Are Mothers Subconsciously Judged Differently Based On Everyday Parenting?

Adam Nguyen, & Irmak Olcaysoy Okten, Ph.D.

FSU

MOTIVATED SOCIAL COGNITION LAB

Introduction

What do we infer from others' everyday behaviors?

- People encode spontaneous inferences of character (e.g. traits, beliefs, etc.) based on their first behavioral observations of another person (Carlston & Skowronski, 1994; Todorov & Uleman, 2003; Uleman et al., 2008; Uleman et al., 1996).
- Spontaneous inferences = inferences from behaviors without intention and outside of conscious awareness
- Your spontaneous evaluations of a person (whether you see them in a positive or negative manner) are called Spontaneous Evaluative Inferences (Schneid et al., 2015)

Are inferences influenced by stereotypes?

- Previous research in a similar process, Spontaneous Trait Inferences (STIs), has mixed findings regarding how stereotypes influence inferences from everyday behaviors (Wigboldus et al., 2003; Mangels and Degner, 2023)
- SEIs may be more saliently influenced by stereotypes, as they rely on evaluative gut reactions (positive and negative) rather than specific semantics (Olcaysoy Okten et al., 2019).
- It is not known whether stereotypes and norms of parental roles (e.g., mother = nurturing) may color SEIs from everyday parenting behaviors.

How are parents judged explicitly?

- Past research finds that penalties are given more readily towards working women who are mothers, whereas working dads receive no such backlash (Bear & Glick, 2017)
- There seems to be benefits for men that defy gender-inconsistent stereotypes and embrace nurturing roles (Meltzer & McNulty, 2011)
- Expectancy Violation Theory (EVT) states that peoples' evaluations are directly affected by whether that person is violating their perceived stereotypes (Bettencourt et al., 1997).

Hypothesis: Aligned with EVT, we predicted that when mothers "fail" in their parenting behavior, they will be evaluated more negatively compared to fathers. Additionally, fathers who succeeded in their parenting efforts would be evaluated more positively compared to mothers.

Methods

Participants:

- Age ($M = 37.13$, $SD = 13.06$)
- Gender: 127 male participants, 65 female participants, 3 non-binary/other gender participants

Procedure:

- Participants were recruited using Prolific and compensated in accordance with Prolific standards ($8/hour)
- Participants were then directed to a Qualtrics task divided into 2 phases: learning task and iGASSP.

Learning Phase:

- Participants were shown a series of head-and-shoulder photos of 8 women and 8 men in their 40s with neutral facial expressions paired with a behavior. The pairings were each shown for 6 seconds each. They were told that they merely had to familiarize themselves with these pairings.
- There were 3 different types of behaviors, Failure, Success, Neutral.

iGASSP Task:

- Participants were flashed each photo they had previously seen for 300 ms. These photos are described as distractors from the task.
- This task was to ascertain what subliminal prime word (not able to be physically seen) was shown before each photo. The two choices were the words "good" or "bad"
- Since the word could not be seen, participants were told to use their gut reactions.
- There was indeed no subliminal prime word. That is, participants' choices reflected their gut reaction to the photo (mother or father paired with one of the three behaviors in the learning phase)

Learning Phase Examples

Failure Behavior:

She took her son to a baseball game on a sunny day but left the sunscreen at home
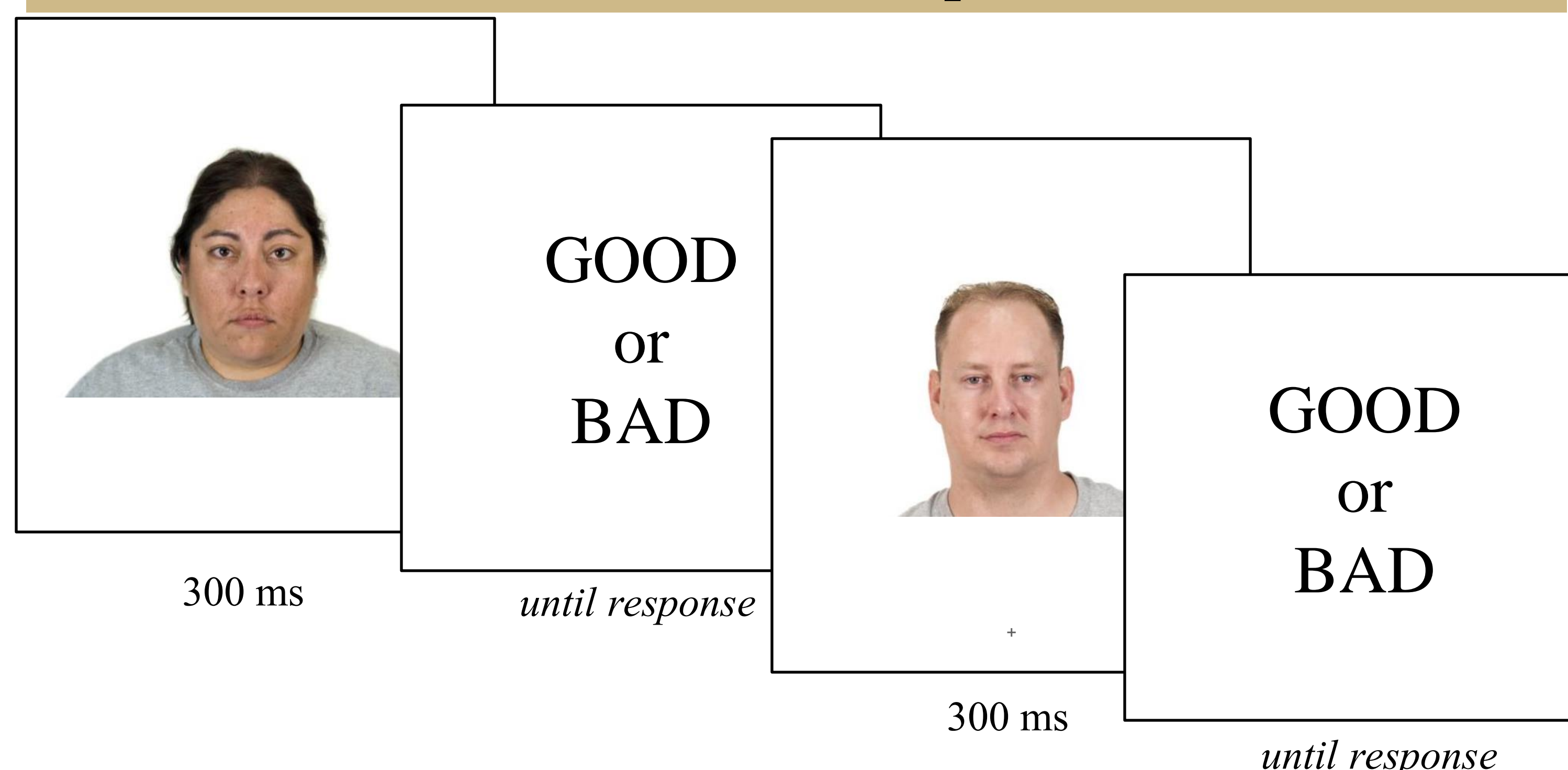
Success Behavior:

She took her son to a baseball game on a sunny day and bought water bottles for them

Neutral Behavior:

He ran into one of his high school teachers the other day

iGAASP Examples

300 ms

until response

300 ms
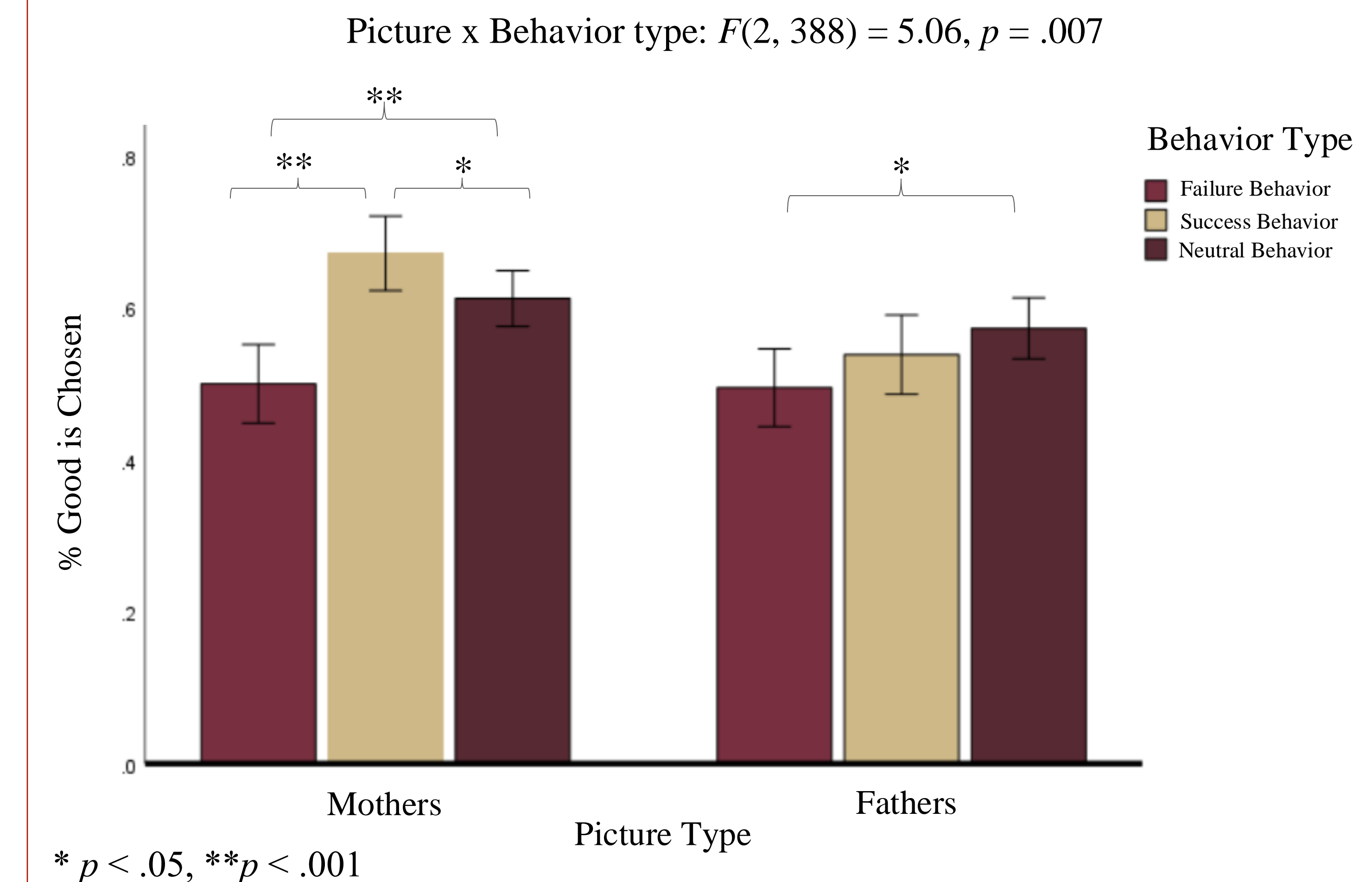
until response

GOOD or BAD

Results

How were SEIs formed between Mothers vs. Fathers?

- Sensitivity to mother behaviors, desensitivization to father behaviors

Figure 1

Bar graph for the percentages of selecting Good (vs. Bad) as a function of the Picture Type (mother vs. father) and Behavior Type (Failure, Success, Neutral)

Picture x Behavior type: $F_{(2, 388)} = 5.06$, $p = .007$

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

Discussion

Implications:

- Though not consistent with our original hypothesis, analyses revealed an interesting pattern regarding SEI from parenting behaviors
- Past research has shown that mothers report lower well-being overall, with a potential reason being the expectations set on them (Nelson-Coffey et al. 2019). The findings seem to concur that there may be a sensitivity to how people judge a mother parenting her child.
- Stay at home dads have also reported feelings of isolation and self doubt, even after positive transitions into their roles (Davis et al., 2020). These feelings of self doubt may be related to the lack of reaction when it comes to positive fatherly parenting.

Limitations:

- There are multiple spontaneous processes involved in the creation of spontaneous impressions (e.g., STIs). This study, however, purely revolves around SEIs.
- As our study focuses on implicit impressions, it is yet unknown how these inferences influence conscious thoughts or our actions.

Future Directions

- As this is the first study done on stereotyping effects in SEIs, future studies may explore intergroup interactions, perceptions of minority groups, etc.
- Research may also be done to create interventions that inform parents of how they're evaluated, and how to cope with those judgements

References