's work hours | -0.01 | 0.04 | 0.12 | 0.08 |
| Husband's perception of wife's parenting | 0.39 | 0.32 | 0.27 | 0.57 |
| Husband's solo child care hours | -0.17** | 0.06 | -0.18 [†] | 0.10 |
| Actor-partner interaction effects | | | | |
| Wife's Perception of Husband's Parenting × Husband's Solo Child Care Hours | -0.05** | 0.02 | -0.03 | 0.03 |
| Husband's Perception of Wife's Parenting × Husband's Solo Child Care Hours | 0.02 | 0.02 | -0.02 | 0.02 |
| Husband's family income | -0.24 | 0.86 | -0.90 | 1.22 |
| Actor effects | | | | |
| Husband's education level | 0.51 | 0.78 | 0.45 | 1.11 |
| Husband's work hours | -0.01 | 0.07 | 0.06 | 0.10 |
| Husband's perception of wife's parenting | 0.01 | 0.44 | -0.66 | 0.62 |
| Husband's solo child care hours | 0.05 | 0.09 | -0.05 | 0.12 |
| Partner effects | | | | |
| Wife's education level | 0.22 | 0.73 | 0.84 | 1.04 |
| Wife's work hours | -0.09 | 0.07 | -0.07 | 0.10 |
| Wife's perception of husband's parenting | 0.29 | 0.34 | 0.60 | 0.48 |
| Wife's solo child care hours | -0.04 | 0.07 | -0.11 | 0.10 |
| Actor-partner interaction effects | | | | |
| Husband's Perception of Wife's Parenting × Wife's Solo Child Care Hours | 0.02 | 0.02 | 0.05 | 0.03 |
| Wife intercept | 41.52*** | 0.87 | 35.24*** | 1.61 |
| Husband intercept | 43.95*** | 1.28 | 40.90*** | 1.82 |

Note. Family income was coded as 1 = \$0-\$15,000, 2 = \$15,001-\$30,000, 3 = \$30,001-\$45,000, 4 = \$45,001-\$60,000, and 5 = over \$60,001 for family income. Education was coded as 1 = less than grade 12, 2 = high school diploma or equivalent, 3 = high school plus business or trade school diploma, 4 = 1-4 years of college but did not graduate, 5 = graduated from college, 6 = postgraduate professional degree.

[†] $p < .10$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

own child care hours did not predict fathers' self-competence.

Self-liking

Mother's self-liking was associated with their husbands' educational level ($b = 2.48$, $p <$

.01) and mother's own working hours ($b = 0.17$, $p < .05$). As expected, however, there was no actor-partner interaction effect between actors' perceptions of the partners' parenting skills and partners' solo child care hours. In addition, mothers' perceptions of

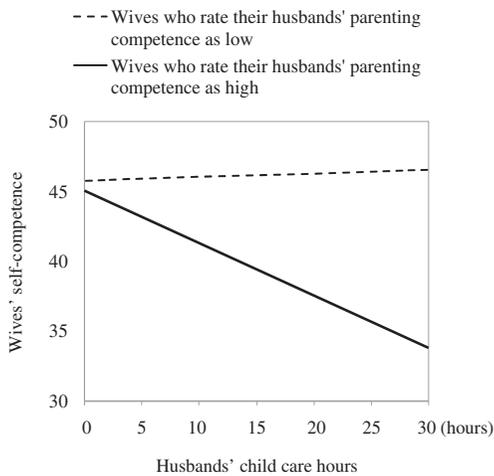


Figure 1. Wives' self-competence as a function of the interaction between husbands' child care hours and wives' perception of husbands' parenting skills.

their husbands' parenting skills, fathers' perceptions of their wives' parenting skills, and mothers' solo child care hours were not linked to mothers' self-liking component of self-esteem, although fathers' solo child care hours were marginally significant. For fathers' self-liking, none of the variables in the model were significant.

Discussion

Because social ideology compels mothers to prioritize maternal care of the family and children above their own wishes (Arendell, 2000), employed mothers may suffer from self-competence losses when their husbands are skillful and involved caregivers. Note, however, that within couple analyses demonstrated that on average, mothers' solo child care hours were 19 hr a week more than husbands' solo child care hours, and over 80% of mothers had solo child care hours equal to or more than their husbands. Consistent with role congruity theory (e.g., Diekmann & Eagly, 2008; Eagly & Karau, 2002), mother's predominant share of child care is taken for granted in society, regardless of the mother's employment status, and women working outside the home suffer when they fail to live up to these social expectations.

Our findings contribute to the literature in three ways. First, the gender specificity of our findings was striking. Whereas mothers' self-competence was associated with both the number of hours they worked outside the home and child care arrangement, fathers displayed no such sensitivity to the caregiving situation. For mothers, employment may represent a double-edged sword, fostering a sense of self-competence but simultaneously eroding self-competence if they perceive that their husbands are assuming the caregiver role effectively. This finding may help explain why mothers perform a much larger portion of the child care even when they are employed. Because cultural norms inspire mothers to be primary caregivers (Arendell, 2000), especially for infants, employed mothers may feel pressured to do more caregiving to ensure the survival of their feelings of self-competence, even while they may wish for fathers' increased participation to lessen their burden.

Second, mothers seem to assess child care role congruity based on their spouse's caregiving characteristics, not on their own caregiving characteristics. Mothers' self-competence was independent of how many hours they spent with their baby or how fervently their husbands praised their parenting. Rather, it was their husbands' child care performance that was associated with their self-competence. In particular, the more time their husbands spent engaged in skillful caregiving, the lower the self-competence of mothers sank.

Third, the present findings also add to a growing literature (Bosson & Swann, 1999; Tafarodi & Milne, 2002) indicating the usefulness of distinguishing two separate dimensions of self-esteem. That said, the sources of self-competence and self-liking are nuanced and complex. For example, in our sample, mothers' self-competence and self-liking were related to their husbands' educational attainment and own weekly work hours, suggesting that women with high socioeconomic status who work longer hours are likely to feel that they are lovable and competent persons. Nevertheless, because American society covertly requires women to make an *extra* effort to compensate for lost hours with infants

because of employment, employed women may feel pressured to do everything perfectly.

We acknowledge several limitations of this research. Our findings may apply only to White middle-class parents of infants, making it important for future researchers to examine the extent to which findings of this study generalize to other racial and ethnic groups, as well as to low-income samples. In addition, the correlational nature of our design allows rival interpretations of our findings. Conceivably, mothers with low self-competence may overestimate their husbands' caregiving skills because they do not feel good about themselves and therefore cede responsibilities to their husbands. Alternatively, fathers may become more involved in child care when they see their wives are low in self-competence, resulting in better wives' perceptions of their husbands' parenting skills. These rival explanations, however, cannot explain two other findings. First, the rival explanations would predict that wives' self-liking would have been associated with their perceptions of spouses' caregiving skills, and it was not. Second, the rival explanations cannot explain why only mothers who perceived their husbands to be competent caregivers suffered low self-competence when their husbands spent time with their children. In addition, it is noteworthy that another interaction term testing the alternative hypothesis that actors with low self-esteem relinquish caregiving responsibilities to their partners, and therefore, the partners underrate the actors' parenting, was not significant. Nevertheless, future studies should test such rival explanations directly by conducting longitudinal analysis.

Considering the mechanism by which perceptions of husbands' child care performance may undermine women's self-competence, future studies should include other sources of self-esteem. Although the design of the current study allowed us to have self-esteem predictors within dyadic relationships (i.e., couples' caregiving characteristics), antecedents in larger contexts are likely to influence individuals' self-esteem. For instance, availability of family-friendly policies to couples with small children, and feedback from social

networks including couples' parents, siblings, and friends are likely to impact individuals' self-esteem.

Future studies should also determine whether our effects might be moderated by gender role attitudes. If the current results are replicated both for mothers who have egalitarian as well as traditional gender role attitudes, it would suggest that social attitudes about gender roles have become more egalitarian with respect to employment and career accomplishments but have persisted with respect to parenting roles. From this vantage point, recent social changes may have convinced many Americans that women should enter the workplace and their husbands should share the caregiving. Yet, the ideal that parenting is primarily the wife's responsibility has survived. As a result, women may be trapped by the conviction that a truly competent woman can and should be a "supermom" who has a high-powered career yet is nevertheless always there for her children.

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