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Case Report

Psychological consequences of the Dad Bod: Using biological and physical changes to increase essentialist perceptions of fathers[☆]Erin McPherson^{*}, Sarah Banchefsky, Bernadette Park

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ABSTRACT

Psychological essentialism occurs when a category is seen as real, meaningful, and having a basis in an invisible underlying essence. Prior research has demonstrated that mothers are seen in more essentialist terms than fathers (Park, Banchefsky, & Reynolds, 2015). Across two studies using an online survey method (Study 1 $N = 408$; Study 2 $N = 756$), we found that this difference could be attenuated by providing participants with information about invisible biological (e.g., increased oxytocin levels; Study 1) or visible physical (developing a “Dad Bod”; Study 2) changes that fathers experience. These manipulations increased essentialist perceptions of fathers, while leaving those of mothers unchanged. The results indicate that exposure to information about physical and biological changes undergone by fathers can have important consequences in terms of how fathers are perceived as a social category.

In February of 2017, singer Beyoncé Knowles publicly announced that she was pregnant with twins. Shortly afterwards, Knowles delivered a performance at the 59th Annual Grammy Awards ceremony that was an homage to all things maternal. Following an introduction by her own mother, Knowles appeared on stage wearing a crown of gold, and dressed in a gown with an image of a mother and child placed directly over her visibly swollen belly—embodying the image of a powerful fertility goddess. As she performed, quotes from poet Warsan Shire discussing the uniqueness and importance of motherhood played: “Do you remember being born? Are you thankful for the hips that cracked? The deep velvet of your mother and her mother and her mother?”; Knowles cradled her belly with her hands while her five-year-old daughter, Blue, played on stage at her feet. The performance was a dramatic celebration of motherhood, both past and future. Knowles' performance drew acclaim from critics and commentators alike as a powerful statement about the experience of being a mother (Chira, 2017). While standing on a stage in front of millions adorned with a golden halo is an experience not shared by most mothers, Knowles' underlying sentiment—“I am a mother, and that is a real and meaningful part of my life”—clearly resonated with other members of that social group. However, this theme of the importance of parenthood seems distinctly tied to perceptions of mothers, more so than fathers. Had Jay-Z, Knowles' husband, whose role as a father is clearly an important part of his social identity (it is a frequent topic in his lyrics) choreographed a Grammy performance centered around the god-like

role of fatherhood, it likely would have been met with a mixture of confusion and perhaps some derision.

Psychological essentialism is the belief that a group or category possesses a deep and invisible underlying essence; because of this underlying essence, the category is seen as stable, immutable, natural, permanent, and meaningful (Haslam, Rothschild, & Ernst, 2000; Medin & Ortony, 1989). Members of the category are viewed as homogeneous (i.e., similar to one another), and the category itself is seen as discrete and distinct from other categories. While psychological essentialism is particularly strong and common in perceptions of biological categories, or “natural kinds” (e.g., *cats, birds, fish*, Gelman & Taylor, 2000; Medin & Atran, 2004), human artifacts such as social groups can also be essentialized, particularly when the group has some biological basis and/or when category differences correspond with physical differences (e.g., race and gender; Dar-Nimrod & Heine, 2011; Gelman & Taylor, 2000; Keller, 2005; Rothbart & Taylor, 1992; Williams & Eberhardt, 2008). That is, surface level (i.e., visually salient) characteristics are often used to infer deep-level properties.

Work by Park, Banchefsky, and Reynolds (2015) demonstrated that although men and women were seen as equal on essentialism, mothers were viewed as higher in essentialist properties than fathers, in part due to the visually salient transformation they undergo in the process of becoming mothers. Compared to fathers, mothers were viewed as higher on each of six essentialism dimensions—as a more natural category with greater stability, shared agency (or goals), greater inductive

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potential, and as a more homogenous group with discrete and impermeable boundaries. In contrast, for gender, the categories *women* and *men* were viewed equivalently on three dimensions of essentialism, men were perceived higher on two dimensions, and women were seen higher on just one of the six dimensions of essentialism. Furthermore, those who perceived large differences in parent essentialism also judged that it is difficult for mothers, but not fathers, to be both an excellent parent and an excellent worker—that is, to “do it all.” The psychological tendency to see motherhood as a fundamental and enduring category membership, more so than fatherhood, may contribute to and justify unequal work and family outcomes by placing a disproportionate amount of the responsibility for childrearing onto women and minimizing the importance of fatherhood. Further support for this relationship comes from research by Gaunt (2006) showing that the more that fathers essentialized the role of motherhood, the more hours mothers spent as the primary caretaker of their child. Fathers who rejected essentialist beliefs, on the other hand, were more likely to be involved in childcare.

Given that essentialist perceptions of parents can have meaningful consequences for attitudes and behaviors, it is important to determine the origins of these. Essentialist beliefs involve cognitive and developmental factors, but they also arise in part from cultural influences (Haslam, 2017), which may include exposure to information in popular media. In recent years, there have been substantial changes in how fathers are portrayed and discussed in the media. Fathers are increasingly spending more time caring for their children (Craig, Powell, & Smyth, 2014), and this behavioral change has given rise to a number of articles in newspapers, magazines, and other media outlets extolling the virtues and benefits of fatherhood. These articles discuss behavioral and physiological changes that men experience when they become fathers, and outline the uniquely important role that fathers bring to their children's development (e.g., Barro & Wolfers, 2015; Jarrett, 2014; Martin, 2010; Wilcox, 2013). Exposure to this kind of information about fathers may change how they are perceived as a social category, along with beliefs about what membership in that category means—potentially leading to changes in essentialist perceptions of fathers. It is clear that the sociocultural discourse of fathers as a social category is changing, and that there is increasing media discussion around the meaning of fatherhood. However, the consequences of these changes have yet to be empirically examined.

The current work examined one key research question: does providing people with information about physiological changes experienced by fathers increase essentialism ratings of them, and thus attenuate the difference between mothers and fathers in rated essentialism? Given that the biological/physical transformations that mothers undergo as part of becoming a parent are partially responsible for their heightened levels of essentialism (Park et al., 2015), we hypothesized that emphasizing parallel changes to fathers should lead to increased perceptions of essentialism, and decrease the mother-father difference.

We conducted two studies to test this question. Study 1 tested whether learning about an invisible biological change experienced by fathers would increase their rated essentialism relative to mothers, while Study 2 tested whether learning about a visible physical change (not necessarily biologically driven) would have the same effect. Importantly, we did not anticipate null target effects (an elimination of the mother-father difference in essentialism), but rather an attenuation of this difference. The magnitude and robust nature of the mother-father difference observed in past research (Park et al., 2015) makes it unlikely that the brief manipulations studied here would completely eliminate this difference. Rather, we hypothesized that calling attention to biological and physical changes experienced by fathers would reduce the gender gap in perceived essentialism. Both studies also included a condition discussing changes to the social role of fathers as a comparison to the biological and physical change conditions. We report all measures, manipulations, and exclusions in these studies.

1. Study 1

1.1. Method

Four hundred and thirty-four workers from Amazon's Mechanical Turk marketplace participated for \$1.00 compensation. Sample size was determined based on the sample sizes used in Park et al. (2015). Twenty-six workers (6%) failed at least two of four attention checks (described below) and were excluded from analysis, leaving a total of 408 participants (237 female, ages 18–69, $M_{\text{age}} = 38.7$, 83% White). Participants were told that they would be asked to read a recent article from a major news outlet and provide their reactions to it, and that they would also be asked to think about a variety of social groups and answer questions about the meaning of membership in those groups.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four conditions. In the three “active” conditions, participants read an article generated by the researchers based on actual real findings about changes experienced by parents. In one condition ($n = 105$), participants learned about biological changes that men experience in the course of becoming fathers, including increases in oxytocin levels, and increased neural activity in the pre-frontal cortex (BioDad condition). A BioMom condition ($n = 101$) described the same changes but attributed these to mothers instead of fathers. Finally, a SocialDad condition ($n = 103$) described social changes in the role of fathers over time, including an increased number of hours spent with children, and thoughts and emotions that new fathers experience such as empathic concern for their children. The articles were presented as a series of five slides presented sequentially (see Supplemental materials for the full manipulations). Participants were required to spend a minimum amount of time on each slide before they were allowed to advance (about 25 s for slides with text, and about 10 s for slides with only pictures). After reading the article, participants answered open-ended questions about their reaction to the article and completed two comprehension check questions. The Control condition ($n = 99$) was a direct replication of Park et al. (2015) in which participants simply reflected on and wrote about how being a member of each of four social groups (mothers, fathers, cigarette smokers, and the chronically depressed) affects the lives of the members of that group.

Although generally we expected mothers to be viewed in more essentialist terms than fathers, we hypothesized that information about biological changes that fathers experience would cause the greatest increase in essentialism toward fathers (BioDad), reducing the mother-father difference. Information about social change (SocialDad) might also reduce the gap but to a lesser extent than information about biological changes (Dar-Nimrod & Heine, 2011). Emphasizing biological changes experienced by mothers (BioMom) should produce the largest mother-father difference. Thus we predicted a linear effect of condition whereby the mother-father difference in rated essentialism would be greatest in the BioMom condition, followed by the Control condition, smaller in the SocialDad condition, and smallest in the BioDad condition. A linear contrast reflecting this predicted pattern constituted the test of the primary hypothesis. In order to specify the complete model and provide the full analysis of the data, we included a full set of orthogonal contrast codes including higher order polynomials in our analyses. Nevertheless, the linear effect was the contrast of interest.

Following the article manipulation, participants answered 12 questions taken directly from Park et al. (2015) measuring essentialist perceptions of each of four groups: mothers, fathers, cigarette smokers, and the chronically depressed (the two latter groups were included to provide a broader context), for a total of 48 essentialism questions (e.g., “As a group, women who are mothers are a very distinct and different group from women who are not mothers.”; see Supplemental materials for full set of questions). These 48 questions were intermixed and presented to participants in a random order. Randomly embedded within the essentialism items were four attention check questions. Participants who failed two or more of these were excluded from analysis (SocialDad = 7, BioDad = 9, BioMom = 5, Control = 5). Finally,

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