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# Contributions of Television Use to Beliefs about Fathers and Gendered Family Roles among First-Time Expectant Parents

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## Abstract

TV content has been documented to portray a limited range of gender roles, and to frequently depict fathers as incompetent parents. Accordingly, this study explored whether first-time expectant parents' beliefs about gendered family roles and the importance of fathers to child development were related to their TV use. Participants were 201 individuals (122 women, 79 men) from across the United States expecting their first biological child in a cohabiting heterosexual relationship. Participants completed an online survey assessing weekly TV exposure, exposure to TV programs featuring fathers, perceived realism of TV, use of TV to learn about the world, and beliefs about both fathers' importance to child development and family gender roles. Zero-order correlations indicated that increased exposure to TV in general and to programs featuring fathers, perceived realism, and stronger learning motives were each linked to less egalitarian gender role beliefs in both women and men. Among women, heavier exposure to TV in general and to programs featuring fathers, and stronger learning motives were each correlated with weaker beliefs that fathers were important to child development. Multiple regression analyses, however, indicated that attributing more realism to TV content uniquely predicted more traditional gendered family role beliefs and beliefs that fathers are less important to child development across the whole sample. Even among men with low perceived realism, greater exposure to TV fathers was linked with weaker beliefs that fathers were important to child development. First-time expectant fathers may be especially vulnerable to media messages about father roles.

**Keywords:** fathers, gender role beliefs, media, perceived realism, transition to parenthood

The transition to parenthood is a period during which individuals consolidate their expectations for impending roles as mothers and fathers. However, violated expectations with respect to parenting roles contribute to a significant portion of role strain and marital dissatisfaction after childbirth (Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2004; Holmes, Sasaki, & Hazen, 2013). Women and men develop their expectations of parenthood via multiple sources, such as through their own family experiences, talking with friends, and via media (Parke, 2002). Indeed, televised media are a powerful purveyor of cultural messages and may be contributing to our society's beliefs both about gender roles within families and about the importance of fathers to child development. Some scholars have argued that narrow media portrayals of fathers as incompetent caregivers may be perpetuating myths about fathers that impede father involvement in families (Parke & Brott, 1999). However, these claims have yet to be empirically tested. The purpose of the current study was to investigate whether regular exposure to televised portrayals of fathers is related to first-time expectant parents' beliefs about fathers in families in the United States.

### **Socialization of Parenting in the United States**

Parenting roles are deeply tied to gender roles in our society, whereby women, instead of men, are expected to be primary caregivers. Thus, women are directly socialized into caregiving roles from early in life. Differential caregiving socialization can be seen in toy choices for girls (e.g., dolls) compared with boys (e.g., trucks) (Idle, Wood, & Desmarais, 1993), and in the chores assigned to children such as girls' babysitting, compared to taking out the trash for boys (Parke, 2002). When individuals face the transition to parenthood, the resources and support available are heavily biased toward mothers compared to fathers (Parke & Brott, 1999), which leads to a greater gap in childcare preparation between women and men. This socialization over the lifetime leads to an assumption that women are better suited for rearing infants compared to men (Schoppe-Sullivan, Brown, Cannon, Mangelsdorf, & Sokolowski, 2008), and as such, many women assume the primary caregiver role. However, expectations for fathers' active involvement with their children have increased over the past 50 years (Habib, 2012; Lamb, 2000; Pleck & Pleck, 1997). Previously, men's general lack of caregiving socialization was unproblematic when men's roles in families were clearly defined as family provider and head, not as caregiver (Bernard, 1981; Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009; Kelly, 2009). But how do men learn to be competent, nurturing parents if they have not had the same lifetime training as women and girls? How do women develop expectations for fathers' roles within these changing gender role norms?

One probable source of parenting information is portrayals of parenting in mainstream media, such as TV. Media serve as powerful sculptors and perpetuators of gendered cultural messages (Barner, 1999; Signorielli, 1989), including messages about parenting practices (Parke & Brott, 1999). Although little is known about TV's influence on fathering in the United States, we can look to a few studies conducted in other English-speaking countries. A qualitative study of expectant fathers in South Africa indicated that these men perceived a dearth of information on fatherhood and childcare skills and suggested that TV would be the best avenue to provide guidance (Hinckley, Ferreira, & Maree, 2007). If men feel neglected by the traditional support and resources afforded to women's transition to

parenthood (Parke & Brott, 1999; Wentz & Crockenberg, 1976), and want to learn about fatherhood expectations from TV (Hinckley et al., 2007), then TV messages about fatherhood could be critical sites of socialization. Finally, televised media have even been used as effective broad-scale parenting intervention programs in Australia (Calam, Sanders, Miller, Sadhnani, & Carmont, 2008; Sanders & Turner, 2002). These interventions found that media showing effective parenting skills reduced dysfunctional parenting. Therefore it is possible that media portrayals of dysfunctional or incompetent parenting can negatively influence real-life parenting.

### **Portrayals of Men and Fathers on TV in the United States**

Although TV's representations of men have varied over time, ranging from the playboys Sam Malone of *Cheers* or Joey of *Friends* to brilliant misanthrope Dr. House and vengeful serial killer Dexter Morgan from *Dexter*, these portrayals have been relatively narrow in their depictions of masculinity (Lotz, 2014). Analyses indicate that men on TV are frequently portrayed as sex-obsessed, unfaithful, aggressive, and dominant (Gunter, 1986; Lotz, 2014; Scharrer, 2001, 2013). Men are also typically portrayed in work-related roles, which is in contrast to general depictions of women as wives and mothers (Gunter, 1986; Lauzen, Dozier, & Horan, 2008).

Findings also indicate that men are represented differently in male-oriented media than in female-oriented media (Feasey, 2008; Furnham & Li, 2008; Gentry & Harrison, 2010). For example, male characters in adventure shows, which are targeted more to men, are more hostile and violent than men in situation comedies (Cantor, 1990), which are targeted more toward women. Within family contexts, women are more commonly represented as parents than are men (Dail & Way, 1985), a pattern that may reinforce conventional beliefs that women are more suitable parents than men, even in female-targeted programming. Together, these portrayals of men seem to be incompatible with a societal call for sensitive, involved fatherhood.

How are men portrayed as fathers, more specifically? Content analyses of family sitcoms (e.g., *Everybody Loves Raymond*, *Still Standing*) indicate that fathers are often portrayed as clueless and incompetent, but a father character's fidelity to his family and his family's happiness supersede any incompetence (Fogel, 2012). Although father characters may be ridiculed for being incompetent, they are never forced to change, implying that the love for their family is enough (Fogel, 2012). Thus, contemporary TV may be painting a picture of fatherhood in which fathers can be portrayed as "good" family men as long as they love their family, despite their incompetence and misgivings. In a content analysis of domestic comedies that aired during the 2012–2013 season, father-centered sitcoms (e.g., *Baby Daddy*, *Raising Hope*, *Modern Family*) portrayed ideal fatherhood as encompassing physical care, emotional support, moral guidance, and advice (Hentrich, 2014). When fathers failed at care or nurturance, they were frequently ridiculed, mirroring previous uses of incompetent fathers as a comedic point in TV. In another content analysis of 12 sitcoms from the 2000s featuring fathers, most father-child interactions (56%) were portrayed as being emotionally available (warm, supportive, but also a disciplinarian), whereas remaining interactions were nearly evenly split between friendly or critical/caustic interchanges between fathers

and children (Troilo, 2015). Taken together, portrayals of fathers in sitcoms are fairly ambivalent: ideal fathers are emotionally available, but fathers also tend to be incompetent in their parenting duties.

Because men may not watch these family comedy programs and may not be exposed to these father messages, father images in other genres that are more male-oriented (e.g., dramas) should be investigated. For example, the conflicted and homicidal Tony Soprano of *The Sopranos* and deeply flawed Walter White of *Breaking Bad* are prominent father characters, but no content analyses have been conducted on these types of father portrayals. Accommodating research on father portrayals in multiple genres is especially pertinent now that viewers have many more choices in a variety of programming (Webster, 2005).

### **Shaping of Family Beliefs through TV**

TV families may offer implicit lessons about family life that may affect the way people think about families (Douglas & Olson, 1995; Wilson, 2004). Survey data indicate that both general TV exposure and viewing of specific genre types (e.g., domestic comedies) are associated with children's and adults' beliefs about family behavior, such as conflict and support (Alexander, 2009; Buerkel-Rothfuss, Greenberg, Atkin, & Neuendorf, 1982; Signorielli, 1989; Wilson, 2004). In a study of adolescent girls' and undergraduate women's exposure to sitcoms and soap operas, greater consumption of TV series that depicted traditional mothers was associated with a more traditional view of motherhood (Ex, Janssens, & Korzilius, 2002). This study also examined viewing motivations and found that women and girls who watched TV out of habit rather than for learning purposes endorsed more traditional views of motherhood. The authors explained that because habitual viewing was associated with more hours of viewing, more TV viewing was ultimately responsible for women's greater endorsement of traditional motherhood. However, because these participants were not mothers or expectant mothers, the results may be conflated by a distancing between the participant and the maternal role. Young adult women may not try to actively learn about mother roles because they are distanced from becoming a mother. Previous research showed that married individuals used TV as models for their own marital behavior (Robinson, Skill, Nussbaum, & Moreland, 1985), thus TV portrayals are impactful when there is role congruence between TV and the viewer.

According to the Differential Susceptibility to Media Effects Model (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013), some individuals are more susceptible to media effects than others based on dispositional dimensions (e.g., gender, motivations, beliefs), developmental stage (e.g., transition to parenthood), and social context (e.g., cultural norms, such as the primacy of motherhood). Although it has not been previously studied, we speculated that portrayals of TV families could particularly influence individuals transitioning to parenthood who may be readily looking for models to imitate, as they begin a new life stage. Because men are less socialized into parenting roles than women, we contend that men's beliefs would be more susceptible to TV use variables than would women's beliefs. Men may not only rely on TV images more than women to form their beliefs about parenting roles but may also perceive TV to be more realistic and be more motivated to learn from TV to form their beliefs about fatherhood and parenting roles.

Furthermore, Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2002) proposes that viewers' scripts, schemas, and normative beliefs are shaped by their engagement with media content and that these beliefs and values lead to behaviors. In this way, expectant parents could learn about family roles through exposure to these roles on TV. However, exposure, alone, does not guarantee the imitation of behaviors depicted or adoption of values conveyed. Instead, the likelihood of these responses also depends on viewers' cognitions about the content. Here, perceived characteristics of the actors observed are influential. It is believed that if the model is perceived as realistic, as similar to the perceiver, or as having admirable qualities (e.g., physical attractiveness, popularity), there is a greater likelihood that his or her behavior will be modeled. Across several studies and across multiple types of belief outcomes, findings indicate that the more realistic a person perceives TV content to be, regardless of how much TV he or she watches, the more likely his or her behaviors and cognitions are to be shaped by TV portrayals (Perse, 1986; Potter, 1986; Rubin, 1984; Taylor, 2005; Ward & Carlson, 2013). Thus, fitting assumptions of Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 2002), expectant parents who report greater levels of exposure to TV fathers, or attribute greater realism to TV content would each be expected to be more accepting of the dominant content and themes conveyed.

### **Viewing Motivations**

A second dimension on which individual viewers may differ is in their motives for viewing TV. Uses and gratifications theory (Rubin, 1984) argues that individuals use media for different purposes, and that the particular motives viewers bring to the screen play a critical role in determining how open they may be to the content or to potential influence. Whereas some viewers use TV intentionally to learn about the world, others use it for entertainment, for companionship, or not intently at all. In this sense, it is expected that individuals who try to learn about behavior through TV may be more likely to engage in the behavior depicted than might individuals who watch TV for fun. Support for the role of learning motives on TV effects has been mixed, with some studies finding significant contributions (Kim & Rubin, 1997; Lee & Taylor, 2014), and others finding null or conditional results (Ex et al., 2002; Ward, 2002). It is unknown whether TV portrayals of fathers influence expectant parents' beliefs about fathers in real life, and whether this association extends to learning motives.

### **Current Study**

TV portrayals of fathers are increasing in number and in scope, and fathers are being represented in both positive and negative ways. On sitcoms, fathers are often emotionally available but also bumbling and incompetent. Little is known about the nature of father portrayals on other genres such as dramas, nor about the influence of exposure to these mixed portrayals on viewers' beliefs about father roles. Viewers may expect men to be more emotionally involved parents based on these images. On the other hand, humorous depictions of incompetent fathers may be more memorable, and therefore viewers may rely on these images more when developing expectations about fathers' roles. In this sense,

the portrayal of fathers on TV may help shape beliefs about fathers' roles within families and the importance of fathers to child development. These beliefs may guide individuals' own expectations, behaviors, and interactions within family relationships. We do not claim that family role beliefs are solely guided by media, as there may also be sociostructural determinants of family beliefs, such as income, education level, religiosity, or age.

To explore whether TV use is associated with expectant parents' beliefs about fathers in families, we used a correlational approach to assess whether regular viewing patterns (frequency, motivation, and perceived realism of televised content) were associated with beliefs about fathers' roles. Given that TV typically portrays men's roles to be incompatible with sensitive *and* competent fatherhood, we hypothesized that heavier viewing, attributing more realism to the content, and viewing with a stronger learning motive would each be associated with a weaker belief that fathers are important to child development and with less egalitarian family gender role beliefs in zero-order correlations. Via multiple regressions with moderation analyses, we also explored the unique contributions to family role beliefs of each media variable, and tested whether these contributions would differ based on gender. Finally, because the contribution of exposure to TV fathers on family role beliefs may be moderated by perceived realism, as well, we tested two-way interactions between exposure and perceived realism and three-way interactions between exposure, perceived realism, and gender.

## Method

### *Participants and Procedure*

Participants were 201 individuals (122 women, 79 men) expecting their first biological child in a cohabiting heterosexual relationship with the other expectant parent. All participants were living in the United States. Only one member of the couple was eligible to participate in the study to maintain independence of data. Participants were recruited from online advertisements posted on Craigslist's volunteers section, e-mails sent to family research Listservs, Amazon's Mechanical Turk, flyers in local doctor's offices in Southeast Michigan, and word of mouth. Interested participants were directed to an online survey where they were shown a consent form. After consenting, participants completed a pre-screening questionnaire to determine eligibility. Individuals who were not eligible were redirected to the end of the survey. Participants were told in the consent form that they may withdraw from the study at any time by closing out of their browser window. Therefore, data from individuals who did not complete the survey were deleted from the dataset ( $N = 27$  of 228 eligible). Participants who completed the survey were then redirected to an online form that was not connected to their survey responses. Participants were then given the opportunity to enter their e-mail address into a drawing of 10 \$100 gift cards. Amazon Mechanical Turk participants were compensated \$.01 for completion of the survey and eligible to enter into the drawing as well. Ten participants were randomly selected to receive one of 10 \$100 gift cards. It took approximately 20 to 30 min to complete the survey.

<b>Table 1. Participant Characteristics</b>		
Characteristic	Mean	SD
Age (in years)	27.93	4.36
Years in current relationship	5.66	4.05
Months pregnant	5.40	2.16
	<i>N</i>	%
Highest level of education		
Some college/associate's degree or less	55	27.6%
Bachelor's degree	90	44.8%
Master's degree or higher	54	27.1%
Race/ethnicity		
American Indian/Alaska Native	3	1.5%
Asian/Asian-American	30	14.9%
Black/African-American	16	8.0%
Hispanic/Latino	20	10.0%
White/European-American	142	70.6%
Other	1	.5%
Region of United States		
Northeast	22	10.9%
Midwest	48	23.9%
South	44	21.9%
West	86	42.8%
Living area		
Rural	21	10.4%
Suburban	73	36.3%
Urban	107	53.2%
Employment status		
Full-time	159	79.1%
Part-time	27	13.4%
Unemployed	15	7.5%
Partner's employment status		
Full-time	169	84.1%
Part-time	22	10.9%
Unemployed	10	5.0%
Household income		
< \$20,000	20	10.0%
\$20,001 to \$40,000	27	13.4%
\$40,001 to \$60,000	26	12.9%
\$60,001 to \$80,000	31	15.4%
\$80,001 to \$100,000	26	12.9%
< 100,001	71	35.3%

A majority of participants were White/European American (70.6%), with 29.4% spanning other racial and ethnic groups: 1.5% identified as American Indian/Alaska Native, 14.9% as Asian/Asian American, 8% as Black/African American, and 10% as Hispanic/Latino. Eleven participants indicated more than one race/ethnicity. Most participants were married (73.1%). The majority of participants were employed full-time (79.1%), as were their partners (84.1%), and did not plan on changing their or their partner’s employment status once the baby was born (54.2%). Household income ranged from less than \$20,000 to more than \$100,001; 48.2% of participants earned at least \$80,001. A majority of participants reported living in an urban area (53.2%), but participants resided across the United States. The majority of participants had earned at least a bachelor’s degree (71.9%). Participants’ ages ranged from 18–46 years ( $M = 27.93$ ,  $SD = 4.36$ ). Participants also reported on their religiosity, which was measured using three items ( $M = 2.98$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ,  $Range = 1-5$ ,  $\alpha = .92$ , e.g., “How religious are you?”). For a full description of the demographics in the sample, see Table 1.

**Measures**

See Table 2 for means and standard deviations of all main study variables.

**Table 2.** Descriptive Statistics and Gender Differences among Study Variables

Variable	Sample range	Overall M (SD)	Men M (SD)	Women M (SD)	df	t
Exposure to TV father programming	.00–79.00	23.25 (22.15)	30.69 (24.21)	18.53 (19.42)	126	3.57**
Weekly TV exposure	4.00–70.00	30.81 (19.32)	34.39 (20.96)	28.51 (17.91)	140	2.01*
Perceived realism	1.00–6.17	3.59 (1.14)	3.88 (1.07)	3.39 (1.15)	199	2.99**
Learning motive	11.00–66.00	41.78 (11.85)	44.96 (11.20)	39.71 (11.84)	199	3.14**
Beliefs in role of father in child development	37.00–73.00	57.69 (7.04)	55.76 (6.25)	58.94 (7.27)	199	–3.20**
Egalitarian gender role beliefs	3.60–6.90	4.89 (.90)	4.61 (.77)	5.06 (.94)	188	–3.73***

**Note:** TV father programming based on of shows with 5.5 or higher rating in father prominence ( $N = 30$ ).

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

*Amount of TV use*

Participants were asked about their general consumption of TV programming by indicating the number of hours they watch TV on a typical weekday, Saturday, and Sunday. Response options ranged from 0 to more than 10 hours. A weekly sum of TV hours was computed by multiplying the reported weekday usage by five and then adding the Saturday and Sunday hours (Ward, 2002). Although participants watched a substantial amount of TV

per week, more than 30 hours on average, there was considerable variability across participants  $M = 30.81$ ,  $SD = 19.32$ . Twenty-five percent of the sample reported watching TV 14 hours or less per week, and 25% reported watching 49 hours or more per week.

*Father programming selection and exposure to selected programs*

Programs were initially selected from TV Guide's list of programs ( $N = 243$ ) airing with new episodes in 2013 through 2014. Independent ratings were then gathered to identify which TV programs featured fathers as a main character. Raters only rated programs they were familiar with; if they were not familiar with a program, they skipped that program. Raters were 50 individuals consisting of a multiethnic sample of 39 women and 11 men aged 20–48 ( $M = 27.58$ ,  $SD = 5.06$ ) solicited from Facebook and laboratory colleagues. All ratings were conducted anonymously on Qualtrics. Frequencies of whether or not there was a main character as a father in a program (yes/no) were calculated for programs that were rated by at least 4 individuals ( $N = 157$ ). Programs that were at least 50% yes were included in the pool of father programming ( $N = 76$ ). One month after the ratings were obtained, one program began airing that prominently featured fathers (*Surviving Jack*), and we included this program in the list of selected father programming ( $N = 77$ ). Selected father programming ( $N = 77$ ) was then rated by a multiethnic sample of 58 independent raters (40 women, 18 men; aged 21–66 years old;  $M = 29.13$ ,  $SD = 9.80$ ) who were solicited from Facebook and laboratory colleagues. Raters rated programs for the prominence of the father role on each program. Each program and each attribute was rated on a 7-point Likert scale. Specifically, raters were asked if the fathers portrayed on the program are 1 = *not at all prominent* to 7 = *extremely prominent*. Independent raters were given a “not familiar” option if they have not seen the program. Of the initial 77 programs, 30 were rated above 5.5 in the father character's prominence, and these 30 were designated as “father prominent” programs. Participants were given the list of 30 programs that prominently portrayed fathers as a recurring character drawn from new programming that aired during the 2013 through 2014 TV season. Ten programs were dramas (e.g., *The Walking Dead*, *Parenthood*), 13 programs were sitcoms (e.g., *Modern Family*, *Raising Hope*), two programs were comedy-dramas (i.e., *Louie*, *Shameless*), four were animated (e.g., *Family Guy*, *The Simpsons*), and one was reality (*Teen Mom*). Participants were asked how frequently they viewed each program on a 0–3 scale, with 0 = *never*, 1 = *sometimes* (1–10 episodes), 2 = *often* (10–20 episodes), and 3 = *all the time* (most or all episodes). To determine the total amount of father exposure, participants' responses to frequency of viewing each program was summed across the prominent father programs (Aubrey, 2006). Participants did not have a lot of exposure to programs prominently featuring fathers, whose mean fell at 23.5 of a possible 90 ( $M = 23.25$ ,  $SD = 22.15$ ).

*Perceived realism*

Beliefs about the level of realism of TV portrayals were assessed by a 6-item, modified version of the Perceived Realism scale (Rubin, 1981). Each item was rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Example statements included “People on TV handle their problems just like real people do” and “TV lets me really see

how other people live." A mean across items was used as a composite ( $\alpha = .75$ ). Perceived realism was present to a moderate degree,  $M = 3.59$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ .

#### *Learning motivation*

The 11-item learning motivation scale (Ward & Rivadeneyra, 1999) measured the extent to which individuals watch TV to learn about the world (e.g., "I like to watch TV because it helps me learn about myself and others"). Each item was rated on a 6-point Likert scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 6 = *strongly agree*. A composite was created using the sum across items based on previous uses of the scale ( $\alpha = .94$ ). Learning motives were present to a moderate degree,  $M = 41.76$ ,  $SD = 11.85$ .

#### *Family gender role beliefs*

Beliefs concerning the roles of women and men with regard to family, work, and children were measured by the 20-item Gender Role Attitudes scale (Bird, Bird, & Scruggs, 1984). Higher scores on the questionnaire indicated more egalitarian gender beliefs, whereas lower scores indicated more traditional gender beliefs. Higher scores reflected beliefs that husbands and wives should have equal decision-making power and shared responsibility within the family and home. Lower scores reflected traditional beliefs that fathers should be breadwinners and mothers should be caregivers. Each item was rated on a 7-point Likert scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 7 = *strongly agree*. Example items included "A married man's chief responsibility should be his job" (reverse coded) and "A husband should be just as willing as a wife to stay home from work and care for a sick child." A composite was created using the mean of all items ( $\alpha = .91$ ). The mean scores reflecting beliefs about egalitarian family roles were moderate, indicating that there was a spectrum of gender-traditional to gender-egalitarian beliefs within the sample,  $M = 4.89$ ,  $SD = .90$ .

#### *Role of fathers*

Beliefs about the importance of the fathers' role to child development were measured using the 15-item Role of the Father Questionnaire (Palkovitz, 1984). Each item was rated on a 5-point Likert scale, from 1 = *disagree strongly* to 5 = *agree strongly*. Higher scores indicated that fathers are capable of and should be involved and sensitive with their infants. Example items included "Fathers play a central role in the child's personality development" and "Mothers are naturally more sensitive caregivers than fathers are (reverse coded)." A composite was created using the sum of all items ( $\alpha = .79$ ). The mean scores reflecting beliefs about fathers' importance to child development were moderate, indicating that there was a spectrum of father-unimportant to father-important and gender-traditional beliefs within the sample,  $M = 57.69$ ,  $SD = 7.04$ .

## **Results**

### *Preliminary Analyses*

To test potential differences in study variables between women and men, we conducted a series of *t* tests; results are listed in the final column of Table 2. Overall, men engaged with TV more than women, and women held more egalitarian gender and father-positive beliefs

than men. Men watched more weekly hours of TV and more TV programs that prominently featured fathers than did women. Men perceived TV to be more realistic and reported stronger learning motives than did women. Women believed fathers were more important to child development and endorsed stronger egalitarian gender beliefs than did men. These results indicated that, as suspected, gender could be a potential moderator of TV use variables on beliefs about family roles.

The second set of preliminary analyses tested whether each of the following demographic factors was significantly related to the gender and father role beliefs: age, educational attainment, income, race, religiosity, relationship length, pregnancy length, and plans to change employment after the birth. Correlations were conducted between the continuous demographic variables (age, religiosity, relationship length, pregnancy length) with belief variables. Significant differences in categorical demographic variables (race, educational attainment, income, plans to change employment) were tested using one-way ANOVAs. A median split was conducted on income (less than \$80,000, more than \$80,001), and education was recoded to three levels (some college or less, bachelor’s degree, master’s degree or higher) before analysis. Race, relationship length, and plans to change employment after birth did not emerge as significant covariates.

Participants who endorsed stronger egalitarian gender beliefs were less religious,  $r(201) = -.42, p < .001$ , and older,  $r(187) = .14, p < .05$ . Participants who earned a Master’s Degree or higher endorsed stronger gender egalitarianism,  $F(2, 196) = 28.12, p < .001$ , and stronger endorsement of fathers’ importance to child development,  $F(2, 196) = 10.33, p < .001$ . Participants who endorsed weaker gender egalitarianism earned a household income of more than \$80,001, compared with those who earned less than \$80,000,  $F(1, 199) = 4.13, p < .05$ . All significant covariates (religiosity, age, education, income) were entered into each regression analysis.

**Correlational Analyses**

To test whether expectant parents’ TV use correlated with their gendered family beliefs, we conducted zero-order correlations between the four media variables (exposure to fathers on TV, weekly TV exposure, perceived realism of TV, and learning motives) and the two family belief variables. Results are provided in Tables 3 and 4. Analyses were conducted for the full sample and then separately for men and women.

**Table 3.** Zero-Order Correlations between Media Use and Family Role Variables in All Participants ( $N = 174-201$ )

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Beliefs in role of father in child development	—					
2. Egalitarian gender role beliefs	.58***	—				
3. Exposure to TV father programming	-.28***	-.47***	—			
4. Weekly TV exposure	-.29***	-.47***	.69***	—		
5. Perceived realism	-.44***	-.62***	.61***	.62***	—	
6. Learning motive	-.27***	-.48***	.59***	.56***	.73***	—

\*\*\*  $p < .001$

**Table 4.** Zero-Order Correlations between Media Use and Family Role Variables for Men and Women

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Beliefs in role of father in child development	—	.59***	-.40***	-.48***	-.49***	-.35***
2. Egalitarian gender role beliefs	.48***	—	-.45***	-.47***	-.57***	-.48***
3. Exposure to TV father programming	.01	-.42***	—	.62***	.61***	.52***
4. Weekly TV exposure	.05	-.45***	.75***	—	.67***	.56***
5. Perceived realism	-.24*	-.67***	.56***	.54***	—	.73***
6. Learning motive	-.03	-.41***	.63***	.55***	.70***	—

**Note:** Correlations for men are presented below the diagonal ( $N = 71-79$ ); correlations for women are presented above the diagonal ( $N = 107-122$ ).

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

Among all participants, TV use variables were linked with less egalitarian gender beliefs and weaker endorsement that fathers were important to child development, providing support for our hypothesis that heavier viewing, stronger perceived realism, and stronger learning motives would each be associated with weaker beliefs that fathers are important to child development and less egalitarian gender role beliefs.

Among men, more frequent exposure to programs featuring fathers, greater weekly TV exposure, higher perceived realism, and a stronger learning motive each correlated with expressing less egalitarian beliefs about family gender roles. Men who perceived TV to be less realistic also endorsed stronger beliefs that fathers were important to child development. Among women, more frequent exposure to programs featuring fathers, greater weekly TV exposure, higher perceived realism, and a stronger learning motive each correlated with expressing less egalitarian family role beliefs and weaker beliefs that fathers were important to child development.

Fewer TV use variables were significantly correlated with men’s beliefs about the role of fathers than women’s. The differences in correlation results between women and men further indicated that gender was potentially a moderator of TV variables on family beliefs.

**Multiple Regression Analyses**

To further test the hypotheses that TV use variables contribute differently to expectant parents’ beliefs about gender and father roles for women and men, we conducted multiple regressions. The dependent variables were gender role beliefs and belief of fathers’ importance to child development. All significant covariates (religiosity, age, income, education) were entered into each equation. To test for gender differences, gender was entered as a standalone predictor, and interaction terms between gender and TV variables were entered as separate predictors. All continuous variables were centered prior to creating interaction terms and were entered as centered predictors into the regression analyses. See Table 5 for regression coefficients.

**Table 5.** Multiple Regressions Predicting Beliefs about Fathers' Importance to Child Development and Family Gender Role Beliefs

Variable	Importance of dads to child development			Egalitarian gender beliefs		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$
Education <sup>a</sup>	3.78**	1.15	.24	.68***	.13	.34
Religiosity	.55	.41	.10	-.12**	.04	-.18
Income <sup>b</sup>	.32	.29	.08	.04	.03	.08
Age	-.12	.11	-.07	-.00	.01	-.02
Gender <sup>c</sup>	-5.92***	1.41	-.41	-.37*	.15	-.20
Exposure to dad TV	.05	.06	.16	-.01	.01	-.18
Weekly TV exposure	-.09	.05	-.24	.01	.01	.12
Perceived realism	-3.59**	1.02	-.58	-.31**	.11	-.39
Learning motive	.04	.07	.07	-.01	.01	-.06
Gender × Exposure to dad TV	-.22*	.10	-.46	.00	.01	.00
Gender × Weekly TV	.15	.08	.27	-.01	.01	-.10
Gender × Perceived realism	2.33	1.50	.23	-.06	.16	-.05
Gender × Learning motive	.17	.13	.17	.02	.01	.17
Dad TV × Realism	-.08	.04	-.23	-.00	.01	-.09
Gender × Dad TV × realism	.26**	.07	.55	.01	.01	.19

a. 1 = masters' degree or higher, 0 = bachelor's or lower

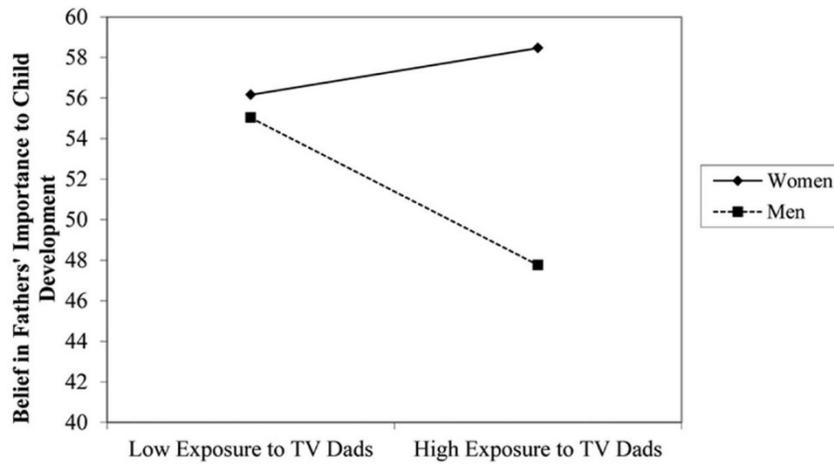
b. 1 = \$80,001 per year or more, 0 = less than \$80,000

c. 1 = men, 0 = women

\*  $p < .05$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*\*  $p < .001$

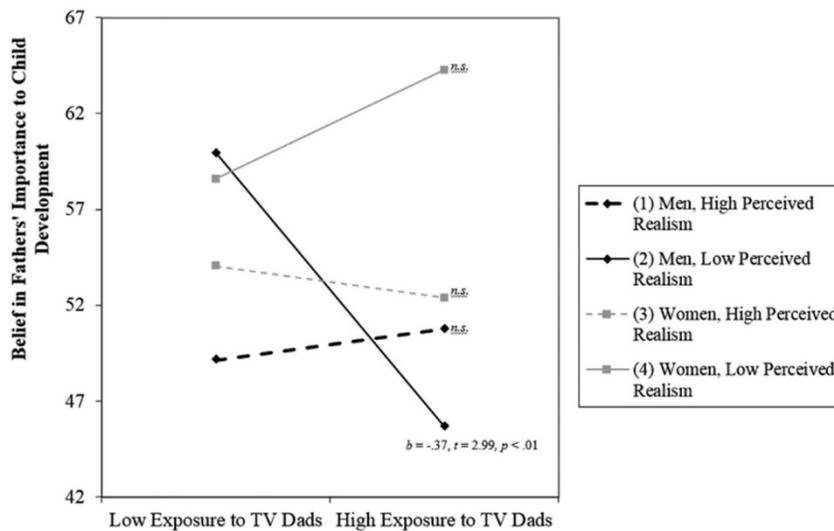
Beliefs about the importance of fathers to child development were tested first. This model accounted for a sizable 37.6% (Adj.  $R^2 = .32$ ) of the variance in expectant parents' beliefs about the importance of fathers to child development,  $F(15, 153) = 6.15, p < .001$ . Participants who earned a master's degree or higher endorsed stronger beliefs that fathers were important to child development, as did women. Expectant parents who perceived TV to be more realistic endorsed weaker beliefs that fathers were important. A significant two-way interaction emerged between gender and exposure to TV featuring fathers. A significant three-way interaction emerged between gender, exposure to TV featuring fathers, and perceived realism. Significant interactions were probed in post hoc simple slopes analyses (Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2006).

Simple slopes analyses for the two-way interaction between gender and exposure to TV featuring fathers revealed that neither slope was significantly different from zero, meaning that *within* gender, high or low exposure did not predict beliefs about fathers. But the patterns of exposure to fathers on TV on beliefs about fathers were moderated by gender (see Figure 1). Put another way, high exposure to TV fathers reflected more negative beliefs about fathers in men, but not women.



**Figure 1.** Gender moderates the association between exposure to television fathers and beliefs about fathers' importance to child development. Low values plotted at  $-1 SD$ , high values at  $+1 SD$ . Neither slope was significantly different from zero.

See Figure 2 for graphical presentation for the three-way interaction between gender, exposure to TV featuring fathers, and perceived realism. Simple slopes analyses revealed that when men have low perceived realism, they endorse more negative beliefs about fathers only when they also have high exposure to TV fathers,  $b = .37, t = -2.99, p < .01$ . No other slopes were significantly different from zero, meaning that level of exposure to TV fathers did not matter within women with high or low perceived realism and men with high perceived realism.



**Figure 2.** Gender, exposure to television fathers, and perceived realism interact to predict beliefs about fathers' importance to child development. Low values plotted at  $-1 SD$ , high values at  $+1 SD$ . n.s. = nonsignificant.

The second model predicted egalitarian gender beliefs. This model accounted for a substantial 55% ( $\text{Adj } R^2 = .51$ ) of the variance in expectant parents' egalitarian gender role beliefs,  $F(15, 153) = 12.68, p < .001$ . Participants who earned a master's degree or higher endorsed stronger egalitarian beliefs, as did less religious participants, and women. Expectant parents who perceived TV to be more realistic endorsed less egalitarian beliefs. There were no significant interactions.

## Discussion

In the current study we explored whether media use and exposure to TV programs featuring fathers were related to expectant parents' beliefs about fathers and beliefs about roles within families. Although we found bivariate associations between participants' exposure to TV fathers and beliefs about fathers, our regression analyses indicated that perceived realism of TV was a stronger predictor of expectant parents' beliefs when controlling for weekly TV exposure, learning motives, and demographic covariates. The pattern of results differed between regressions predicting beliefs about egalitarian gender roles and about the importance of fathers. Whereas the only TV variable to uniquely predict egalitarian gender role beliefs was perceived realism, results for beliefs about fathers were more nuanced. Gender and perceived realism moderated associations between exposure to TV fathers and beliefs about fathers' importance to child development. High exposure to TV fathers reflected weaker beliefs that fathers were important in men, but not women. Further, men endorsed weaker beliefs that fathers were important when they had greater exposure to TV fathers and perceived TV to be less realistic. The remainder of the discussion will contextualize and evaluate our findings.

Previous research found that young women's heavy exposure to programs featuring traditional mothers was linked with more gender traditional beliefs about motherhood (Ex et al., 2002). Similarly, we found that more exposure to programs featuring fathers was linked with less egalitarian family gender role beliefs in both women and men. However, when we examined all media use constructs together (exposure, perceived realism, and learning motives), only perceived realism of TV content was uniquely predictive of beliefs about gendered roles within families. Specifically, individuals who perceived TV to be more realistic also endorsed more traditional gender beliefs and believed that fathers were less important to child development. Family gender role beliefs tend to become more traditional during the transition to parenthood (Katz-Wise, Priess, & Hyde, 2010), and these findings represent a first insight into how media may be shaping beliefs about family roles in women and men as they transition to parenthood.

We explored whether contributions of TV exposure and perceived realism to family beliefs would differ by gender. Although patterns concerning egalitarian gender beliefs did not differ between women and men, we did find that gender qualified associations between exposure to TV fathers and expectant parents' beliefs about fathers' importance. Whereas men who had high exposure to TV fathers offered less endorsement that fathers were important to child development, there were no effects of exposure on beliefs about fathers in women. It is possible that unattractive (bumbling or unfaithful) portrayals of fathers are counter to expectant mothers' desires for an involved and equal partner, and therefore

women may not rely as much on these images for forming their beliefs about fathers' roles in families.

First time expectant fathers held a particularly negative view of fathers' importance to child development when they had high exposure to TV fathers, despite perceiving TV to be less realistic. These results provide some support for our hypothesis that first time expectant men's beliefs about family roles and fathers would be more strongly influenced by media use than women's, given that women's roles as mothers are more clearly prescribed in American society than are men's roles as fathers. Previous qualitative research in South Africa found that fathers wanted to learn about fathers' roles through TV (Hinckley et al., 2007), and we found that the more exposure men have to fathers on TV, the less importance they place on fathers' roles.

Our findings seem counter to existing media influence theories that posit that values conveyed on TV need to have a positive or attractive outcome to be adopted as one's own beliefs (Bandura, 2002). Why would expectant fathers be affected by images of bumbling, disinterested, or insensitive fathers if it is a negative portrayal of their group? We offer a few explanations. First, there may be elements of men's portrayals as fathers that are attractive. For example, Walter White of *Breaking Bad* and Tony Soprano may not be sensitive fathers, but they are formidable and powerful *men*. Phil Dunphy and Jay Pritchett from *Modern Family* may not be the most competent fathers, but they are married to beautiful wives and are adored by their families. Although the portrayals of these men *as fathers* are negative, the overall portrayals of these fathers *as men* are attractive because they portray these men as powerful, dominant, or sexually virile. Yet these attractive portrayals of men are still incompatible with beliefs about men as important in children's lives. Thus, expectant fathers may be encoding messages about masculinity that are discordant with sensitive, involved fatherhood.

A second explanation is that messages may still be encoded even if they are negative. According to stereotype threat theories and research, negative stereotypes that are widely circulated through culture can impact groups that are at risk for being negatively stereotyped (Steele, 1997). Thus, negative portrayals of fathers may be influential on expectant fathers as a result of stereotype threat processes. Because men are already less socialized into parenting roles than women, even negative media portrayals may be especially influential on men's beliefs about fatherhood.

Our three-way interaction findings provide some support for the stereotype threat perspective. Men appear to be more susceptible to media messages about fathers, regardless of their perceived realism. Even men who perceived TV to be less realistic expressed weaker beliefs that fathers were important for children when men who had more exposure to fathers on TV. Given that men have not been as socialized into father roles as women into mother roles, men's beliefs about fathers may be more easily shaped by TV portrayals. A third explanation for our interaction findings may also be partly a function of the types of programs women and men watch on a regular basis. Women tend to watch more soap operas, drama, and romance, whereas men tend to watch more horror and action-adventure programs (Valkenburg, Peter, & Walther, 2015). Our measure of exposure to TV fathers had a broad range of portrayals across genre types. Whereas the fathers in the female-oriented drama *Parenthood* tend to be loving and competent, the father in the more male-

oriented *Two and a Half Men* tends to be bumbling and incompetent. Other male-oriented programs (*Sons of Anarchy*, *Breaking Bad*) tend to portray fathers as men who inevitably hurt their family through their criminal activity. Although content analyses have focused only on how fathers are portrayed in sitcoms (Pehlke, Hennon, Radina, & Kovalanka, 2009; Scharrer, 2001; Troilo, 2015), an analysis of father roles in more male-oriented programs is sorely warranted because men's beliefs may be affected by these negative portrayals.

Whereas our multiple regressions predicting beliefs about fathers' importance suggested that the contribution of exposure to TV fathers was moderated by both gender and perceived realism, our results for gender role beliefs suggested a potentially *mediating* role of perceived realism on TV viewing. Given that the zero-order correlations suggested that there were individual contributions of TV exposure on family gender role beliefs but once entered into the multiple regression with perceived realism, TV exposure was no longer significant, it could be possible that perceived realism actually mediates the relationship between TV exposure and gender role beliefs. Previous work has found perceived realism to be a moderator *or* mediator of TV exposure on beliefs and attitudes (Peter & Valkenburg, 2010; Ward & Carlson, 2013). Because our data are cross-sectional and correlational, we cannot adequately test a mediation hypothesis. Future research could employ an experimental or longitudinal design to test the mediating role of perceived realism between TV exposure and gender role beliefs.

Similar to previous literature reporting null results concerning learning motives and beliefs about parenting (Ex et al., 2002), we did not find that learning motives were uniquely predictive of gender and family role beliefs. Learning motives may vary by genre or by program, which may explain our results. Viewers may have different levels of learning motives with certain programs compared to others. For example, viewers may watch the heartfelt drama *Parenthood* with more intentions of learning about parenting roles than the dysfunctional reality program *Teen Mom* or animated sitcom *Family Guy*. Our measure of learning motives did not capture this sensitivity across programs. Similarly, our measure of perceived realism did not assess realism per program. Future research could ask participants learning motives or perceived realism specific to certain programs, but this would require constraints on the number of programs assessed. Given the immense variety of programming available across platforms, using only a limited number of programs to assess learning motives or perceived realism could pose challenges for reflecting actual TV use.

Our study had several strengths. We were able to obtain a fairly diverse sample from across the United States using our data collection and recruitment strategies, which increases the generalizability of our results to other first-time expectant parents. It should be noted, however, that we used a convenience sample, and not a nationally representative one. Additional strengths of our study included a systematic identification of TV programs featuring fathers across genres and networks. Previous studies on father portrayals on TV have examined only domestic comedies. We were able to create a measure that reflected the broad variety of programming available that was not constrained by the segmentation of televised media.

Despite the significant findings reported here, we acknowledge limitations in our approach that future studies will want to address. First, we acknowledge that media habits

and gender beliefs are not likely to be fully independent within couples. Between-couple variation may be greater than the variation between men and women, but we cannot test this notion using our data. Future replications can include examinations of family beliefs and TV viewing habits within and across couples. Because we designed the study to maintain independence of data by collecting responses from only one member of the couple, we can be confident that our results are attributable to gender differences between women and men and not differences between couples. Second, our data are cross-sectional and correlational, so we cannot determine whether expectant parents seek out programming consistent with their beliefs about parenting or whether their beliefs are being shaped by how realistic they perceive TV. Nevertheless, our findings represented an initial insight into what facet of media consumption might be most important for the development of family role-related beliefs. Because TV exposure was correlated but not uniquely predictive of family role beliefs, future research can explore perceived realism as the potential mechanism by which TV use is related to family role beliefs in either a longitudinal or experimental design. Third, we may have excluded programs featuring fathers that expectant parents in our sample watched. Future research could ask participants to fill in their most recently watched programs to obtain an individualized measure of TV exposure.

In conclusion, this study represented a first attempt to use a quantitative approach to test a long-held hypothesis that negative portrayals of fathers on TV are influencing beliefs about fathers within families. We explored whether exposure to fathers on TV was relevant for first-time expectant parents' beliefs about fathers and gendered family roles because family role beliefs during the transition to parenthood contribute to well-being after the birth of a child. From our results, perceived realism of TV was consistently predictive of beliefs about family and father roles, rather than exposure to TV featuring fathers. Therefore, expectant parents who believe TV to be more realistic may be actively applying the gendered messages of TV to their own expectations of parenthood and family roles. Finally, expectant fathers' beliefs about the importance of fathers to child development appeared to be especially vulnerable to TV portrayals of fathers.

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