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The Effect of Single Mothers' Marital Status on Sympathy, Character Evaluations, and Maternity Leave Support

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The effect of single mothers' marital status on sympathy, character evaluations, and maternity
leave support

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Senior Thesis Research

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Abstract: The effect of single mothers' marital status on sympathy, character evaluations, and maternity leave support

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Social science research has found that single mothers tend to be viewed more negatively than married mothers. However, single mothers are not a monolithic group, they can vary in terms of their marital status. Informed by DiLiapi's (1989) motherhood hierarchy, we hypothesized that relative to never married single mothers, formerly married single mothers (i.e., widowed and divorced) would garner more sympathy, more favorable character evaluations, and people would also be more willing to support maternity leave policies as a result of thinking about formerly married single mothers compared to never married single mothers. To test these predictions participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions where they read a vignette about a single mother named Maya. What varied between conditions was her marital status; either Maya was never married, divorced, or widowed. Afterwards, participants completed measures of sympathy toward Maya, six character evaluations of Maya, and rated their endorsement of four maternity leave policies. We found some significant effects for Maya's marital status, such that relative to participants assigned to divorced or widowed conditions, participants assigned to the never married condition expressed significantly less sympathy toward Maya, perceived Maya as significantly more irresponsible and selfish. No significant differences were found between divorced and widowed conditions. We also examined if sympathy mediated the effect of marital status (previously married: divorced and widowed vs. never married) on character traits and maternity leave policies. All ten mediation models tested were significant, such that people evaluated Maya more positively and supported maternity leave policies more when she was previously married, compared to when she had never been married, because they felt more

sympathy. We discuss the implications of these findings for future social science research and public policy initiatives geared toward single mothers.

Introduction

Single Motherhood

There are approximately 6.4 million families headed by single mothers in the United States, a figure expected to increase by about 10-15% over the next 20 years (McCue, 2014). As the number of single mothers continues to increase, so do the disadvantages that single mothers face. For example, relative to single women without children and married mothers, single mothers tend to be economically disadvantaged. The poverty rate for single mother families in 2013 was 39.6%, compared to 7.6% for married families (Entmacher, Robbins, Vogtman, & Frolich, 2013). Additionally, the unemployment rate for single mothers is 6.3%, which is higher than the current national average of 4.8% and that of married mothers at 4.4% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2017). While an in-depth discussion of why single mothers are so disadvantaged in economic terms is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to note that single mothers are one of the more economically disadvantaged groups in the U.S.

Not only are single mothers a social group that on average, tends to be economically disadvantaged, but single mothers are frequently negatively stereotyped. For example, single mothers are often perceived to be more promiscuous and immoral than single women without children, or married women with children (Ganong & Coleman, 1995). These negative perceptions of single mothers stem from widely accepted heteronormative standards, whereby men and women have prescribed roles in society based on their gender. According to the theory of heteronormativity, women are expected to be married in a traditional nuclear family; have children with their husband, and assume the majority of the childcare and household responsibilities (Schilt, & Westbrook 2009).

While a growing body of research has shown that single mothers tend to be viewed negatively because they deviate from heteronormative standards, much of the research has treated single mothers as one large homogenous group (Schmitz, 1995). In reality, there are numerous ways that single mothers can differ from each other, which might influence how people perceive them. One notable way in which single mothers can differ from one another is with respect to marital status. According to recent estimates, 49% of single mothers have never been married, 30% are divorced, 17% are separated, and about 3% are widowed (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Some have speculated that within single motherhood, the highest levels of nobility are awarded to those who were once married (Allers, 2016). However, very little research has examined whether people perceive single mothers differently based on their marital status (for exceptions see Ganong & Coleman, 1995; Bennet & Jamieson, 1999). Building off DiLapi's (1989) motherhood hierarchy theory, which posits that the degree to which mothers are viewed positively by society is to some degree dependent on how closely they fit heteronormative standards, we argue that a single mother hierarchy might exist based on the marital status of single mothers. We conducted an experiment to test the existence of a single mother hierarchy. Specifically, we examined whether simply thinking about a single mother who has previously been married (i.e., widowed and divorced) would lead to greater positive evaluations of single mothers as a whole. Further, we investigated if there would be a greater willingness to support government policies that might benefit single mothers (e.g., paid leave) compared to those who were made to think about a single mother who had never been married. We also examined the potential mediating role of sympathy in these processes.

Single Mothers vs. Married Women and Single Fathers

As mentioned earlier, a growing body of research suggests that single mothers are devalued relative to parents in other family arrangements. For example, a recent meta-analysis on family structures and their associated stereotypes, by Valiquette-Tessier, Vandette, and Gosselin (2016) found that single parent families are perceived less favorably in comparison to married families. This is because married families fit most closely with heteronormative standards which tend to elicit positive evaluations from others. Parents who are married in biological families with children tend to be perceived as affectionate, supportive, and stable with strong communication. In comparison to married parents, single parents are often perceived as immoral and untrustworthy. In sum, it appears as though parents who have been married at some point are evaluated more positively compared to single parents because they conform more to prescribed norms for family structure.

Among single parents, single mothers tend to be evaluated much less favorably than single fathers (Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2016; Etaugh & Folger, 1998). For example, DeJean, McGeorge, and Carlson (2012) primed participants using vignettes to compare attitudes toward never married single mothers and never married single fathers. These vignettes were identical in description except for the gender of the single parent. Compared to single fathers, single mothers were rated by participants as less responsible, less moral, and less of a good parent (DeJean et al., 2012). It is possible that single mothers, in this study were rated more negatively than single fathers, because the former are expected to be the primary child bearers while the latter are not held to the same standard, mostly assuming financial responsibilities. Single mothers are perceived as simply assuming their heteronormative role while comparatively, a single father is perceived as assuming child care responsibilities that are not traditionally his. Mothers in general are held to a higher standard of childcare responsibility, making single fathers appear heroic by

comparison. As such, people tend to assign more positive character traits to single fathers than they do to single mothers (Haire & McGeorge, 2012). Taken together, research findings within the area of family studies, sociology, and psychology suggests that relative to married parents and single fathers, single mothers tend to be viewed much less favorably (Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2016; Schmitz, 1995; DiLapi, 1989).

The Motherhood Hierarchy and Single Mothers

In Dilapi's *Lesbian Mothers and the Motherhood Hierarchy* (1989), she argues that mothers can be placed into three categories based on how they are generally perceived by society: appropriate, marginally appropriate, and least appropriate. The appropriate mother is a married woman in a traditional patriarchal family who has children as a result of intercourse with her husband. This is what many would consider an ideal woman or mother. Marginally appropriate mothers are single mothers, teen mothers, women who have a child out of wedlock, or women who give their child up for adoption. Finally, least appropriate mothers are lesbians. The idea of a motherhood hierarchy is simply a framework that reflects prominent social values, gender role expectations, and heterosexism that still permeate society. Under such a framework, women are valued based on their ability to reproduce and manage the home. DiLapi (1989) proposed that a motherhood hierarchy is a useful explanation as to why certain kinds of mothers receive different treatment and access to resources in comparison to others. Mothers in heterosexual marriages are rewarded with positive societal perceptions, whereas marginal and inappropriate mothers are more likely to be punished for deviating from heteronormative standards.

We believe that DiLapi's motherhood hierarchy theory (1989) might be applicable to single mothers. Specifically, we argue that a single motherhood hierarchy exists based on the

marital status of single mothers; such that people will express more sympathy and positive evaluations of single mothers who have been previously married—such as widowed and divorced single mothers—compared to single mothers who have never been married. There is some empirical evidence that suggests that motherhood hierarchy might exist. For example, Ganong and Coleman (1995) conducted a descriptive study that examined perceptions of different types of mothers (i.e., married, stepmother, divorced and never married). Specifically, each participant rated the percentage of positive and negative character traits (e.g., friendly, intelligent, stupid, bitter) that they believed of each type of mother to possess. Overall they found that there was a general tendency for people to believe that a higher percentage of married mothers possessed positive character traits (and less negative character traits), relative to stepmothers, divorced mothers, and never married mothers. Never married mothers tended to be viewed the most negatively, with stepmothers and divorced mothers falling somewhere in between married mothers and never married mothers on most character traits. In a similar study, Bennet and Jamieson (1999) had participants evaluate the percentage of married, stepmother, divorced, and never married mothers that they believed to possess 26 of the character traits used by Ganong and Coleman (1995). The focal difference between the two studies was that Bennet and Jamieson (1999) used an independent groups design, such that each participant only rated one type of mother. Their findings largely mirrored Ganong and Coleman's (1995), in that perceptions of married mothers tended to be most positive, and perceptions of never married mothers tended to be the least positive.

Taken together, Ganong and Coleman (1995) and Bennet and Jamieson's (1999) findings provide some preliminary evidence of the existence of a single motherhood hierarchy. Namely, that the degree to which single mothers are favorably evaluated by others is dependent on their

current marital status. Single mothers who have been previously married (e.g., divorced) tended to garner a greater percentage of positive evaluations compared to never married mothers. The prior studies are elucidating in a number of ways, but they were not specifically designed to assess the existence of a single mother hierarchy—the focal aim of our research. Using an experimental design, we examined whether people would evaluate single mothers who had previously been married (i.e., widowed and divorced) more favorably on a number of character traits compared to never married single mothers. Given that single mothers, on average, tend to be economically disadvantaged relative to married mothers (Entmacher et al., 2013), we also assessed whether people's support for policies such as maternity leave differed as a function of marital status. Finally, we speculated that differences in sympathy, a prosocial emotion associated with positive character evaluations and helping behavior (Iyer, Leach, & Crosby, 2003), might account for differences in positive character evaluations and support for policies among the three types of single mothers.

Sympathy and Single Motherhood

According to theories of emotional responses toward disadvantaged groups, sympathy is an emotion that people tend to experience toward members of social groups when they identify with the others' misfortune. Sympathy is greatest when an individual or group's circumstances are perceived to be uncontrollable (Leach, Snider, & Iyer, 2002). As such, it stands to reason that among the three subtypes of single mothers: widowed, divorced, and never married, widows are likely to receive the most sympathy from others. A widow's circumstances should be perceived by most as unfortunate and beyond her control. Divorcees might reside in the middle, receiving less sympathy than widows and more sympathy than never married single mothers. A divorced single mother is not likely to receive the same amount of sympathy as a widow because either

her or her ex-husband chose to end the marriage. Therefore the circumstances of a divorced single mother might be perceived as more controllable in comparison to the uncontrollable circumstances of a widowed single mother. A never married single mother should receive the least amount of sympathy from others, as their circumstances are likely to be construed by others as a personal choice. Additionally, unlike a never married single mother, a divorced single mother and her widowed counterpart chose to comply with heteronormative standards by marrying a man and raising children within a marriage. That too might contribute to greater sympathy toward both types of previously married single mothers (i.e., widowed and divorced), relative to never married single mothers (Allers, 2016).

Sympathy and Positive Evaluations/Policy Support

As previously stated, single mothers tend to be more stigmatized relative to other subgroups of women (Gangong & Coleman, 1995). Theory by Pryor, Reeder, Monroe, and Patel (2009) speculates that the more one's circumstances are perceived by others to be beyond one's control, then that stigmatized person's character is likely to be seen more favorably, in part, because others are likely to feel more sympathy and/or less anger and irritation toward the stigmatized person. Perceived controllability of a stigmatized persons circumstances leads to less sympathy, increased negative emotions, and less desire to help. Building off of theory by Pryor et al., (2009) we are hypothesizing that never married single mothers will be viewed the least favorably out of all conditions because their situation will be perceived as being in their control, in comparison to a widowed or divorced single mother who is perceived as being in a situation beyond her control. Feelings of sympathy consequently predict a person's desire to help.

Prosocial behaviors such as policy support for disadvantaged groups such as single mothers are directly linked to the emotion of sympathy (Pryor et al., 2009). Theory on sympathy

reasons that sympathy is associated with increased willingness to support the economically disadvantaged through social policy (Leach et al., 2002). Further, Iyer et al., (2003) found that White people's sympathy toward Blacks strongly predicted support for equal opportunity policy such as affirmative action. Taken together, these studies and theories strongly imply that sympathy levels can have an effect on character evaluations and policy positions.

Overview of the Current Study

The purpose of this experiment was to test whether a single motherhood hierarchy exists (see Allers, 2016). Informed by the idea of a motherhood hierarchy (DiLapi, 1989) as well as theory of sympathetic responses to members of disadvantaged groups (Leach et al., 2002), we predicted that a single mother who has been married (i.e., widowed and divorced) would be evaluated and treated more favorably than a never married counterpart. To test this, participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions in which they had to read a brief vignette about the life of a single mother named Maya. The only piece of information that differed between conditions was her marital status. Either she was described as widowed, divorced, or never married. Participants then completed measures of sympathy toward Maya, evaluations of Maya's character traits, and support for policies (e.g., paid leave) aimed at helping single mothers like Maya. We predicted that people would feel the most sympathy toward Maya when she was described as a widow, and the least sympathy when she was described as never married; with divorced falling in between. These differences in sympathy as a function of Maya's marital status, would in turn predict the degree to which people evaluated her positively and were willing to support policies aimed at helping single mothers like Maya. Further, positive character evaluations and support for policies would be greatest when Maya was described as a widow, because people felt more sympathy toward Maya under those circumstances.

Method

Participants

Eighty-four students (45 women, 39 men) from Trinity College participated in exchange for course credit and also a chance to win one of two \$50 Amazon gift cards. These participants were recruited using convenience sampling. Specifically, participants were recruited via announcements made in introductory psychology classes, campus listserves, and sports teams.

The mean age of the sample was 20.08 ($SD = 1.51$). In terms of racial background, 74% of the sample identified as White, 12% as Black, 7% as Multiracial, 2% as South Asian, and 1% East Asian (all other racial categories < 1%). In terms of household income, 20% of the sample reported their household income as less than \$23,000, 12% as \$24,000 to \$50,000, 7% as \$51,000 to \$75,999, 7% as \$76,000 to \$100,999, 8% as \$101,000 to \$150,999, 9% as \$151,000 to \$200,999, 7% as \$201,000 to \$250,000, and 30% as \$251,000 or more.

Procedure

Participants completed an online survey hosted by Survey Gizmo (SurveyGizmo, 2017). Before proceeding to the survey participants were presented with a consent form which outlined the purpose of the study, the compensation, potential risks, as well as their right to withdraw at any time. Participants first responded to a series of demographic questions (e.g., age and gender). Next, participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions. After reading the vignette, participants completed measures of sympathy toward Maya, character traits, and support for maternal leave policies.

Manipulation

Participants were randomly assigned to one of three conditions. In each condition, participants read a vignette about a single mother named Maya. The only thing that varied between each condition was Maya's marital status. Her marital status was always brought up in

the second and third sentences of the passage. Thus, the only two sentences that differed between conditions were the second and third one. In all three conditions participants saw the following:

Maya is a 27-year old single mother. [She has never been married. Maya and the father of her child broke-up a couple of years ago./She is a widow. Maya's husband passed away a couple of years ago./She is divorced. Maya and her ex-husband separated a couple of years ago.] At this point in her life she is quite content being single. Maya is the mother of a four-year old and works full time as a nurse. She often works long shifts, overtime, and sometimes gets called into work with little notice. She takes as many hours as she can to try make ends meet and provide a decent life for her child. However, Maya reports feelings of stress as a result of working and having to take care of her four-year old. Maya wishes she could spend more time with her child, but does the best that she can, given the circumstances.

Dependent Measures

Sympathy toward Maya. Sympathy toward Maya was measured with one-item adapted from Outten, Schmitt, Miller, and Garcia (2012). After reading one of the vignettes, participants were asked, "To what extent do you feel sympathetic toward Maya?" The response scale ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 11 (*completely*).

Maya's Character. Participants were asked to rate Maya on 6 character traits adapted from Ganong and Coleman (1995). Three character traits were of a positive nature (i.e., hardworking, empowering, talented). Three character traits were negative (i.e., irresponsible, promiscuous, selfish). Participants reported the extent to which they agreed Maya fit the particular character trait on scales ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 11 (*very*).

Support for Maternity Leave Policies. Participants were asked 4 questions that pertained to their views on single mothers and their access to Maternity Leave via the Family Medical Leave Act (FMLA; Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993, 2006). The FMLA is a federal law requiring employers to provide employees with 12 weeks of unpaid, job protected leave per year. The questions were as follows: To what extent do you agree or disagree that single mothers should receive 12 weeks paid maternity leave? To what extent do you agree or disagree that single mothers should receive more than 12 weeks paid maternity leave? To what extent do you agree or disagree that companies should be required to offer paid maternity leave for single? To what extent do you agree or disagree that the government should incentivize companies to offer paid maternity leave? The response scales for each question ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*).

Manipulation Check. We included a manipulation check to assess whether participants paid attention to Maya's marital status while reading the respective article they were assigned to. Specifically, participants were asked, "In the paragraph that you just read, what was Maya's marital status?" and then were given the options of never married before, divorced, widowed, or married. 13 of the 97 participants answered the manipulation check incorrectly. Those 13 participants were excluded from subsequent analyses. This left a total of 84 participants for the remaining analyses.

Results

Effect of Marital Status on Dependent Measures

We conducted a series of one-way ANOVA's to test if marital status had an effect on sympathy toward Maya, positive and negative character traits, and support for maternity leave policies. If significant main effects were found we then conducted post hoc comparisons using

the Tukey HSD test. We found a significant effect of marital status on the degree of sympathy toward Maya, $F(2, 81) = 5.13, p < .01$. Post hoc comparisons were somewhat consistent with our first hypothesis, single never married mothers received significantly less sympathy ($M = 6.85, SD = 2.09$) in comparison to both divorced single mothers ($M = 8.54, SD = 1.91$), $p < .01$ and widowed single mothers ($M = 8.21, SD = 2.18$), $p < .05$. However, the difference in levels of sympathy did not differ significantly between divorced single mothers and widowed single mothers, $p = .82$. (see Table 1).

A one-way ANOVA examining the effect of marital status on the three positive character traits, revealed that marital status only had a significant effect on the degree to which people viewed Maya as hardworking, $F(2, 81) = 4.15, p < .05$. The traits empowering and talented did not significantly differ between conditions. Thus we only conducted a post hoc comparisons for the trait hardworking. Single never married mothers were perceived as significantly less hardworking ($M = 8.70, SD = 2.30$) in comparison to divorced single mothers ($M = 10.04, SD = 1.20$), $p < .05$ but not widowed single mothers ($M = 9.48, SD = 1.50$), $p = .21$. Thus, divorced single mothers were seen as significantly more hardworking than never married single mothers and widowed single mothers.

A one-way ANOVA revealed that marital status condition had an effect on the degree to which people viewed Maya as irresponsible $F(2, 81) = 4.52, p < .05$ and promiscuous $F(2, 81) = 12.12, p < .001$. The traits selfish did not significantly differ between conditions. A post hoc comparisons using Tukey HSD test, were conducted to determine which pairs of conditions differed significantly. Single never married mothers were perceived as significantly more irresponsible ($M = 4.04, SD = 2.81$) in comparison to both divorced single mothers ($M = 2.39, SD = 1.69$), $p < .05$ and widowed single mothers ($M = 2.62, SD = 1.97$), $p < .05$. Single never

married mothers were perceived as significantly more promiscuous ($M = 3.85$, $SD = 2.35$) in comparison to both divorced single mothers ($M = 1.64$, $SD = 1.22$), $p < .001$ and widowed single mothers ($M = 2.07$, $SD = 1.56$), $p < .001$. Lastly, single never married mothers were not perceived as significantly more selfish in comparison to previously married single mothers (divorced and widowed). There were no significant differences between divorced single mothers and widowed single mothers in terms of negative character trait assessments. This data suggests that never married single mothers are perceived as significantly more irresponsible and promiscuous in comparison to previously married single mothers.

Finally, a one-way ANOVA revealed that marital status condition did not have an effect on support for any maternity leave policy: 12 weeks paid maternity leave for single mothers $F(2, 81) = 1.45$, $p = .23$, more than 12 weeks paid maternity leave for single mothers $F(2, 81) = .39$, $p = .68$, requiring companies to give paid leave to single mothers $F(2, 81) = .81$, $p = .45$, and the government incentivizing companies to offer paid maternity leave $F(2, 81) = .35$, $p = .71$.

Table 1.

Means and Standard Deviations for Character Traits and Maternity Leave Policy by Marital Status Condition

	Single Never Married		Single Mother Condition Divorced		Widowed	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Sympathy	6.85	2.09	8.56 ^a	1.91	8.21 ^a	2.18
Positive Character Traits						
Hardworking	8.70	2.30	10.04 ^a	1.20	9.48	1.50
Empowering	7.96	2.53	8.14	2.53	8.93	1.93
Talented	7.30	1.68	8.00	2.23	7.72	1.98
Negative Character Traits						
Irresponsible	4.04	2.81	2.39 ^a	1.69	2.62 ^a	1.97
Selfish	3.85	2.35	1.64	1.22	2.07	1.56
Promiscuous	2.78	2.01	1.75 ^a	1.40	2.03 ^a	1.78
Maternity Leave						
12 weeks paid	4.89	2.06	5.43	1.60	5.67	1.37
+12 weeks paid	4.04	2.28	4.32	2.21	4.55	2.03
Required leave	4.44	2.08	5.00	1.47	4.97	1.84
Government incentive	5.00	2.02	5.21	1.60	5.38	1.47

Subscript *a* indicates a significant difference between either of the previously married conditions (divorced and widowed) and the single never married condition. None of the character traits or maternity leave policies significantly differed between the two previously married conditions. Maya's marital status did not directly affect support for any maternity leave policy.

Sympathy as a Mediator

Next, we tested our mediational hypotheses, namely that sympathy would mediate the relationship between marital status and our two types of outcomes: character evaluations and maternity leave. Because the results of our ANOVA's showed that both widowed and divorced single mothers received much more sympathy and were viewed much more favorably than never married single mothers, for ease of analyses we decided to combine widowed and divorced categories into a single 'previously been married' category for our mediation analysis. As such, divorced and widowed single mothers = 0 and never married = 1. To test for mediation we used

Hayes (2013; Model 4) PROCESS macro for SPSS. If the confidence intervals that PROCESS generates do not contain zero, then one can conclude that mediation is statistically significant.

Mediation analyses revealed that sympathy was a significant mediator of the relationship between marital status condition and each of the three positive character assessments: hardworking ($b = -.62, se = .27, 95\% CI, -1.294, -.212$), empowering ($b = -.67, se = .35, 95\% CI, -1.52, -.164$), and talented ($b = -.45, se = .23, 95\% CI, -1.028, -.1216$). This suggests that relative to participants in the two previously married conditions, participants in the never married condition rated Maya less positively in terms of positive character traits, in part, because they felt less sympathy toward her. (see Figure 1).

The tests for mediation revealed that sympathy was a significant mediator of the relationship between marital status condition and each of the three negative character assessments: irresponsible ($b = .45, se = .30, 95\% CI, .058, 1.225$), selfish ($b = .35, se = .20, 95\% CI, .083, .922$), and promiscuous ($b = .40, se = .22, 95\% CI, .099, .983$). This suggests that relative to participants in the two previously married conditions, participants in the never married condition tended to rate Maya more harshly in terms of negative character traits, in part, because they felt less sympathy toward her.

The tests for mediation revealed that sympathy for Maya mediated the marital status condition and four policy positions pertaining to maternal leave: 12 weeks paid leave for single mothers ($b = -.22, se = .18, 95\% CI, -.717, .019$), more than 12 weeks paid leave for single mothers ($b = -.39, se = .23, 95\% CI, -.985, -.065$), requiring companies to offer paid leave for single mothers ($b = -.48, se = .23, 95\% CI, -1.047, -.115$), and government incentivizing companies to offer paid leave for single mothers ($b = -.39, se = .20, 95\% CI, -.893, -.085$). This suggests that relative to participants in the two previously married conditions, participants in the

never married condition tended to be less in favor of maternity leave policies because, in part, they felt less sympathy toward Maya.

Figure 1.

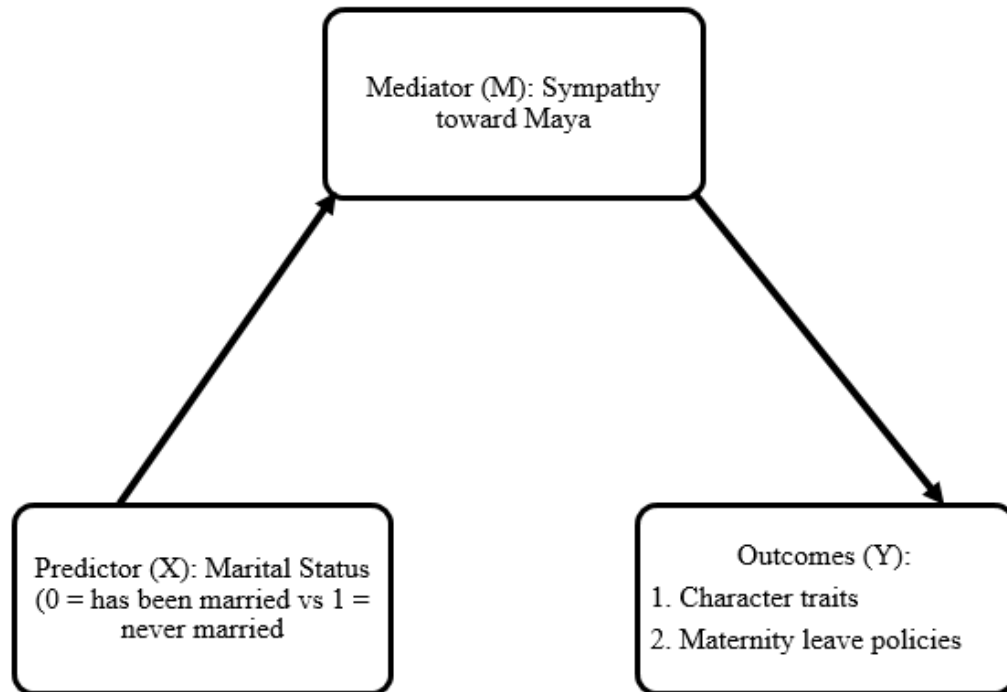


Figure 1. Proposed mediation model: Sympathy toward Maya as a mediator of the relationship between marital status on character traits and maternity leave policy support (i.e., if Maya has never been married people will feel less sympathy toward her, which in turn will lead to more negative character evaluations and less support for maternity leave policies).

Discussion

Informed by DiLapi's (1989) motherhood hierarchy theory, we investigated how the marital status of a single mother named Maya affected the following outcomes: sympathy toward Maya, the positivity of evaluations of her character, as well as support for maternity leave policies that might benefit single mothers. We anticipated that people would have the most positive responses toward Maya and maternity leave policies for single mothers when Maya was described as widowed, followed by when she was described as divorced; the least positive

responses would be when she was described as never married. Overall, we found partial support for our hypotheses. When Maya was described as never been married, people tended to express less sympathy toward her and view her character more negatively, compared to when she was described as having been previously married (i.e., widowed and divorced). However, we did not find support for the notion that Maya would be viewed more favorably—in terms of sympathy and character evaluations—when she was described as being widowed compared to when she was described as being divorced. We also failed to find evidence that maternity leave policies differed as a function of Maya’s marital status. Finally, our mediational hypothesis received fairly strong support, sympathy mediated the effect of marital status (previously married: divorced and widowed vs. never married) on all character traits and all maternity leave policies. While not all of our predictions were supported, the findings do provide evidence that simply having been previously married can elicit more sympathy toward a single mother, which in turn can increase the degree to which people evaluate her character more positively and support maternity leave policies that might benefit single mothers as a whole. To our knowledge, this is the first study to provide evidence that one’s marital status can elicit different degrees of sympathy, which in turn can affect the degree to which people evaluate someone’s character favorably and support social policies.

Consistent with theory on sympathy and prosocial behavior (Pryor et al., 2009), when Maya was described as never married, people felt less sympathy toward her, which resulted in more negative character evaluations, compared to when Maya was described as previously married (i.e., divorced and widowed). Participants in the never married condition also tended to be less in favor of maternity leave policies because they felt less sympathy toward Maya. The finding that maternity leave policies were supported more when people felt more sympathy are

consistent with previous research linking sympathy to support for policies that might help stigmatized groups (e.g., Iyer et al., 2003; Leach et al., 2002). In sum, our findings concerning sympathy suggest that never married single mothers seem to receive significantly less sympathy than widowed or divorced single mothers. This notion can have implications for how people evaluate single mothers, as well as their feelings toward social policies that might directly impact the life of a single mother.

Regarding the direct effect of marital status on character evaluations, our findings aligned somewhat with Ganong and Coleman (1995) such that there was an overall trend for Maya to be viewed in a more positive light when she had previously been married (i.e., divorced and widowed) compared to when she had never been married. However, not all of the effects of marital status were consistent with our predictions. Maya was perceived as significantly more irresponsible and promiscuous when she had never been married, compared to when she was described as previously be married; which is consistent with heteronormative theory in that mothers who deviate from the norm, should be viewed more negatively in comparison to mothers who comply with heteronormative standards (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Surprisingly though, both never married single mothers and widowed single mothers were rated as significantly less hardworking in comparison to divorced mothers. One possibility is that people might be more inclined to assume that both never married and widowed single mothers receive a form of government assistance: welfare for never married single mothers and social security for widowed single mothers. This might lead people to view both groups as less hardworking than divorced single mothers. Lastly, inconsistent with predictions we did not find any support for when Maya was described as widowed or divorced she would be evaluated as more empowering, talented, and selfish, compared to when she was described as never married. Perhaps, it is

possible that participants regarded single mothers in general as being empowering and talented simply for being able to handle the responsibilities associated with being a single parent, regardless of marital status. It is also possible that there was not a significant difference between conditions for the character trait selfish because participants regarded Maya as selfless for being the sole caretaker of a child in the face of adverse conditions.

It is somewhat surprising that marital status did not have a direct effect on support for any of the four maternity leave policies. Again, we anticipated that people would support maternity leave policies most if Maya was described as being widowed or divorced, and least when she was described as never married. One potential explanation for not finding any direct effects—that is supported by our data—is that another person's circumstance is more of a distal predictor of support for a given social policy. In other words, it is unlikely that learning of a single mother's circumstance as well as her marital status is going to directly impact a person's feelings toward any government policy. People's experiences, values, social status, ideological beliefs, and group memberships tend to be proximal predictors of support for government policies (Juliussen, Karlsson, & Gärling, 2005). Thus, it is much more likely that one's feelings or emotions toward a stigmatized person or group is a more proximal predictor of support for policies. Given that sympathy toward Maya was a strong predictor of all four maternity leave policies and that it mediated the effect of marital status on maternity leave policy support, sympathy—a prosocial emotion—seems to be a more proximal predictor of policy support than knowing a particular person's circumstances.

Finally, it is worth discussing reasons why we did not find any significant differences in our outcomes when Maya was described as a widow versus when she was described as a divorcee. We initially hypothesized that when Maya was described as a widow she would

receive more sympathy, her character would be evaluated more positively, and participants would support maternity leave policies more compared to when she was divorced. One reason for the lack of significant differences in outcomes between these two marital status conditions is that people might perceive widows and divorcees as similar because they have endured experiences that others recognize as comparable to one another. For example, divorcees have also experienced a form of death. A person's divorce can represent the death of a marriage, the death of love, or the death of a promising future (Fleet, 2014). Essentially people are drawing parallels between the pain and challenges that widows and divorcees feel, which may explain why there were not any significant differences between single mothers when described as divorced or widowed in terms of character evaluations (Fleet, 2014). Another reason for the lack of differences may be attributed to the age of our sample. Twenty was the mean age. It is possible that many of our participants have not come in contact with a widow. As such, they might lack the ability to empathize with a widow having never interacted with one. Presumably, the older one is, the more likely they are to know women who have suffered the loss of a spouse. Additionally, divorce rates are higher than widow rates, which can affect the likelihood of interacting with a widow versus interacting with a divorcee. Perhaps future studies can control for prior contact with mothers of different marital statuses to examine if that can influence how people feel toward particular single mothers.

Future Directions and Limitations

While the findings demonstrate differences in the perceptions of never married single mothers in comparison to previously married single mothers, there are ways in which future studies might try to improve upon this study. For example, recruiting a sample more representative of the demographics of the United States in terms of ethnicity and household

income might reflect significant differences between widowed and divorced single mothers in terms of character evaluations. While the sample was predominantly White, it should be noted that Trinity College is a college with students from affluent backgrounds and wealthy White families are not representative of the demographics of the United States. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2010), about 64% of the United States population is White, 16% Hispanic/Latino, 12% Black, and 5% Asian, with all other racial categories <1%, meaning that the sample had an overrepresentation of Whites, an underrepresentation of Asians, and an absence of Hispanics/Latinos. Further, 54% of the sample had a combined household income of at least \$101,000 which is not representative of the United States, as the median household income is \$55,000 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2015). Lastly, another way to improve upon this study would be to improve the clarity of the manipulation check. By having “married” as a possible option when asked about Maya’s marital status, it is possible that participants were confused which resulted in a 13% failure rate for the manipulation check.

For future research it would be beneficial to see if sympathy mediates the effect of marital status of single mothers on specific policies aimed at helping single mothers, as these measure have never been tested for before. For example, future research might examine how sympathy mediates one’s willingness to be in favor of government assistance (e.g., food stamps, welfare, subsidized housing) for single mothers according to marital status. Research has shown that feelings of sympathy can be predictors of willingness to support equal opportunity policies such as affirmative action (Iyer et al., 2003). However, policies such as affirmative action and government benefits are distinct, as one pertains to race and the other refers to assisting those experiencing economic difficulties. Equal opportunity policy does not address the immediate economic disparity felt by many single mothers. Future research might also seek to understand

how sympathy mediates the effect of marital status on government assistance outcomes (e.g., food stamps, welfare, subsidized housing) to further understand the effect of emotions toward other stigmatized groups (e.g., Blacks, homosexuals, immigrants) and how that effects policy positions.

Lastly, these findings can be applied to other marginalized groups. Never married single mothers characterize only half of all single mothers, while the other half are divorced/separated or widowed (U.S. Census Bureau, 2016). Because people tend to think of single mothers more negatively in comparison to other groups of women (Gangong & Coleman, 1995), they project these negative feelings on single mothers as a whole. Further, if the entire demographic of single mothers are perceived as never been married, then the entire group will receive less sympathy. As evidenced by this study, this means that single mothers in general will be perceived less positively and people will be less in favor of policies that might benefit single mothers as a whole.

There are parallels in the effects of stigma on single mothers and other stigmatized groups. For example, when people think of Blacks, they think of criminals and subsequently the entire group is evaluated as such. Advocates of stigmatized groups should highlight within group diversity similar to the way distinctions of single mother marital statuses were addressed in this study. It is possible that people will feel more positively toward a group as a result of realizing within group diversity. Groups are often thought of as a whole but through addressing within group differences, we can begin to undo stigma cast on specific demographics of people.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we found partial support for our hypotheses. Informed by DiLapi's (1989) motherhood hierarchy theory, marital status did have an effect on the levels of sympathy single

mothers received. As predicted, when described as a single and never married mother, Maya received the least amount of sympathy. However, we did not find support for the idea that Maya would receive more sympathy when she was described as being widowed compared to when she was described as being divorced. We also failed to find evidence that maternity leave policies differed as a function of Maya's marital status. Finally, our mediational hypothesis received fairly strong support. Sympathy mediated the effect of marital status (previously married: divorced and widowed vs. never married) on all character traits and all maternity leave policies. While not all of our predictions were supported, the findings do provide evidence that simply having been previously married can elicit more sympathy toward a single mother, which in turn can increase the degree to which people evaluate her character more positively and support maternity leave policies that might benefit single mothers as a whole. Going forward, our findings can be applied to other stigmatized groups. Highlighting within groups differences is crucial to understanding group dynamics, as groups are often stigmatized as the result of one negative prototype.

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