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Jack and Phil: Associations Between Exposure to Television Parents, Parental Stress and Efficacy

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Jack and Phil: Associations Between Exposure to Television Parents,
Parental Stress and Efficacy

Jane Elizabeth Shawcroft

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science

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ABSTRACT

Jack and Phil: Associations Between Exposure to Television Parents, Parental Stress and Efficacy

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Although parents in television are often depicted in negative patterns, little to no research has empirically examined the effect of viewing these depictions of parent efficacy and stress. The purpose of this study is to use experimental methods to assess the effect of viewing authoritative, authoritarian, and stereotypical depictions of parents in television on parental efficacy and parent stress. A sample of 122 parents of adolescents were randomly assigned to one of three condition groups: authoritarian, authoritative, and stereotypical. Each group watches a different clip from a television show, and then reported on their comparison of themselves against the parents depicted in the television clip. Parents then answered questions assessing parent efficacy and parent stress. Results revealed that there were no differences in levels of parent efficacy and parent stress based on condition, and a SEM analysis did not find that social comparison served as a meaningful mediator for the relationship between television depiction of parents (condition group) and either parent efficacy or parent stress. Parents did, however, engage in social comparison differently based on their condition group. These findings indicate that portrayals of parents in media do not affect parent efficacy or parent stress for parents of adolescents.

Keywords: parent efficacy, parent stress, media effects
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Jack and Phil: Associations Between Exposure to Television Parents, Parental Stress and Efficacy

"I am thankful for my family. I'm thankful that we're all safe, and there's no one in the world that I'd rather be too hot or too cold with." - Jack Pearson, This is Us

“I’m the cool dad, that’s my thang. I’m hip, I surf the web, I text. LOL: laugh out loud. OMG: oh my God. WTF: why the face.” – Phil Dunphy, Modern Family

Families in movies and television are often depicted in problematic patterns, portraying negative stereotypes or maladaptive parenting practices (e.g., Isojärvi, 2019; Kline et al., 2006; Zurcher et al., 2018). Specifically, many parents in television are either depicted using authoritarian parenting practices, typified as domineering, harsh, or demanding of their children, or as highly stereotypical, which for fathers’ often means buffoonish, and for mothers frazzled and overworked (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2022). Some television shows, however, deviate from these two patterns and depict healthier authoritative parenting, in which the parents depict warm, supportive, and responsive parenting styles (Baumrind, 1991). While many have critiqued these patterns of displaying uninvolved or generally incompetent parents from a cultural perspective (Phillips, 2015), no research has examined if these depictions effect parent efficacy or parental stress. Due to the pervasiveness of media and the potential to influence sense of self, it is possible that parents encounter both positive and negative stereotypical depictions of parents in media often. Thus, it is important to not only understand what these patterns of parental depictions look like in media (such as television), but also the effect of these depictions on parental stress and efficacy. This paper will specifically explore the
influence of watching different depictions of parents in media (specifically authoritative, authoritarian, and stereotypical depictions) on parent stress and efficacy using an experimental design.

**Parents in Media**

While there are several styles of parenting and approaches to parenting that have been documented and examined in social science research, this paper will specifically focus on three types of depictions, specifically depictions of authoritative parents, authoritarian parents, and stereotypical parents. While there are many different parenting styles and domains (Smetana, 2017), these three depictions were chosen for their prevalence in television depictions of parents (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2022).

Authoritative parenting is defined as a parenting style that is both highly demanding and responsive to children's needs (Baumrind, 1991) and is frequently linked to several positive child outcomes, such as decreased risky sexual behavior (Grossman et al., 2020), academic achievement, and can be a protective factor for both parent and child depression (Shahimi et al., 2018). While one content analysis of parenting in Disney animated films found that 56% of parents were depicted as competent and demonstrated authoritative parenting (Zurcher et al., 2019), little other research has examined the frequency or impact of depictions of authoritative parenting in media, and anecdotally it seems that in television no geared towards children (such as non-Disney TV or movies), authoritative parenting is depicted less frequently.

In contrast to the positive depictions of authoritative parenting, some parents in media display authoritarian parenting styles. Authoritarian parenting is defined as a parenting style that is highly demanding but not responsive to children and is often characterized as controlling and strict (Baumrind, 1991). Authoritarian parenting is linked to lower self-esteem and self-
confidence, child externalizing problems (Thompson et al., 2003), and unhealthy weight status in early childhood (Rhee, 2006), although meta-analyses have found that in some cultural circumstances, authoritarian parenting is not always negative and may be protective (Pinquart & Kauser, 2018). In the same content analysis of parenting in Disney films discussed previously (Zurcher et al., 2019), roughly a quarter (23.4%) of parents displayed an authoritarian parenting style, the overwhelming majority (72.7%) being fathers. A more recent report of depictions of parenting in television found that fathers were more likely to be emotionally abusive, and were less likely to be depicted as warm, supportive, or affectionate than mothers (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2022) indicating that depictions of authoritarian parenting is highly gendered and may more often be depicted by TV fathers than mothers. Little other research, however, has examined the prevalence or effect of authoritarian parenting in media on parent efficacy or parental stress.

The final style of parenting this paper will examine is what I will define as stereotypical, which for fathers will mean the trope of the buffoon (also referred to as apprentice) father, and for mothers will indicate the overworked and overwhelmed mom (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2022). While research indicates fathers in contemporary television display higher levels of emotional engagement, involvement, and bonding with children than TV produced in the past (Pehlke et al., 2009), research also indicated that TV fathers are rarely depicted as competent nurturers of children. Fathers are often stereotyped as incompetent comedic "buffoons" (Evans, 2015), particularly working-class fathers, who are typically depicted as less competent and emotionally supportive as a father than their middle or high SES counterparts (Kelly, 2009; Pehlke et al., 2009). Interestingly, racial minority fathers are depicted as more competent nurturers than white fathers (Pehlke et al., 2009) but are depicted in television
less often than white fathers (Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media, 2022).

In contrast to the stereotype of the buffoon, mothers are often assigned the stereotype of
overworked and overwhelmed. While the stay-at-home mother is depicted frequently (Zurcher et
al., 2019) and as the ideal (Lee et al., 2020), these stay-at-home mothers are also depicted as
superficial, overwhelmed, frazzled, and burdened by their children (Johnston & Swanson, 2003).
A recent report of gender dynamics of television parents found that mothers were depicted as
doing 33% more on-screen caregiving (cooking/interacting with children/laundry) than fathers
(Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. (2022). As mothers are more likely to be shown
doing lots of household and caregiving tasks, it is unsurprising that mothers are often stereotyped
has having simply too much to do.

Both stereotypical depictions of fathers and mothers whittles down parents to comedic
fodder in television shows. While often the buffoon father and frazzled mother are depicted
alongside can laughter and as the brunt of jokes, these depictions do not depict holistic parenting
for either men or women as competent parents.

Social Cognitive Theory

We frame our rationale for the effect of depictions of parents in television on parent
efficacy and parent stress through the lens of social cognitive theory (Bussey & Bandura, 1999).
Within this framework, the primary mechanism by which media influences identity is through
modeling (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Through modeling, the observation of behaviors depicted
in media content influences perceptions of social norms, a process also referred to as electronic
acculturation (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Hawkins & Pingree, 1982). Indeed, it is through the
effects of modeling and acculturation that media content is understood to influence behaviors,
identity, and attitudes such as body image and esteem (Perloff, 2014), purchasing behaviors
(Sokolova & Kefi, 2020), and self-efficacy (Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009). The effects of media content have been shown across different time horizons, ranging from experimental designs (Ward & Friedman, 2006) to long-term longitudinal studies (Coyne et al., 2021).

Drawing from this theoretical foundation, it is probable to hypothesize that depictions of parents and parenting in television would have an effect on parents, especially as prior research and theory suggests that individuals identify more closely, and are more effected, by depictions of characters who resemble them (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005).

**Social Comparison Theory**

Building on my social cognitive lens, the mechanism by which authoritative, authoritarian, or stereotypical depictions of parents in television may influence parents’ efficacy and stress may manifest thorough processes of social comparison (Festinger, 1954).

Within the framework of social comparison theory, individuals search for social information to indicate if they are measuring up or falling short of the expectations they may have for themselves or they feel society hold for them (Mussweiler & Strack, 2000). Media plays an important role in the social comparisons that individuals make, specifically by conveying societal expectations (or perceptions of social expectations). For example, research looking at how women approached depictions of the "thin ideal" in magazines concluded that social comparison was the mechanism by which women internalized social expectations, leading to higher body dissatisfaction (Tiggemann & Polivy, 2010). Within the framework of social comparison theory, these findings could be explained by saying that magazines portraying the thin ideal conveyed to women looking at those magazines that they were expected to also be thin (or that society wanted them to be thin). Thus, when women did not live up to those expectations, they were more dissatisfied with their bodies because they felt they were falling
short of the expectations laid before them.

In a parenting context, media could also convey expectations for parents. These expectations could take many forms. For example, watching a warm and supportive authoritative parent may convey that society expects parents to be warm and supportive of their children. In contrast, watching a buffoonish father or overwhelmed mother flounder in their role could convey that society does not expect parents to fulfill the roles well.

Social comparison theory, however, goes farther than to just suggest that expectations influence perception. Instead, this framework also suggests that individuals engage in comparison processes, where they compare themselves against the expectations laid before them. These comparisons take on a directional component and can either go upward, comparing against someone or something better or higher than an individual's current state, or downward, comparing against someone or something worse or lower than an individual's current state (Foley et al., 2016; Yperen et al., 2006). For example, a woman looking at a magazine showing an ultra-thin model may engage in an upward comparison if she compares her own perfectly normal and healthy body against the ultra-thin image and sees the thin image as better than her own. In contrast, a father who watches a buffoonish father on television may think to himself “I am a much better parent than that guy”, an example of a downward comparison.

Empirical evidence suggests different outcomes between upward and downward comparisons. Upward comparisons may increase an individual's aspirational feelings of commitment to do something better (e.g., Collins, 1996) or may lead to individuals feeling worse about personal characteristics (e.g., Thornton & Moore, 1993). In a parenting context, fathers who engage in an upward comparison compared to other parents around them (or in media) could potentially lead to either that father feeling worse about their abilities to father effectively
or could give that father a "goal" or ideal to try and live up to and thus become a better father. Downward comparisons may increase individual's satisfaction in their role performance or other aspects of identity but do little to inspire better performance (e.g., Buunk et al., 2001; Foley et al., 2016; Gibbons, 1999). This happens in part because individuals engage in downward comparisons as conscious acts of self-preservation to enhance the sense of self (Taylor et al., 1983). For example, a mother who engages in downward comparisons towards other parents around her may feel more satisfied in her role as a mother but is unlikely to be compelled to be a better parent.

**Parent Efficacy**

While there are many facets of both parenting and parent identity, this paper will specifically focus on parental efficacy and stress, as they are often operationalized as constructs feeding into parental competence or how well individuals feel they fulfill their parental role overall (e.g., Gilmore & Cuskelly, 2009).

Parental efficacy, as an aspect of parental competence, captures the confidence parents feel about how well they fulfill their parental role (Gilmore & Cuskelly, 2009). High parental efficacy encourages positive parenting practices, significantly impacting parent's disciplinary style (Sanders & Woolley, 2005), children's self-regulation development and academic competence (Brody et al., 1999), sensitivity to infant's emotions (Leerkes & Crockenberg, 2002), increased father involvement (Trahan, 2018), as well as reduced internalized and externalized problems (Shim & Lim, 2019). Overall, parents with high parental efficacy are warmer, more involved, and more responsive to their children. When examined longitudinally, the positive impact of high parent efficacy is present for families of diverse family structures, including single mothers and non-resident fathers (Jackson & Scheines, 2005).
Parent Stress

Parental stress differs from efficacy in that it measures how well parents feel they are fulfilling their role as a parent and how stressed they are about fulfilling that role, not just their confidence. Measures of parent stress often cross over with the construct of parental satisfaction, which are conceptually opposite sides of the same coin. Measures of parental stress and/or satisfaction often ask participants to make comparisons to their own or other parents (e.g., Gilmore & Cuskelly, 2009) in part to capture the identity-forming process of comparing role performance to expectations modeled by other parents. Fathers sometimes report lower feelings of parental stress than mothers (Gilmore & Cuskelly, 2009), while other studies report equal levels of parental stress between mothers and fathers (Campbell et al., 1976). Cross-sectionally, parental stress has been found to mediate the relationship between stressful family circumstances (e.g., a child with a psychiatric disorder) and perceptions of the stressor. No research (to our knowledge) has examined the impact media may have on parent stress.

Current Study

The purpose of this paper is to use experimental methods to examine the effect of three different styles of parents in media, authoritative, authoritarian, and stereotypical, on parent efficacy and stress. In addition, this paper will explore how upward and downward comparison play mediating role in the relationship between watching depictions of parents in media, and parent efficacy and stress. Parents will randomly be assigned to watch one of three conditions, an example of an authoritative parent in television, an example of an authoritarian parent, and an example of a stereotypical parent. Parents will then report on their social comparison between them and the parent they watched, and then on their parenting stress and efficacy. Using this methodology, we will test the following hypotheses.
Hypothesis 1: Individuals exposed to authoritarian, and stereotypical depictions of parents in television will have lower levels of parent efficacy, and higher levels of parent stress than individuals exposed to authoritative depictions of parents in television.

Hypothesis 2: The relationship between exposure to depictions of parents in television (condition) and parent stress and efficacy will be moderated by gender.

Hypothesis 3: The direction of an individual’s social comparison will mediate the relationship between depictions of parents in television and parent efficacy and stress.

Due to theoretical rationale supporting the possibility that either upward or downward comparison may increase parent efficacy and decrease parent stress, we will explore a mediating relationship, but hypothesize the directionality of that relationship. In addition, as authoritative parenting is the only positive depiction of parenting in this study, it will be included as a the comparison group in our analyses for Hypothesis 3.

Methods

Participants and Procedure

Participants for this study were recruited via MTurk. To qualify for participation, individuals needed to be the parent of a child between the ages of 12-18, and that child either needed to live with that parent part-time or full-time. These specifications were chosen for two reasons. First, by specifying that participants must be parents of adolescent children, we were able to choose more relevant experimental conditions by selecting television clips depicting parents of adolescents. In addition, by specifying that all participants must have their adolescent child living with them either full-time or part-time, we were able to sample a population for whom their roles as a parent are highly salient, and thus potentially more susceptible to influences via television depictions on parent efficacy and stress (compared perhaps to parents with older children who were no longer living at home, or non-resident parents who do not see
their children as often).

As online surveys are often susceptible to bots (Moss et al., 2021), the Qualtrics Bot Detector was implemented to prevent bots from entering the dataset. Responses with a high probability of being a bot as opposed to a human participant were dropped from the total sample. In total, 122 parents participated in this study, completing a 15-minute survey for which participants were compensated $3. Prior to survey administration, approval for this study was obtained from Brigham Young University's IRB. Of the 122 parents, about half were male (n = 60; 49.18%) and half were female (n = 62; 50.82%; see Table 1). The mean age of parents was 40.41 years old (SD = 7.62). In terms of education, 7.38% had a High School diploma or GED (n = 9), 13.93% had some college (n = 17), 13.93% had a 2-year degree (n = 17), 42.62% had a 4-year degree (n = 52), 18.03% had a professional degree (JD, MBA, n = 22) and 1.64% had a Ph.D. (n = 2). The overwhelming majority of participants reported being married (n = 100; 81.97%) and the remained of participants reported being widowed (n = 2; 1.64%), Divorced (n = 4; 3.28%) Separated (n = 3; 2.46%), or never married (n = 10; 8.20%).

This study implemented a 1x3 factorial design with three condition groups (authoritative, authoritarian, and stereotypical). Parents began the study by first electronically signing a consent form, answering demographic questions (age, sex, education) and qualifying questions (if they had a child between the ages of 12-18 and if that child lived with them either part-time or full-time). After answering these questions, parents were then randomly assigned a video clip from one of the three conditions: authoritative, authoritarian, or stereotypical. To account for the closer identification that individuals have with characters of the same gender in media (Bussey & Bandura, 1999; Hoffner & Buchanan, 2005), parents were shown a media clip featuring a parent of their same gender (mothers watched clips of mothers, fathers watched clips of fathers).
Following the video clip, participants were asked to fill out a series of questions asking them to make a social comparison between themselves and the parent in the media, followed by answering questions about their parental stress and efficacy.

**Experimental Media Exposure**

As two clips for each condition needed to be obtained for this study (one for fathers and one for mothers), we used clips from the same television show for each condition when possible in order to better control for the overall quality, tone, and reputation of the show. Clips were selected from TV shows that aired in the early 2000’s or later, and were all focused around family life and dynamics, specifically with children who were between the ages of 12 and 18 who lived with their parents in order to better match the demographics of the participants in the study. All clips were between 3-5 minutes in length, and featured one parent interacting with one or more adolescent children. A pilot study was conducted with 20 undergraduate students to assess the validity of these measures. The goal of this study was to validate the clips, assuring that they each represented the style of parenting, and that clips were similar on factors such as humor, how likeable the parent was, how attractive was, and the quality of the television. Data from the pilot study, however, demonstrated that while the television clips were similar on factors such as how likeable the parent was, the quality of the television, and how attractive the parent was, they were also not consistently different on the necessary measures. Specifically, the stereotypical condition and the authoritative condition were not significantly different on measures of authoritative parenting, although the authoritarian was significantly more authoritarian than both the stereotypical and authoritative conditions.

Clips for the authoritative condition were taken from This Is Us, specifically, a clip of Beth Pearson (Season 2 Episode 4) for mothers, and Jack Pearson (Season 1 Episode 6) for
fathers. Both authoritative clips depict the parent having a one-on-one conversation with a child discussing a challenge the child is facing in a warm and supportive manner. Clips for the authoritarian condition were taken from Malcolm in the Middle and That 70’s Show, specifically, a clip of Lois (Season 2 Episode 24) for mothers, and Red Forman (Season 3 Episode 2) for fathers. Both clips depict the parent disciplining a child in a very harsh manner. Clips for the stereotypical condition were taken from Modern Family, specifically, Claire Dunphy (Season 1 Episode 18) for mothers and Phil Dunphy (Season 2 Episode 22) for fathers. The stereotypical condition for fathers depicts Phil Dunphy trying unsuccessfully to engage in household chores and talking to his children, who respond to him by brushing him off, or rolling their eyes, conveying they see him as buffoonish. The stereotypical condition for mothers depicts Claire Dunphy trying to accomplish many household tasks and attempting to get her children to help her with household chores. It is conveyed through the dialogue and Claire’s actions that while she is a competent parent, she is overwhelmed by her children and her tasks.

Measures

Social Comparison

Social comparisons parents engaged in was be assessed using a modified Iowa-Netherlands Comparison Orientation measure (Gibbons & Buunk, 1999). Participants respond to five questions on a 5-point Likert scale (1 being strongly agree, 5 being strongly disagree), and some items were reverse coded so that higher scores would indicate a more upward comparison, and lower scores a more downward comparison. As I conceptualize upward and downward comparisons as mutually exclusive (one cannot engage in both an upward and downward comparison at the same time), this approach to quantifying social comparison was appropriate. Sample items include "I am a more competent parent than this parent," and "I want to be more
like this parent” (reverse coded). Items were averaged for an overall mean score. Reliability for this measure was adequate; $\alpha = 0.71$.

**Parental Stress and Efficacy**

Parental stress and efficacy were measured using the Parenting Sense of Competence Scale (PSOC; Ohan et al., 2000). The PSOC is a widely used measure of both parent stress and efficacy. Parents report on a 17-item Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree).

The stress subscale measures parent anxiety, motivation, and frustration, with items such as "sometimes I feel like I'm not getting anything done" and "I go to bed the same way I wake up in the morning, feeling I have not accomplished a whole lot." Items were averaged for a total mean level of parenting stress. Reliability for this subscale was good; $\alpha = 0.77$. Items were coded so that higher scores indicated more stress.

The efficacy subscale assesses competence, capacity, and problem-solving skills of parents and includes items such as "if anyone can find the answer to what is bothering my child, I am the one" and "considering how long I have been a mother/father; I feel thoroughly familiar with the role." Items were averaged for a total mean level of parenting efficacy. Reliability for this subscale was good; $\alpha = 0.83$. Items were coded so that higher scores indicated more efficacy.

**Demographics**

Alongside the constructs of interest, we also measured marital status, sex, education level, and age or parents to include as covariates in our analyses. To measure marital status, parents were asked to respond to the question “What is your marital status?” on a nominal scale. Response options were married, widowed, separated, divorced, never married, and other.
Participants who selected other were then asked to report their marital status in a free-response box. Education was assessed by asking participants to respond to the question “What is your highest level of education?” on a ordinal scale. Response options were less than high school, high school or GED, some college, 2-year degree, 4-year degree, professional degree (Masters, JD, MBA), and Ph.D. Parents sex was assessed by asking participants to respond to the question “What is your biological sex assigned at birth?” on a nominal scale, with response options male and female. Age of participants was assessed by asking participants to respond to the fill in a free-response to the question “How old are you?”.

**Plan of Analysis**

Data was initially cleaned, and descriptive statistics were examined in Stata 16.4. As part of the data cleaning process, observed variables for each of the primary constructs were created, as were dummy variables for each condition. In addition, demographic variables were consolidated. Specifically, due to the high frequency of married parents as opposed to parents with other marital status (e.g., widowed or divorced), a binary variable was created to capture parents’ marital status, with 1 = married, 0 = not married. After the data cleaning process, descriptive statistics including frequencies and bivariate correlations between our primary constructs were examined. After exploring the data, I examined if any of the demographic variables (marital status, age, education, or sex) were significant predictors of condition groups in an effort to confirm that the groups were similar to one another. After this, I examined mean levels of both parenting stress and parental efficacy by condition group. Then, to examine hypothesis 1, mean differences in parenting efficacy and stress were examined based on condition using an ANOVA. I also examined if there were significant gender differences in the effect of condition on parental efficacy and parent stress (hypothesis 2). To examine hypothesis
3, using Mplus 8.8, I used an SEM framework to examine if social comparison would significantly mediate the relationship between television parent (condition) and parent efficacy and stress. The authoritative condition was the comparison group for this analysis, so that all results should be interpreted as the effect of the condition, either Authoritative or Stereotypical, is compared to participants randomly assigned to the Authoritative condition. Model fit of the specified SEM model was assessed using the following fit indices; CFI (< 0.95), RMSEA (> 0.06), SRMR (> 0.08), and Chi-Square of Model Fit (non-significant indicates better fit). Parent age, sex, education, and marital status were included as covariates.

**Results**

**Descriptive Statistics**

Concerning parent’s efficacy, parents reported mean levels of efficacy at 3.48, which on a 5-point Likert scale indicates general positive feelings of parental efficacy. For parenting stress, parents reported mean levels of stress at 2.78. As parenting stress was also measured on a 5-point Likert scale, this indicates general disagreement or less mean levels of parenting stress. Finally, looking at mean levels of social comparison, parents reported mean levels of social comparison at 3.23. As social comparison was measured again on a 5-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating more downward comparison and lower scores indicating more upward comparison, a mean level of 3.23 indicates that on average across treatment groups, most parents are engaging in a slight downward social comparison (and thus feel that they are better parents than the parents they watched in their treatment television clip).

**Hypothesis 1**

First, I examined if any demographic variables significantly predicted condition group to ensure that the groups were randomly assigned and roughly equivalent (see Table 2 for
breakdown of demographic variables for each condition). None of the demographic constructs assessed were significant predictors of any of the condition groups (see Table 3), indicating that participants were roughly equally distributed across the three conditions. Using a 3x1 ANOVA, results revealed that there were no significant differences in mean levels of parenting efficacy between the three conditions (authoritative, authoritarian, stereotypical), F(2, 101) = 0.49, p = .056. In addition, there were no significant difference in mean levels of parenting stress between the three conditions, F(2, 101) = 0.01, p = .441. See table 4 for mean levels of parent efficacy and stress across the three condition groups.

**Hypothesis 2**

To examine hypothesis 2, I also examined potential gender differences in mean levels of parental efficacy and parent stress based on condition using a 3x2 ANOVA. For mothers, there was no significant difference between the three condition groups for parental efficacy, F(53) = 0.08, p = .920. There was also no significant difference between the three condition groups for parent stress, F(53) = 0.26, p = .700. For fathers, there was no significant difference between the three condition groups for parental efficacy, F(49) = 0.70, p = .500, or parent stress, F(49) = 0.44, p = .649. See table 4 for mean levels of parent efficacy and stress across the three condition groups by sex. I further examined gender as a moderator for the relationship between condition and parent efficacy and stress in an OLS framework. For parent efficacy, there were no significant interaction between gender and condition (see Table 5). For parent stress, there was also no significant interaction between gender and condition.

**Hypothesis 3**

Finally, I examined how social comparison (either upward or downward) might mediate the relationship between depictions of parents in television and parenting stress and satisfaction.
Parents age, sex, education, and marital status were included in the analysis as covariates. Overall model fit was good, CFI = 0.975, RMSEA = 0.048, SRMR = 0.051, X2(21) = 156.717, p < .001. There were not, however, any significant difference between the direct effects comparing either the authoritarian or stereotypical condition and the authoritative condition. In addition, there were no significant indirect effects via social comparison on the effect between parent depictions in television and either parenting stress or parenting efficacy. However, this analysis did show that both parent age and education were positively related to parental efficacy (see Figure 1) indicating that older parents, and parents with more education, had higher levels of parental efficacy. Parent age and education were also negatively related to parent stress, indicating that older parents, and parents with more education, reported lower levels of parent stress. Finally, both the Authoritarian and Stereotypical conditions were positively associated with social comparison (see Figure 1). This indicates that compared to the Authoritative condition, participants randomly assigned to the Authoritarian or Stereotypical conditions reported higher levels of social comparison, suggesting they engaged in more downward social comparison, compared participants randomly assigned to the Authoritative condition.

**Discussion**

The purpose of this paper was to explore the influence of watching different depictions of parents in media (specifically authoritative, authoritarian, and stereotypical depictions) on parent stress and efficacy using experimental methodologies, and to examine if these differences were a facet of social comparison. Overall, I found that there were no significant differences in either parenting stress or efficacy based on condition, nor did I find gender differences in these patterns. However, there were differences in how parents engaged in social comparison based on
their experimental condition, but social comparison did not mediate the relationship between
depictions of parents in television, and parenting stress or efficacy. Thus, as there was no support
for our hypotheses, we are unable to reject the null hypotheses and cannot make further claims
concerning the effects of depictions of parenting in television on parent stress or efficacy. This
is potentially encouraging, as the more negative depictions of parents in media (both
authoritarian and stereotypical) are anecdotally more common in television than the more
positive authoritative depictions (Isojärvi, 2019; Kline et al., 2006; Zurcher et al., 2018). As
these depictions are more common, it was likely that these more negative depictions of parents in
media would somehow have a negative effect on parent efficacy and stress. This however,
p propane to not be the case in this experiment.

It is telling that the directionality of social comparison parents reported were different by
condition. Specifically, parents in the authoritarian or Stereotypical conditions reported higher
levels of social comparison, suggesting they engaged in more downward social comparison,
compared participants randomly assigned to the Authoritative condition. Although the social
comparison parents were asked to engage in and report had no effect on parent efficacy or stress,
the overall trends in social comparison one would expect were found in these data (Yperen et al.,
2006; Foley et al., 2016)- specifically that parents in the authoritarian or stereotypical condition
engaged in more downward social comparison and parents in the authoritative condition engaged
in more upward social comparison, social comparison was not related to either parent stress or
efficacy. As social comparison theory would suggest that engaging in social comparison informs
how an individual perceives and evaluates their own performance in various roles (Bussey &
Bandura, 1999), it is possible that the effect of social comparison on parent efficacy and stress
takes longer to manifest.
Future Research

Guided by insights gained through this experimental study, there are several directions future research could pursue to gain further insight to how depictions of parents in television influence parent identity. First, the operationalization of parent efficacy and stress are measures which assess aspects of parents’ sense of competency along a longer time horizon, specifically by asking questions about their perception of routines and daily parenting. It is possible that while depictions of parents in television do not influence these facets of parent competency, depictions of parents may influence how much parents value their role as a parent, or perhaps how much they feel they can be good parents in the moment. Future research should examine the effect of depictions of parents in television on more proximal assessments of parents’ sense of identity or competency.

In addition, our failure to reject the null hypothesis in this instance may be a facet of the television clips used for each condition. As mentioned in the methods section, while our pilot study did find some indication of validity, depictions of parents in the stereotypical condition and those in the authoritative condition did not receive significantly different scores of authoritative parenting during the pilot. It is possible that these clips were not distinct enough from one another, or that the stereotypical and authoritative depictions are somewhat similar. This is especially probable, as being depicted stereotypically does not necessarily speak to the quality of the parent-child interactions. Future research should perhaps take a more nuanced approach, potentially by creating television clips to show to parents that have more validity.

Finally, future research should consider the time horizon and how to better assess how parents are consuming depictions of parenting via television. Other useful methodologies which may be better suited to assess the effect of depictions of parenting in television may be an
ecological momentary assessment (EMA). Specifically, researchers could ask parents about the television they are watching repeatedly over the course of a few weeks, while also asking questions about their sense of competency or identity as parents. Researchers could then examine the content parents report watching, and how those different patterns of content might be related to parent identity.

Another limitation to this research that should be rectified in future research was the lack of diversity of the sample, specifically that the sample consisted of well-educated married individuals. As there are many parents who are not part of this profile, future research should also explore the relationship between watching different portrayals of parents in media might influence parent identity in more diverse samples of parents.

Conclusion

This paper’s aim was to understand better if watching different depictions of parents in media (specifically authoritative, authoritarian, and stereotypical depictions) influenced parent stress and efficacy using experimental methodologies, and if these relationships might be a facet of the social comparisons’ parents engage in. Overall, we found that watching different depictions of parents was not associated with parent stress and parental efficacy, and that although parents who watched different portrayals of parents engaged in social comparison differently, these social comparisons also did not influence parent identity.
References


Geena Davis Institute on Gender in Media. (2022). *This is us? How TV does and doesn’t get men’s caregiving*. https://seejane.org/research-informs-empowers/this-is-us-how-tv-does-and-doesnt-get-mens-caregiving/?utm_source=The+Representation+Project&utm_campaign=6e8b81903a-Weekly+Action+11.10.2020_COPY_01&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_fa9a227cf4-6e8b81903a-411005133


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https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci7030047
Table 1. Frequency of Demographic Variables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N (M)</th>
<th>% (SD)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital Status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>81.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Married</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>49.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>50.82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School/GED</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Year Degree</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Year Degree</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>42.62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Degree (Masters, JD, MBA)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>18.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>40.41</td>
<td>7.62</td>
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</table>
Table 2. Descriptive Breakdown of Condition Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Authoritarian</th>
<th>Authoritative</th>
<th>Stereotypical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n (M) % (SD)</td>
<td>n (M) % (SD)</td>
<td>n (M) % (SD)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall</td>
<td>38 31.15</td>
<td>40 32.79</td>
<td>41 33.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>16 42.11</td>
<td>20 50.00</td>
<td>18 43.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>22 57.89</td>
<td>20 50.00</td>
<td>23 56.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married</td>
<td>35 92.11</td>
<td>31 77.50</td>
<td>34 82.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Married</td>
<td>3 7.89</td>
<td>9 22.50</td>
<td>7 17.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>40.21 6.38</td>
<td>40.80 8.13</td>
<td>40.22 8.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High School/GED</td>
<td>1 2.63</td>
<td>4 10.00</td>
<td>4 9.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some College</td>
<td>6 15.79</td>
<td>5 12.50</td>
<td>6 14.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Year Degree</td>
<td>6 15.79</td>
<td>4 10.00</td>
<td>7 17.07</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Year Degree</td>
<td>15 39.47</td>
<td>18 45.00</td>
<td>19 46.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Degree (Masters, JD, MBA)</td>
<td>9 23.68</td>
<td>8 20.00</td>
<td>5 12.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>1 2.63</td>
<td>1 2.50</td>
<td>0 0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Percentages are taken out of the total number of participants (n = 122) for Overall, and out of the total number of participants in each condition for Sex, Marital Status, Age, and Education (Authoritarian, n = 38; Authoritative, n = 40; Stereotypical, n = 41).
Table 3. Regression Analyses Predicting Condition assignment by Sex, Education, Marital Status, and Age

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Authoritarian</th>
<th>Authoritative</th>
<th>Stereotypical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>β</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sex</strong></td>
<td>-0.12</td>
<td>0.09</td>
<td>.164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>0.03</td>
<td>.302</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>-0.001</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>.813</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital Status</strong></td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>0.10</td>
<td>.090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>R²</strong></td>
<td>.043</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Sex is modeled as Male (1) compared to Female (0). Marital Status is modeled as Married (1) compared to not married (0). Three separate models were run for each condition.
Table 4. Mean Levels of Parental Efficacy and Parent Stress by Condition; Authoritarian, Authoritative, and Stereotypical

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Parent Efficacy</th>
<th>Parent Stress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authoritative</td>
<td>3.46</td>
<td>.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.45</td>
<td>.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.47</td>
<td>.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authoritarian</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.55</td>
<td>.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereotypical</td>
<td>3.43</td>
<td>.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>3.33</td>
<td>.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>3.54</td>
<td>.47</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 5. Gender as a Moderator for the Effect of Condition on Parent Efficacy and Parent Stress

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Condition</th>
<th>Parent Efficacy</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Parent Stress</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>β</td>
<td>S.E</td>
<td>p</td>
<td>β</td>
<td>S.E</td>
<td>p</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authoritarian</td>
<td>0.08</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.690</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>.30</td>
<td>.580</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stereotypical</td>
<td>0.07</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>.751</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.904</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>-0.02</td>
<td>.24</td>
<td>.921</td>
<td>-0.17</td>
<td>.35</td>
<td>.619</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction Term</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male x Authoritarian</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.909</td>
<td>0.37</td>
<td>.46</td>
<td>.418</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male x Stereotypical</td>
<td>-0.18</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>.554</td>
<td>-0.08</td>
<td>.45</td>
<td>.859</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adjusted R²  .02  .04

Note. Reference category for Condition is Authoritative. Reference category for Gender is Female.
Figure 1. SEM Mediation Model: Social Comparison as a Mediator for the Effect of Condition on Parental Efficacy and Parent Stress

Note. Unstandardized coefficients are shown. Only coefficients for significant paths are shown. Paths shown in dotted line are non-significant. Correlation coefficients are not shown for the sake of parsimony. Authoritarian and Stereotypical are in comparison to the Authoritative condition.