



Reports

System justifying functions of myths that exaggerate the emotional rewards of parenthood

Richard P. Eibach*, Steven E. Mock

University of Waterloo, Canada

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ABSTRACT

Popular beliefs exaggerate the emotional rewards of caring for children. These beliefs may persist because they provide ideological legitimacy for policies that otherwise might appear to exploit parents' contributions to the public good. Studies 1a and 1b tested whether information suggesting that parents' labor is unjustly exploited by society motivates people to exaggerate the emotional rewards of parenthood. Study 2 manipulated participants' exposure to parenthood idealizing myths to test whether these myths reduce support for expanding government assistance to parents. Across these studies support was found for the hypothesis that exaggerating the emotional rewards of children functions to legitimize and maintain low public assistance to parents. Theoretical insights into system justifying ideologies and practical implications for social justice movements are discussed.

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Introduction

Investments in raising the next generation contribute to the public good (Folbre, 2008). Nurturing children's human capabilities equips them to be more productive workers and engaged citizens (Folbre, 2008). And yet, despite the fact that the community as a whole benefits from investments in children, parents receive little public assistance to meet children's growing costs (Caldwell, Caldwell, & McDonald, 2002). With some exceptions (e.g., France, Europe's Nordic countries), wealthy nations do not provide a comprehensive package of benefits that comes close to covering the direct and indirect costs of raising children (Gornick, Meyers, & Ross, 1997; Thevenon, 2011). For instance, estimates suggest that the US government subsidizes only 4 to 10% of parents' child-rearing costs (Folbre, 2008).¹ We hypothesize that policies that undersupport parents are rationalized by popular beliefs that exaggerate the intrinsic emotional rewards of child-raising. To the extent that people exaggerate the compensating emotional gratifications parents receive from raising children they may feel that parents deserve less public assistance.

System justification theory explains how emphasizing children's emotional rewards can legitimize policies that assign parents most of the costs of raising children. The theory posits that people have a fundamental need to believe that rewards and costs are distributed equitably within their society (Jost & Hunyady, 2003). People perceive social distributions to be

equitable when individuals' rewards are proportional to their contributions or costs (Walster, Walster, & Berscheid, 1978). Thus, the recognition that society as a whole benefits from the work parents do to raise the next generation has the potential to threaten perceptions that the system is just by suggesting that parents' labor is unfairly exploited by others.

When people become aware of systemic inequities in the distribution of costs and rewards there are typically two strategies – one practical and one psychological – for restoring belief in the system's fairness (Walster et al., 1978). The practical strategy involves changing the actual distribution of costs and rewards to make them more equitable. So, when concerns about societal exploitation of parents are raised the practical strategy for remedying this inequity would be to provide more public assistance to alleviate parents' costs. This is the strategy of social movements that advocate expanding public assistance to parents (e.g., Alstott, 2004; Folbre, 1994; Fuchs, 1988).

An alternative, more psychological strategy for restoring perceived equity involves changing one's beliefs about the distributions of costs and rewards to make these distributions appear more equitable. So, when concerns are raised that society in general benefits from parents' investments in children, individuals' perceptions of equity may be restored if they can identify rewards that parents uniquely derive from their investments in children. One such reward would be direct emotional gratification parents gain from raising children. If parents enjoy exclusive emotional rewards from raising children that the rest of society does not share, then it may seem fair for parents to pay most of the costs of raising children. This strategy of restoring perceived equity is used by individuals and groups who emphasize the unique emotional rewards parents gain from children to oppose demands for increased public assistance to parents (England & Folbre, 1999; Gilbert, 2008). For example, Ferreira, Buse, and Chavas (1998) propose

* Corresponding author at: Psychology Department, University of Waterloo, 200 University Avenue West, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada N2L 3G1.

E-mail address: reibach@uwaterloo.ca (R.P. Eibach).

¹ A study of the value of parental benefits in wealthy industrialized nations ranked the US in the bottom half of nations, but several nations ranked lower (Bradshaw & Finch, 2002).

that incorporating estimates of the emotional utility parents derive from children into public welfare models would justify lowering official calculations of parents' welfare needs. Indeed, Folbre (2001) suggests that opponents of public assistance to parents view raising children less as a public good and more as a private leisure interest, analogous to keeping a pet. She writes,

I think I know why so many people seem to think that parents, especially mothers, should pay most of the costs of raising children. These people think of children as pets. Parents acquire them because they provide companionship and love... [T]hose who care for them are the ones who get the fun out of them; therefore they should pay the costs (p. 109).

The tendency to cite emotional rewards of children to oppose calls for increased public assistance to parents is problematic because the emotional rewards of raising children are often exaggerated. Many people believe that parenthood increases a person's happiness (Arnold et al., 1975; Edin & Kefalas, 2005; Gilbert, 2006; Hoffman, Thornton, & Manis, 1979; Veenhoven, 1975), a belief that is reinforced by popular media images emphasizing parenthood's emotional rewards (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). This popular belief is contradicted by evidence that parents experience less frequent positive emotions (Simon & Nath, 2004), more frequent negative emotions (Ross & Van Willigen, 1996), greater relationship conflict (Somers, 1993), and greater depression (Evenson & Simon, 2005) than nonparents. Also, people retrospectively report enjoying time with children more than they actually enjoyed it (Kahneman, Krueger, Schkade, Schwarz, & Stone, 2004). This work does not deny that parents derive important meaning and value from raising children; it merely suggests that certain commonly held beliefs about the emotional rewards of raising children are often exaggerated. These beliefs exaggerating the emotional rewards of children may persist despite evidence against them because these beliefs provide psychological legitimacy for existing policies that undersubsidize parents' work raising children.

We conducted a series of studies to test the hypothesis that idealizing the emotional rewards of children functions to legitimize policies that provide little material support to parents. Studies 1a and 1b test whether information suggesting that parents' labor is exploited by society leads people to exaggerate the emotional rewards of parenthood unless justice concerns are alleviated through other means. Study 2 then tests whether exposure to myths that exaggerate the emotional rewards of parenthood makes people less likely to endorse increasing public assistance to alleviate parents' financial burdens. Cumulatively these studies suggest that myths exaggerating the emotional rewards of children function to justify policies that might otherwise appear to exploit parents' contributions to the public good.

Study 1a

To test the hypothesis that people exaggerate the emotional rewards of parenthood to rationalize low public assistance to parents we manipulated whether assistance to parents was framed as inadequate and we also manipulated whether participants received information about compensating material rewards of parenthood. We predicted that threatening the perceived justice of the system by suggesting that public assistance is inadequate would motivate participants to exaggerate the emotional rewards of parenthood to restore perceived equity. However, we predicted that if equity was already restored by referencing compensating material rewards of parenthood then this should lessen participants' need to exaggerate the emotional rewards of parenthood.

Method

Participants

Sixty-four undergraduates (39 females) were recruited at public locations on a university campus and received \$2.

Materials and procedure

All participants read information about the modern costs of parenthood including that the average parent spends just under \$200,000 to raise a child to age 18 (Lino, 2005). However, we manipulated whether these costs were framed as an injustice to parents. In the *justice threat* condition participants read that some people who have studied the issue believe that it is unfair that government assistance to parents covers only a small portion of the costs of raising children despite the fact that society as a whole benefits from parents' work raising the next generation of workers, citizens, and taxpayers. In the *unthreatened control* condition participants did not read any information suggesting that parents receive inadequate assistance.

Next, the material rewards manipulation varied whether participants received information about long-term material benefits of parenthood. Participants in the *material rewards* condition read that although raising children is costly to parents, adult children provide various forms of practical and financial assistance to aging parents and, as a consequence, adults with children often experience greater security and well-being in later life than those without children. Participants in the *no material rewards* condition read nothing about children's benefits to parents in later life.

After administering these manipulations,² we measured idealization of the emotional rewards of parenthood with an 8-item scale (from Eibach & Mock, 2011b; sample item: "Parents experience a lot more happiness and satisfaction in their lives compared to people who have never had children."). Participants rated each item on a 5-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5) and these were averaged after reverse-coding items challenging parenthood idealization ($\alpha = .84$).

Results and discussion

Parenthood idealization beliefs were submitted to a 2 (justice threat: *justice threatened* vs. *unthreatened control*) \times 2 (material rewards: *material rewards* vs. *no material rewards*) ANOVA (see Table 1). As predicted there was a significant interaction between justice threat and material rewards, $F(1, 60) = 4.12, p < .05, h_p^2 = .06$. Simple effects tests revealed that in the *no material rewards* condition participants idealized the emotional rewards of parenthood significantly more if they were in the *justice threat* condition than if they were in the *unthreatened control* condition, $F(1, 60) = 4.60, p < .05, h_p^2 = .07$. However, the effect of the justice threat manipulation was eliminated in the *material rewards* condition, $F < 1$.

These results support our hypothesis that people are motivated to exaggerate the emotional rewards of parenthood when they are led to believe that parents receive inadequate public assistance and no compensating long-term material rewards for raising children. In the next study we test whether this need to exaggerate the emotional rewards of parenthood is lessened when the more general fairness of one's society is affirmed.

² To check the validity of this as a manipulation of perceived parental exploitation we recruited 100 undergraduates at various campus locations, administered the Study 1a manipulations, and measured participants' agreement that: "When it comes to providing parents financial support for the costs of raising children, the rest of society does not contribute its fair share." Participants responded on a 7-point scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (−3) to *strongly agree* (+3). Ratings were submitted to a 2 (justice threat) \times 2 (material rewards) ANOVA. Main effects of justice threat, $F(1, 96) = 6.98, p < .05$, and material rewards, $F(1, 96) = 4.67, p < .05$, were qualified by the predicted interaction, $F(1, 96) = 4.01, p < .05$. In the *no material rewards* condition participants perceived greater exploitation in the justice threat condition ($M = 1.44$) than in the *unthreatened control* condition ($M = 0.28$), $F(1, 96) = 10.78, p < .01$. This effect of justice threat was eliminated in the *material rewards* condition (justice threat: $M = 0.40$; unthreatened: $M = 0.24$), $F < 1$. To check that participants' judgments of the economic burdens of raising children did not differ across conditions we also asked: "In general how costly would you say it is to raise children these days?" Participants answered on a 5-point scale ranging from *not very costly* (1) to *extraordinarily costly* (5). As expected, no significant main effects or interactions emerged on this measure, $F_s < 1$.

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