



## FlashReports

## The vigilant parent: Parental role salience affects parents' risk perceptions, risk-aversion, and trust in strangers

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## ABSTRACT

Since parenting involves protecting children from various risks and dangers, tendencies towards increased risk perception, risk-averse decision-making, and distrust of strangers may come to be associated with the parental role. Consequently, parents may be more likely to exhibit each of these psychological tendencies when their parental role is situationally salient than when it is not salient. We tested this hypothesis in two studies that manipulated the salience of the parental role in samples of parents and nonparents and measured the effects on participants' risk perceptions, risk-aversion, and trust in strangers. As we hypothesized, parents perceived greater risk (Study 1), made more risk-averse choices (Study 1), and trusted strangers less (Study 2) when their parental role was salient than when it was not salient. Implications for understanding psychological adaptations to social roles are discussed.

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One of the many surprising things to me about fatherhood is how it has perverted my attitude toward risk... There are little risk-averse things I do now that I never did before and little risk-averse feelings that I have now that I never had before.

Lewis (2009) p. 106.

Parents are responsible for protecting children from a variety of risks and dangers (Clutton-Brock, 1991). Because children are inherently more vulnerable than adults, parenting may lead people to perceive the world as a more dangerous place. Parents may also become more risk-averse in their decision-making to avoid exposing children to dangerous situations. Thus, a risk-vigilant mindset may be an important psychological adaptation to the parental role.

Previous research demonstrates that parenthood is associated with heightened vigilance. For instance, parents perceive greater risk (Eibach & Libby, 2009; Eibach, Libby, & Gilovich, 2003; Drottz-Sjoberg & Sjöberg, 1990) and make more risk-averse decisions than nonparents (Cameron, DeShazo, & Johnson, 2010; Chaulk, Johnson, & Bulcroft, 2003; Spivey, 2010; Wang, Kruger, & Wilke, 2009; Warner & Cramer, 1995).

The association between parenthood and risk-vigilant attitudes has been a topic of interest to economists (e.g., Cameron et al., 2010; Leigh, 1986; Schmidt, 2008), evolutionary psychologists (e.g., Wang et al., 2009; Wilson, Daly, & Gordon, 2007), attachment theorists (e.g., Solomon & George, 1996), sociologists (e.g., Warr & Ellison, 2000),

and social philosophers (e.g., Ruddick, 1995). However, because research on this topic has been correlational, the nature of the relationship between parenthood and risk-vigilant attitudes is unclear; it could be that more vigilant people become parents or it could be that parenthood makes people more vigilant. Here we use experimental methods to test the hypothesis that the parental role influences people to become more vigilant.

Prior research shows that when roles are situationally salient people exhibit traits (Heller, Watson, Komar, Min, & Perunovic, 2007) and pursue goals (Fitzsimons & Bargh, 2003) consistent with those roles. A recent study found that parents' moral judgments became more paternalistic when their parental role was salient than when it was non-salient (Eibach, Libby, & Ehrlinger, 2009). Building on this methodology, the present studies manipulated the salience of the parental role to test whether parents perceive greater risk (Study 1), make more risk-averse choices (Study 1), and trust strangers less (Study 2) when their parental role is salient than when it is non-salient.

### Study 1

To test the hypothesis that the parental role influences people to become more vigilant we manipulated parental role salience and measured participants' perceptions of various risks and their preference for the riskier option in a series of hypothetical gambles. We predicted that parents would perceive greater risk and make more risk-averse choices when their parental role was salient than when it was non-salient.

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**Table 1**

Mean leisure activity risk perceptions, crime risk perceptions, and risk-aversion as a function of parental status (parents vs. non-parents) and parental role salience condition (salient vs. non-salient).

Measure	Parents		Non-parents	
	Salient	Non-salient	Salient	Non-salient
Leisure activity risk perceptions	2.91 (0.73)	2.48 (0.66)	2.31 (0.69)	2.40 (0.75)
Crime risk perceptions	2.04 (1.02)	1.44 (0.95)	1.19 (0.82)	1.30 (0.81)
Risk-aversion	0.65 (0.31)	0.49 (0.33)	0.41 (0.23)	0.47 (0.25)

Notes: Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations. Leisure activity and crime risk perceptions were measured on 6-point scales ranging from 0 (little or no risk) to 5 (extremely risky). Risk-aversion represents the proportion of gambles on which participants selected the risk-averse option.

## Method

### Participants

Sixty parents (33 female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 39.65$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 8.71$ ) and 42 nonparents (22 female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 34.09$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 9.30$ ) were recruited at public locations nearby a northeastern United States university.

### Materials and procedure

We manipulated the salience of the parental role by assigning participants to one of two conditions. In the *parenthood salient* condition before participants received the dependent measures they: 1) reported whether they were parents, 2) reported how many children they had, and 3) reported the age of their youngest child. Participants also reported their age and gender. In the *control* condition participants answered these questions after the dependent measures.

Next, participants used a 6-point scale ranging from *little or no risk* (0) to *extremely risky* (5) to rate the risk associated with six leisure activities: 1) horseback riding, 2) downhill skiing, 3) whitewater rafting, 4) motorcycle riding, 5) mountain climbing, and 6) skydiving, and the risk of being a crime victim while doing three activities at night: 1) riding the subway alone, 2) being out alone in one's own neighborhood, and 3) being out alone in an unfamiliar urban neighborhood. The leisure activity risk ratings were averaged for an index of *activity risk perceptions* ( $\alpha = .87$ ) and the crime victimization risk ratings were averaged for an index of *crime risk perceptions* ( $\alpha = .76$ ).

Finally, we measured risk aversion by having participants consider a series of eight hypothetical gambles (Frederick, 2005) involving a choice between a certain gain and an uncertain gain of higher expected value (e.g., \$100 for sure or a 50% chance of \$300). We calculated the proportion of gambles on which participants selected the risk-averse option for an index of *risk-aversion*.

### Results and discussion

The risk perception and risk-aversion measures were each submitted to a 2 (parental status: *parents* vs. *nonparents*)  $\times$  2 (parental role salience condition: *salient* vs. *non-salient*) ANCOVA with participant age as a covariate (see Table 1). Analyses revealed main effects of parental status on all three measures (*activity risk*:  $F(1, 97) = 3.05$ ,  $p < .1$ ,  $h_p^2 = .03$ ; *crime risk*:  $F(1, 97) = 4.65$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $h_p^2 = .05$ ; *risk aversion*:  $F(1, 97) = 3.23$ ,  $p < .1$ ,  $h_p^2 = .03$ ). Also, parental status interacted with condition (*activity risk*:  $F(1, 97) = 4.29$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $h_p^2 = .04$ ; *crime risk*:  $F(1, 97) = 4.32$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $h_p^2 = .04$ ; *risk-aversion*:  $F(1, 97) = 4.01$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $h_p^2 = .04$ ).

Decomposing these interactions we found that parents perceived greater risk and made more risk-averse choices in the *parenthood salient* condition than in the *control* condition, (*activity risk*:  $F(1, 97) = 6.44$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $h_p^2 = .06$ ; *crime risk*:  $F(1, 97) = 6.99$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $h_p^2 = .07$ ; *risk-aversion*:  $F(1, 97) = 5.02$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $h_p^2 = .05$ ). However, nonparents were unaffected by condition,  $F_s < 1$ . Also, parents perceived greater risk and made more risk-averse choices than nonparents in the *parenthood salient* condition (*activity risk*:  $F(1, 97) = 7.51$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $h_p^2 = .07$ ; *crime risk*:  $F(1, 97) = 9.28$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $h_p^2 = .09$ ; *risk-aversion*:  $F(1, 97) = 7.45$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $h_p^2 = .07$ ), but not the *control* condition,  $F_s < 1$ .

As hypothesized, parents perceived greater risk and were more risk-averse when their parental role was salient.<sup>1</sup> In the next study we test whether distrust of strangers is another consequence of parental role salience.

## Study 2

The danger that strangers pose to children is a prominent theme in the media and modern parents are thus often preoccupied with protecting their children from strangers (Best, 1990). To test whether the parental role influences people to trust strangers less we manipulated parental role salience and measured participants' trust in strangers. We predicted that parents would trust strangers but not acquaintances less when their parental role was salient than when it was non-salient.

### Method

#### Participants

Fifty parents (27 female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 40.68$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 8.51$ ) and 33 nonparents (19 female;  $M_{\text{age}} = 31.88$ ,  $SD_{\text{age}} = 8.33$ ) were recruited at public locations nearby a northeastern United States university.

#### Materials and procedure

The salience of the parental role was manipulated as in Study 1. We then measured trust in strangers and trust in acquaintances using two questions from Welch, Sikink, and Loveland (2007): 1) "How much, if at all, do you generally trust strangers, that is, people you do not know personally?" and 2) "Outside of your friends and family, how much, if at all, do you generally trust people you know personally?" Both questions were answered on 6-point scales ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*).

Expectations of stranger cooperation were then measured by having participants consider three hypothetical scenarios. First, participants imagined they were assigned the role of sender while an anonymous stranger was assigned the role of receiver in a hypothetical trust game. Participants were told that as the sender they would receive \$5, which they could keep or give to the receiver. If they kept the money the game ended leaving the sender with \$5 and the receiver with \$0. However, if they gave the money to the receiver the experimenter would add \$15 to it and the receiver would thus receive \$20. The receiver would then decide to either keep the \$20 or split it evenly with the sender. Participants used a 5-point scale ranging from *much more likely to keep the money* (−2) to *much more likely to split the money* (+2) to rate how likely the anonymous stranger would be to split the money with the participant if the participant gave the initial money to the stranger.

Next, participants imagined playing a one-shot prisoner's dilemma game with an anonymous stranger. They were told that each player

<sup>1</sup> It is possible that parents in the role salience condition imagined children as the actors in the scenarios measuring activity and crime risk perceptions and that this accounts for their elevated risk ratings. However, this interpretation does not apply to the risk-aversion measure in Study 1 and the stranger trust measures in Study 2.

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