

Article

Gender Role Beliefs and Ontologization of Mothers: A Moderated Mediation Analysis

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Abstract: This study combines insights from gender studies and studies on dehumanization to show how gender role beliefs influence attitudes and the attribution of ontologization traits to mothers. A convenience sample of 194 Italian participants read one of three vignettes describing a mother (a heterosexual biological mother, a heterosexual stepmother, or a lesbian stepmother) and her five-year-old son during a moment of disagreement. Participants assessed the depicted mother's competence and attributed ontologization traits (human and animal traits) to the same mother. Focal differences were found in the perception of competence that was attributed more to the heterosexual biological mother than to the other targets. A full ontologization process was not observed. However, differences were found in the attribution of animal traits, which were attributed more to the depicted heterosexual stepmother than to the other ones. Moderated mediation analyses also showed that participants endorsing moderate and high levels of traditional gender role beliefs rated the heterosexual stepmother as being less competent compared with the heterosexual biological mother by animalizing her. Gendered expectations concerning mothers' role and parenting can create multiple barriers for women who are—or intend to be—mothers. Attitudinal change should be fostered so that all mothers' identities and experiences are fully accepted.

Keywords: motherhood; gender role beliefs; ontologization; stepmothers

1. Dehumanization and Ontologization of Mothers

“Beauty has no age. But fertility does,” is the caption to a picture of a woman anxiously holding an hourglass. This image was part of a 2016 Italian government campaign to encourage women to have more children. However, the campaign failed in its intent and was highly criticized (New York Times 2016). Motherhood serves as a popular talking point for many different political campaigns and social discourses in different societies (e.g., Park et al. 2015; Pugh 2019; Van der Klein et al. 2012; Yasmine and Sukkar 2019). However, in these discourses, mothers may be objectified or dehumanized as a consequence of focusing on their bodies and biological reproductive functions, as well as of being treated as passive recipients for passing on instructions (e.g., Beech et al. 2020; Goldenberg et al. 2007; MacKay 2021).

Dehumanization is a socio-psychological process in which members of a target group are perceived as being less than human by denying them human-like characteristics (e.g., Loughnan et al. 2009; Haslam 2006). Pérez et al. (2001, 2007) suggested that in-group members tend to attribute a different “essence” or ontology to out-group members who are perceived as being close to an animal condition. Within this dehumanization framework, the ontologization process of minority members describes the attribution of a different ontology to members of certain targets (Volpato 2011; Pérez et al. 2007; Roncarati et al. 2009). In particular, ontologization describes the process of substitution of a human category by an animal category involving a differentiated attribution of nature-culture and/or animal-human traits to minority members (Berti et al. 2013;

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Marcu and Chryssochoou 2005; Pérez et al. 2002). Specifically, more cultural/human characteristics, both positive and negative (e.g., rational and selfish) tend to be attributed to the in-group than to the out-group members, whereas more natural/animal characteristics, both positive and negative (e.g., wild and free), tend to be ascribed to the out-group than to the in-group members. Research found that women may be dehumanized by an association with animals or by an attribution of a lower status than men, something more akin to that of animals (Bark-Yi 2007; Morris et al. 2014; Rudman and Mescher 2012), especially when their bodies are sexualized (Vaes et al. 2011). However, rare studies used the ontologization approach to explore perceptions and attributions of human/animal traits to mothers. In a quasi-experimental study on the ontologization process toward different types of parents, Di Battista et al. (2020b) found that a family made up of two mothers (i.e., a lesbian biological mother and a lesbian stepmother) was partially ontologized compared to other family targets—i.e., heterosexual stepfamilies and gay (step)fathers. In particular, Di Battista et al. (2020b) found that heterosexual Italian participants perceived lesbian (step)mothers as being more animal on traits of ontologization (i.e., “freer” and “dirtier”) than the other (step)parents. The two non-traditional mothers were also perceived equally animal and human (i.e., “rational” and “selfish”) on traits of ontologization compared to the other family members that were judged as being more human than animal.

2. Gender Role Beliefs and Mothering

Although women have moved into the workplace in the last decades, there has not been equal progress in terms of heterosexual men's efforts in the family context (Carone and Lingardi 2022; Cabrera et al. 2018; Huen 2007). Furthermore, the wage gap between mothers and non-mothers has continued to grow more than the wage gap between young men and women (Crittenden 2001; Cukrowska-Torzewska and Matysiak 2020). This lack of progress has been found to be a consequence of a variety of factors related to country-specific policies and gendered beliefs about mothers' roles and responsibilities (Budig et al. 2012, 2016; see also Cukrowska-Torzewska and Matysiak 2020 for a meta-analysis). As for gendered assumptions about parenting (e.g., Hays 1996), biological mothers absorbed in caring roles tend to be perceived as being more competent and proper compared to other targets of mothers, e.g., working mothers, lesbian mothers, and stepmothers (DiLapi 1989; Johnston and Swanson 2003; MacKay 2021; Valiquette-Tessier et al. 2016, 2019). The moral standard of the intensive mothering mandate (Hays 1996; Weaver and Coleman 2005) describes people's expectations that mothers are the most competent parent to satisfy children's needs and, therefore, they should devote all their time, energy, resources, and efforts to their children (Ganong and Coleman 1995, p. 2). This strong cultural emphasis on motherhood has been found to be especially negative for stepmothers (Kalmijn 2021). Non-traditional mothers can indeed represent targets for deviancy discourses of mothering (Arendell 2000; Ganong and Coleman 1995; Di Battista et al. 2022). As Ryan (2009, p. 141) noted: “parenting is a gendered enterprise. It is tied up with assumptions of natural maternal instincts to nurture and paternal instincts to provide,” something which could be particularly challenging for non-gestational mothers (see also Averett 2021). Stepmothers can be seen as being agents of immoral behaviours, increasing people's motivation to exclude them from the realm of humanity (Di Battista et al. 2022; Ganong and Coleman 1995; Harris and Fiske 2011).

Previous studies examining dehumanization and ontologization of mothers and stepmothers have been rare. Investigating attitudes toward stepfamilies, Claxton-Oldfield and O'Neil (2007) found that a heterosexual biological family was perceived as being more stable than a heterosexual mother-stepfather family. Furthermore, a lesbian stepfamily was perceived as being more satisfying/secure than the heterosexual mother-stepfather family. Exploring attitudes toward mothers in the Italian context, Di Battista et al. (2022) found that a heterosexual biological mother was perceived as being a more competent parent compared to other types of mothers (i.e., a heterosexual step-

mother, a lesbian biological mother, and a lesbian stepmother) by attributing to her greater culpability for her children's misbehaviour. Di Battista et al. (2020a) have shown that a difference in the evaluation of (step)parents' competence was through the mediation of attribution of culpability, which depended on the participants' gender role beliefs. Similar to the attribution of responsibility, attributing animal traits as well as denying human traits to mothers (i.e., the ontologization process) may impact the perception of mothers' competence. Indeed, previous studies have shown that people justify their negative attitudes and mistreatment of out-group members by dehumanizing them (Clark et al. 2015; Harris and Fiske 2011). By exploring perceptions toward some mothers whose identities disrupt the "traditional" and heterosexist model of the heterosexual biological mother in a two-parent family—the model upon which the vast majority of studies on motherhood are based—, this study could achieve a better understanding of the role of gendered assumptions on motherhood. In particular, attributions of ontologization traits to different types of mothers and the relationship with gender role beliefs and competence perceptions were explored.

3. The Current Study

Having had no specific research to refer to about the attribution of animal and human traits to different types of mothers, this study is exploratory in nature. In the present study, it is generally expected that a woman's role in the family is imbued with strong moral convictions about the right way to be a mother (Hays 1996). Biological heterosexual mothers, in a different-sex relationship, would be judged as being more human (i.e., *super-human* capacities; see Ganong and Coleman 1995), and less animal than non-biological and non-heterosexual mothers, such as heterosexual stepmothers and lesbian stepmothers, particularly for those with high levels of traditional gender role beliefs. In line with previous studies, perceptions of a different essence or ontology for some minority members may be associated with the perception of a more animal-like status (Bark-Yi 2007; Morris et al. 2014) and this, in turn, could impact on attitudes toward mothers. However, as a competing prediction and considering previous evidence concerning the essentialization of biological mothers as a consequence of focusing on their bodies and biological reproductive functions (e.g., MacKay 2021; Park et al. 2015), it is also possible that biological mothers would be perceived as being closer to a natural/animal status than non-biological mothers (i.e., heterosexual and lesbian stepmothers).

Furthermore, in this study, the role of individuals' moral judgments in the ontologization of—and attitudes toward—"traditional" and "non-traditional" mothers is also explored. According to the Moral Foundations Theory (MFT—Haidt and Graham 2007), the purity moral foundations describe moral concern for contaminant-related issues and concern for those who seem to lack self-control. The latter are described as impure and less than human (Haidt and Graham 2007). Purity moral foundations are associated with accusing acts and individuals are perceived as socially or spiritually disgusting or unnatural (Haidt and Graham 2007; Monroe and Plant 2018; Koleva et al. 2012). In two studies involving over 24,000 participants, Koleva et al. (2012) found that moral judgments of purity predicted negative judgments regarding some issues (e.g., abortion, same-sex marriage and relations, casual sex, having children outside marriage), over and above political ideology, age, gender, and religious attendance. Monroe and Plant (2018) found that emphasis on purity moral foundations predicted a form of dehumanisation (i.e., the denial of mind) toward certain targets (e.g., women who were prostitutes, HIV patients, and gay men) and this relationship, in turn, led to an increase in prejudicial behaviour toward those same targets. In particular, the authors found that dehumanised perceptions mediated the relationship between moral purity foundations and prejudice toward these targets. The relationship between purity foundations, attributions of human and animal traits, and attitudes toward mothers is explored.

4. Methods

4.1. Participants

Seven participants failed the manipulation and attention check questions. Six participants were not heterosexual and thus, they were not included in the analyses. The remaining participants were 194 self-identified heterosexual Italian men ($n = 73$; 37.6%) and women ($n = 121$; 62.4%), aged from 18 to 74 years ($M = 41.76$, $SD = 13.65$). Most participants claimed to be a parent with one or more biological children ($n = 131$, 67.5%), and the other participants declared to be child-free (32.5%). As for education, 84 participants (43.3%) reported having completed secondary school, 99 people (51.1%) had a university degree, and 2 people (1%) had a post-graduate degree.

4.2. Procedures

Participants filled out an anonymous online-based questionnaire supported by the platform Google Forms between March and May 2021. A script introduced them to the study and the informed consent form, and invited participants to complete the questionnaire with appropriate reassurance that their answers would remain anonymous. If participants gave their consent, they could choose to participate in the proposed study by clicking through to the first page of the questionnaire. In the first section of the questionnaire, participants randomly read one of the three vignettes in which a situation of mild disagreement between a five-year-old boy and his mother in a shopping centre was presented (adapted from Claxton-Oldfield 1992; see Supplementary Material File). The questionnaire took approximately 10/15 min to complete and no compensation was given for the participation. Participants were debriefed at the end of data collection.

Inclusion criteria were “being aged 18 or more” and “being native Italian speakers.” The study was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. The research complied with the Ethical Code of the Italian Psychology Association (Associazione Italiana di Psicologia—AIP 2015).

4.3. Materials and Measures

Demographic Questions. Participants answered demographic questions that included their age, gender (1 = female; 2 = male; 3 = other), sexual orientation (1 = homosexual; 2 = heterosexual; 3 = bisexual; 4 = other), parenting status (1 = I have one or more biological children; 2 = I have no children; 3 = I have one or more adoptive children), and level of education.

The Vignettes. Each participant responded to one version of three vignettes describing a heterosexual biological mother, a heterosexual stepmother, or a lesbian stepmother (adapted from Claxton-Oldfield 1992; see the text in the Supplementary Material File). The three vignettes were held constant between the conditions, with the exception of the depicted mother: (1) a heterosexual biological mother ($n = 63$); (2) a heterosexual stepmother ($n = 65$); (3) a lesbian stepmother ($n = 66$). After reading the vignette, participants responded to a manipulation and attention-checking question (i.e., “Antonio is the biological child of Anna;” true or false).

Mother’s Competence. Participants rated three ad-hoc items evaluating the (step)mother’s competence (Di Battista et al. 2022): her competence, preparation, and capacity as a mother on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = absolutely disagree; 5 = absolutely agree; “On the base of my first impression, Anna is a competent mother”). Higher scores represented a better perception of the (step)mother’s competence. A total score was computed on the grounds of the mean ($M = 2.61$, $SD = 1.02$; $\alpha = 0.90$, *Skewness* = 0.31, *Kurtosis* = −0.52).

Ontologization Traits. Participants also attributed two animal (*dirty* and *free*) and two human (*selfish* and *rational*) traits to the depicted (step)mother on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all; 5 = very well). Animal and human traits were the same ad-hoc items of previous studies on ontologization of “non-traditional” parents and other minority groups (see in Di Battista et al. 2020b; Berti et al. 2013; Pivetti et al. 2018) (animal: $M = 2.42$, $SD =$

0.81; $r = 0.31$, $p < 0.001$; *Skewness* = 0.34, *Kurtosis* = 0.83; human: $M = 2.82$, $SD = 0.82$; $r = 0.26$, $p < 0.001$; *Skewness* = -0.02 , *Kurtosis* = 0.37).

Gender Role Beliefs. Participants responded to the eight items of the Gender Linked subscale of the Social Roles Questionnaire (Baber and Tucker 2006) that measures participants' traditional beliefs concerning gender roles (e.g., "Mothers should work only if necessary"). Items were rated using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). Higher scores indicate higher levels of traditional beliefs in gender roles. Items were subsequently summed together to create an index of traditional gender role beliefs ($M = 17.89$, $SD = 7.61$, $\alpha = 0.91$, *Skewness* = 1.10, *Kurtosis* = 1.09).

Purity Moral Foundations. Finally, three items of the purity moral judgments subscale of the Moral Foundation Questionnaire (MFQ; Graham et al. 2009; see the scale at the moralfoundations.org spreadsheet—e.g., "People should not do things that are disgusting, even if no one is harmed") were administered. This scale measures the extent to which participants agreed with purity moral foundations using a 5-point Likert scale (from 1 = *not at all*; to 5 = *very much*). Higher scores indicate a stronger endorsement of moral issues ($M = 3.13$, $SD = 0.87$; $\alpha = 0.64$, *Skewness* = 0.11, *Kurtosis* = 0.10).

In the Supplementary Material File, additional qualitative measures and results were reported.

4.4. Data Analysis

An a priori power analysis was conducted using G*Power 3.1.9.7 (Faul et al. 2007). It showed that, given an α value of 0.05, a power of 0.80 and a medium effect, a minimum sample size of 160 is required for a between-groups comparison Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) with 3 groups. Using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) version 25.0, descriptive and correlation analyses as well as analyses for assumptions of normality were conducted. The values for asymmetry and kurtosis were acceptable in order to prove normal distribution (Kline 2015). A One-Way ANOVA with three levels (i.e., types of (step)mother: heterosexual biological mother vs. heterosexual stepmother vs. lesbian stepmother) was performed to explore differences concerning the (step)mothers' competence perceptions. In order to investigate the way animal and human traits were ascribed to the (step)mothers targets, a 3 (i.e., types of (step)mother: heterosexual biological mother vs. heterosexual stepmother vs. lesbian stepmother) \times 2 (i.e., ontologization traits: animal vs. human) mixed ANOVA, with the latter factors varying within subjects, was performed. Gender role beliefs and purity moral foundations were considered as covariates. However, no significant effects of covariates emerged. For this reason, they were removed from the ANOVA analyses. Then, moderated mediation analyses were conducted to test the effects of the manipulation on the evaluation of (step)mothers' competence through the mediation of the ontologization traits, which would depend on the levels of traditional gender role beliefs. Serial multiple mediation models in which purity moral foundations predicted ontologization traits that, in turn, impacted on perceptions of mothers' competence were also tested (SPSS PROCESS macro; Hayes 2013).

4.5. Results

4.5.1. Preliminary Analyses

Perceptions of mother's competence and human and animal traits were negatively correlated ($r = -0.21$; $p = 0.003$; and $r = -0.25$; $p < 0.001$, respectively). More specifically, all adjectives indicating ontologization were negatively related to competence (free: $r = -0.18$; $p = 0.01$; dirty: $r = -0.23$; $p = 0.002$; rational: $r = -0.17$; $p = 0.021$; and selfish: $r = -0.16$; $p = 0.023$). However, both gender role beliefs and purity foundations were not correlated to competence ($r = 0.13$; $p = 0.08$; and $r = 0.12$; $p = 0.11$, respectively). Human traits were correlated to animal traits ($r = 0.36$; $p < 0.001$). Purity was positively correlated to gender role beliefs ($r = 0.58$; $p < 0.001$), negatively correlated to human traits ($r = -0.17$; $p = 0.02$), but not related to animal traits ($r = -0.07$; $p = 0.38$). Finally, gender role beliefs were not

correlated with human and animal traits ($r = -0.03$; $p = 0.64$; and $r = 0.05$; $p = 0.46$, respectively).

4.5.2. Mothers' Competence Perceptions

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) on perceived competence showed a significant effect of the type of mother, $F(2, 193) = 8.29$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.08$. Levene's test was performed to test homogeneity of variances and was not significant, $F(2, 191) = 0.62$, $p = 0.54$. Bonferroni's post-hoc test showed that participants perceived the heterosexual biological mother as being more competent ($M = 2.97$, $SD = 1.05$) than both the heterosexual stepmother ($M = 2.27$, $SD = 0.92$, $p < 0.001$), and the lesbian stepmother ($M = 2.59$, $SD = 0.97$, $p = 0.03$). Moreover, perceptions of competence of the heterosexual stepmother and the lesbian stepmother did not differ ($p = 0.06$).

4.5.3. Ontologization

The 3 (types of (step)mother: heterosexual biological mother vs. heterosexual stepmother vs. lesbian stepmother) \times 2 (ontologization traits: animal vs. human) mixed ANOVA, with the latter factors varying within subjects, was performed. The Box's test of equality of covariance matrices was found significant, as Box's M was 19.01, $F(6, 900218.71) = 3.12$, $p = 0.01$. Thus, the Levene's test of equality of error variances was inspected, and it did not yield a significant result for animal traits ($p = 0.47$), but a significant result for human traits, $F(2, 191) = 4.08$, $p = 0.02$. Therefore, considering the results of Box's test of equality of covariance matrices and Levene's test of equality of error variances, we used Pillai's Trace criteria. The ANOVA yielded a significant main effect of the ontologization traits, Pillai's Trace = 0.17, $F(1, 191) = 38.96$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.17$, and a significant interaction effect between type of depicted mother and ontologization, Pillai's Trace = 0.05, $F(2, 191) = 5.02$, $p = 0.008$, $\eta^2_p = 0.05$. As for the main effect, the human traits ($M = 2.82$, $SD = 0.82$) were generally more attributed to all targets than were the animal traits ($M = 2.42$, $SD = 0.81$), Pillai's Trace = 0.17, $F(1, 191) = 38.96$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.17$.

Comparisons showed that the heterosexual biological mother was perceived as being more human ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 0.98$) than animal ($M = 2.14$, $SD = 0.73$), Pillai's Trace = 0.12, $F(1, 191) = 25.43$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.12$. However, contrary to expectations, the depicted lesbian stepmother was also perceived as being more human ($M = 2.92$, $SD = 0.80$) than animal ($M = 2.39$, $SD = 0.84$), Pillai's Trace = 0.11, $F(1, 191) = 22.29$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.11$. The depicted heterosexual stepmother was perceived as being equally human ($M = 2.83$, $SD = 0.65$) and animal ($M = 2.71$, $SD = 0.75$), Pillai's Trace = 0.01, $F(1, 191) = 1.07$, $p = 0.30$. Furthermore, all the depicted mothers were perceived as being equally human, $F(2, 191) = 0.98$, $p = 0.38$, but the heterosexual stepmother was perceived as being more animal compared to both the heterosexual biological mother ($p < 0.001$), and the lesbian stepmother ($p = 0.02$), $F(2, 191) = 8.77$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2_p = 0.09$. The heterosexual biological mother and the lesbian stepmother were perceived as being equally animal.

4.5.4. Moderated Mediation Analysis

In the preliminary analyses, focal differences were only found in the attribution of animal traits (i.e., dirty and free). Therefore, a moderated mediation analysis tested the differences concerning attitudes toward (step)mothers' competence through the mediation of the animal traits, which would depend on the levels of the traditional gender role beliefs. To test this model, the SPSS PROCESS macro for testing moderated mediation (model 7; Hayes 2013) was used. The categorical independent variable was the (step)mother target, the continuous dependent variable was the measure of mother's competence, the mediator was the measure of ontologization, and the gender role beliefs was the moderator. The multi-categorical independent variable was coded with the indicator coding system. Thus, two relative indirect effects were tested. Results showed that the equations for both the effects on animal traits, $R^2 = 0.21$, $F(5, 188) = 10.23$, $p <$

0.001, and competence, $R^2 = 0.11$, $F(3, 190) = 7.93$, $p < 0.001$, were significant. Furthermore, the interaction between the independent variable and gender role beliefs significantly impacted on the animal traits attribution, $\Delta R^2 = 0.12$, $F(2, 188) = 14.89$, $p < 0.001$. The indexes of moderated mediation indicated conditional indirect effects that were defined by different levels of gender role beliefs (see Table 1). Results revealed that, at medium levels of gender role beliefs, the heterosexual biological mother was perceived as being less animal than the heterosexual stepmother. At high levels of gender role beliefs, the heterosexual biological mother was perceived as being less animal than both the heterosexual stepmother and the lesbian stepmother. However, indexes of moderated mediation were significant only when the heterosexual biological mother was compared with the heterosexual stepmother (X1). In this case, findings supported the prediction that participants endorsing moderate and high levels of traditional gender role beliefs perceived the heterosexual stepmother as being a less competent mother as compared with the heterosexual biological mother by attributing animal traits (i.e., dirtier and freer).

Table 1. Moderated-Mediation Estimates.

	95% CI					
	<i>Estimate</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>LLCI</i>	<i>ULCI</i>
Direct Effect						
Competence as DV						
Constant	3.47	0.23	15.19	0.00	3.0231	3.9253
X1	−0.57	0.18	−3.21	0.02	−0.9257	−0.2205
X2	−0.32	0.17	−1.88	0.06	−0.6632	0.0153
Animal Traits	−0.23	0.09	−2.59	0.01	−0.4117	−0.0556
Animal Traits as DV						
Constant	2.95	0.24	12.26	0.00	2.4775	3.4273
X1	−0.98	0.33	−2.97	0.01	−1.6275	−0.3271
X2	−1.05	0.34	−3.11	0.01	−1.7140	−0.3824
Gender Role Beliefs	−0.04	0.01	−3.73	0.00	−0.0644	−0.0191
X1 * Gender Role Beliefs	0.08	0.02	5.11	0.00	0.0509	0.1150
X2 * Gender Role Beliefs	0.07	0.02	4.06	0.00	0.0369	0.1064
	Effect	Boot SE		Boot LLCI	Boot ULCI	
Conditional Indirect Effect for Gender Role Beliefs						
Low Level (X1)	0.03	0.04		−0.0515	0.1326	
Low Level (X2)	0.07	0.06		−0.0192	0.2241	
Medium Level (X1)	−0.12	0.06		−0.2438	−0.0092	
Medium Level (X2)	−0.05	0.04		−0.1614	0.0139	
High Level (X1)	−0.26	0.13		−0.5116	−0.0203	
High Level (X2)	−0.19	0.12		−0.4341	0.0038	
Indexes of Moderated Mediation						
Gender Role Beliefs X1	−0.02	0.09		−0.0387	−0.0014	
Gender Role Beliefs X2	−0.02	0.02		−0.039	0.0003	

Note. X1 = the heterosexual biological mother vs. the heterosexual stepmother; X2 = the heterosexual biological mother vs. the lesbian stepmother. Moderator values are at the −1SD, Mean, and +1SD. DV = dependent variable. SE = standard error. Boot 5000 bootstrap samples. CI = confidence interval; LLCI = bias-corrected lower limit confidence interval. ULCI = bias-corrected upper limit confidence interval with 5000 bootstrap bias-corrected.

Furthermore, a serial multiple mediation model was also tested in which the categorical independent variable was the mother target, the dependent variable was perception of mothers' competence, and the mediators were purity moral foundations (the first

mediating variable) and animal traits (the second mediating variable), but this did not produce significant results.

5. Discussion

Whilst considerable scholarship has been dedicated to examining attitudes toward non-traditional parenting (e.g., Baiocco et al. 2020; Carone et al. 2022; Costa et al. 2019; Ioverno et al. 2018; Tušl et al. 2020), little attention has been paid to the ontologization process. In this study, ANOVA results showed that the depicted heterosexual stepmother was perceived as being equally human and animal, and more animal compared to both the heterosexual biological mother and the lesbian stepmother, in line with a process of attribution of animal traits (e.g., Di Battista et al. 2020b). A full ontologization process was not observed and the expected dehumanization of the lesbian stepmother target was not observed. These results are in line with previous studies showing that lesbian stepfamilies and same-sex parents did not receive a more negative evaluation than heterosexual parents (e.g., Claxton-Oldfield and O'Neil 2007; Kranz 2022). However, results also showed that perceptions of competence were higher for a depicted heterosexual biological mother than for the two types of stepmothers (heterosexual and lesbian stepmothers), confirming previous studies' results (Di Battista et al. 2022). Furthermore, the results of a moderated mediation analysis showed that participants with high gender role beliefs did not directly judge stepmothers as being incompetent, but did so through the attribution of animal traits. In other words, stepmothers (particularly the depicted heterosexual stepmother) were judged as being less competent than the heterosexual biological mother through the attribution of animal traits—as opposed to depriving them of human traits. Partially in line with previous studies, participants could justify their negative attitudes toward out-group members by dehumanizing them (Clark et al. 2015; Harris and Fiske 2011). Negative stigma concerning heterosexual stepmothers is in line with previous research findings that stepmothers are commonly portrayed negatively as in the imagery of media and fairy tales. Negative depictions of the wicked or evil stepmothers can be traced back to Roman times and literature (see Noy 1991 for a review), and are present in the European folklore (Aarne and Thompson 1961; Coleman and Gannon 1987; Smith 1953), in universally popular fairy tales such as Hansel and Gretel, Snow White, and Cinderella (Claxton-Oldfield 2000; Kudzus 2005), as well as in media images and movies (Claxton-Oldfield and Butler 1998). In almost all of these cases and globally, stepmothers are depicted as mistreating their stepchildren and constantly represented as being the opposite of true maternity (Cartwright 2014; Downe 2001). Claxton-Oldfield (2000) found that whenever the term “stepmothers” is used, people instantly associate this term with negative words, such as “mean” and “wicked”. The scarcity of appropriate terminology to describe step-relations is a sign of the invisibility, stigma, and lack of institutional acknowledgement of stepparent relations (Cherlin 1978; Miller et al. 2018).

In this study, purity moral foundations were found to be related to traditional gender role beliefs, in line with the prediction that purity is associated with traditional expectations of the role of men and women in the family (Koleva et al. 2012). However, attributions of ontologization traits were not related to purity, and ontologization did not play a role in the relationship between purity and competence. Results also showed that perceptions of all traditional and non-traditional mothers' competence were negatively related to the ontologization traits, both negative traits (i.e., selfish and dirty) and positive ones (i.e., rational and free). In other words, perceptions of a mother's competence were negatively related to characteristics such as being free, selfish, dirty, and even rational. These results are actually not surprising when read in the perspective of the literature on intensive mothering (Hays 1996). According to the high standards of the intensive mothering mandate, a good mother should selflessly make a tremendous investment of energy, time, and resources in their children, reducing their paid work and free time (Verniers et al. 2022).

Both the pervasive negative representations involving stepmothers as well as the unrealistic positive perceptions of special properties attached to biological mothers (Hays 1996) may lead to negative consequences for women and mothers in different areas. For instance, negative attitudes toward stepmothers are related to their high level of stress, depression, and feelings of being a bad person (Doodson and Davies 2014; Henry and McCue 2009; Miller et al. 2018; Shapiro 2014; Shapiro and Stewart 2011). These attitudes can be very distressing also for lesbian stepmothers who experience similar stigmatization despite the substantial support they had provided for stepchildren (Lavoie and Saint-Jacques 2020; Lorah 2007). The essentialism of biological mothers, on the other hand, may negatively impact women's capacity to find a way to reconcile conflicting identities as an ideal mother and a professional (Park et al. 2015). In general, gendered ideology of the parental roles correlated with several negative mental health outcomes for mothers and even for fathers (Rizzo et al. 2013; Verniers et al. 2022). Hays (1996) acknowledged that this gendered ideology is neither natural nor necessary but is a social construct that offers explanations for the persistence of gender inequality.

Working on collective beliefs and attitudes about the role that women and men play in the family and society, as well as overcoming a traditional and gender binary view of the distribution of tasks, responsibilities, and competencies could help to reduce women's workload, change the perception that only women are the right caregivers for their children, and promote women's choice to have children. In this view, research found that higher levels of paternal involvement with childcare are prevalent among those who disagreed with essentialist views of parenting (Gaunt 2006), and among gay fathers who are less vulnerable to traditional gender role beliefs (Carone and Lingardi 2022).

Limitations and Future Directions

In this study, the convenience sample is of limited size, leading to low representativeness of the sample and low generalisability of the results. Future research into the ontologization process should also include other relevant targets in the vignette scenarios, such as lesbian biological mothers. While the present study has aimed to explore attitudes of heterosexual people, future studies will need to investigate attitudes and experiences of heterosexual and lesbian biological mothers and stepmothers, including measures of intensive mothering, perceptions of family functioning, and well-being (Di Battista et al. 2021, 2022; Salvati and Koc 2022). Following the assumptions of a system justification theory (Jost 2018; Jost and Banaji 1994), intensive mothering operates to persuade women that they want (or should want) to commit themselves in practices that are detrimental for mental health and family functioning (Verniers et al. 2022). It would be relevant to understand whether this negative impact is confirmed for different types of mothers, differing in sexual orientation and biological connectedness to their children. Furthermore, considering the incompatible demands between mothers' work and family roles, organizational dehumanization of mothers could be considered for further studies (Arriagada-Venegas et al. 2022; Ariño-Mateo et al. 2022).

6. Conclusions

Researchers in social psychology science have explored underlying factors that lead people to explain group differences in terms of "essential" or ontological differences. This study has found that people may consider biological connectedness between mother and children a factor related to a mother's competence. Results also found that participants attributed a different ontology to heterosexual stepmothers with a differentiated endorsement of animal traits that justified their negative attitudes.

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