

Spontaneous Evaluations of Non-Traditional Couples and Family Systems

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INTRODUCTION

Background:

People form valanced (positive or negative) inferences of others automatically and implicitly (quickly and without conscious awareness) in response to a myriad of behavioral cues (Carlston & Skowronski 1994; Uleman et al. 1996; Todorov & Uleman 2003; Uleman et al. 2008).

- This phenomenon is largely unexplored in group contexts, inspiring the current study.
- “Atypical” parents are often victim to heightened scrutiny (Quadlin et al., 2022), with same-sex couples facing scrutiny and skepticism surrounding ability to raise children (Kaufman & Compton, 2021; Manning & Gustafson, 2025).
- As overt homophobia has become more taboo, implicit measures are more useful in this context, to avoid socially desirable responding (Massey et al., 2013).

Current Study:

Examined participants’ formation of valanced spontaneous evaluative inferences (SEIs) about the parenting ability of couples in response to parental success, failure, and neutral behaviors.

Research Questions:

- Do people form SEIs from couples’ parenting behaviors?
- Does the demographic composition (i.e., same-sex vs. different-sex status) of a couple change how their parenting behaviors are perceived?

Hypotheses:

(H1) Participants will be more likely to make a negative evaluation when a failure (compared to neutral) parenting behavior is paired with a couple.

(H2) Participants will be more likely to make a positive evaluation when a successful (compared to neutral) parenting behavior is paired with a couple.

- We also explored patterns regarding the composition of couples (i.e., same-sex female, same-sex male, heterosexual).

DISCUSSION

- The current research extends previous work on SEIs by demonstrating the nature of group impressions (i.e., Spontaneous Evaluative Inferences of Groups).
- Results from the current study provides supporting evidence that demographic composition of a couple (i.e., same-sex vs. different-sex status) impacts how their parenting abilities are perceived.
- **Future directions:**
 - Explore SEIs of each partner within couple units to determine whether evaluations of failure and successful parenting behaviors also vary across individuals.
 - Compare spontaneous evaluations with explicit attitudes toward homosexuality and beliefs about same-sex parenting.

Participants consistently made negative inferences of couples when they engaged in failure parenting behaviors.

Neutral and successful parenting behaviors were evaluated similarly.

Participants had more positive spontaneous evaluations of heterosexual couples over same-sex couples. Same-sex male couples were evaluated more negatively than same-sex female couples.

Example Couple Images

(adapted from Chicago Face Database and generated using Copilot)



METHODS

Participants:

198 (122 women, 69 men, 7 nonbinary/gender diverse, $M_{age} = 43.03$, $SD_{age} = 13.394$; 5.6% Asian American, 15.2% Black American, 6.6% Latine/Hispanic, 69.2% White/European American, 3.5% Other)

(Participants were recruited on Prolific Academic)

Materials & Procedure:

Learning Phase: Participants were shown images of 16 couples (4 different sex, 4 same-sex male, and 4 same-sex female) created with faces from the Chicago Face Database (Ma et al. 2015), with each image paired with a parenting behavior. Participants were asked to learn about 3 parenting success, 3 parenting failure, and 6 neutral non-parenting related behaviors along with the images for 6 seconds each.

- **Successful Parenting Behavior:** “They offered to help their son with a difficult project and stayed up late to ensure the project was completed perfectly.”
- **Failure Parenting Behavior:** “They took their son to a baseball game on a sunny day but left the sunscreen at home.”
- **Neutral Behavior:** “They were in a crowded store the other day and heard someone call their names.”

iGASSP Task: Participants completed the “iGASSP” task (adopted from Olcaysoy Okten et al. 2019), testing SEIs of parenting ability based upon the behaviors from the learning phase. Then, they completed the same task again with individuals from the couples. Finally, they reported demographic information and completed a small panel of measures regarding explicit attitudes towards homosexuality.

RESULTS

Spontaneous Evaluative Inferences from Couples’ Parenting Behaviors

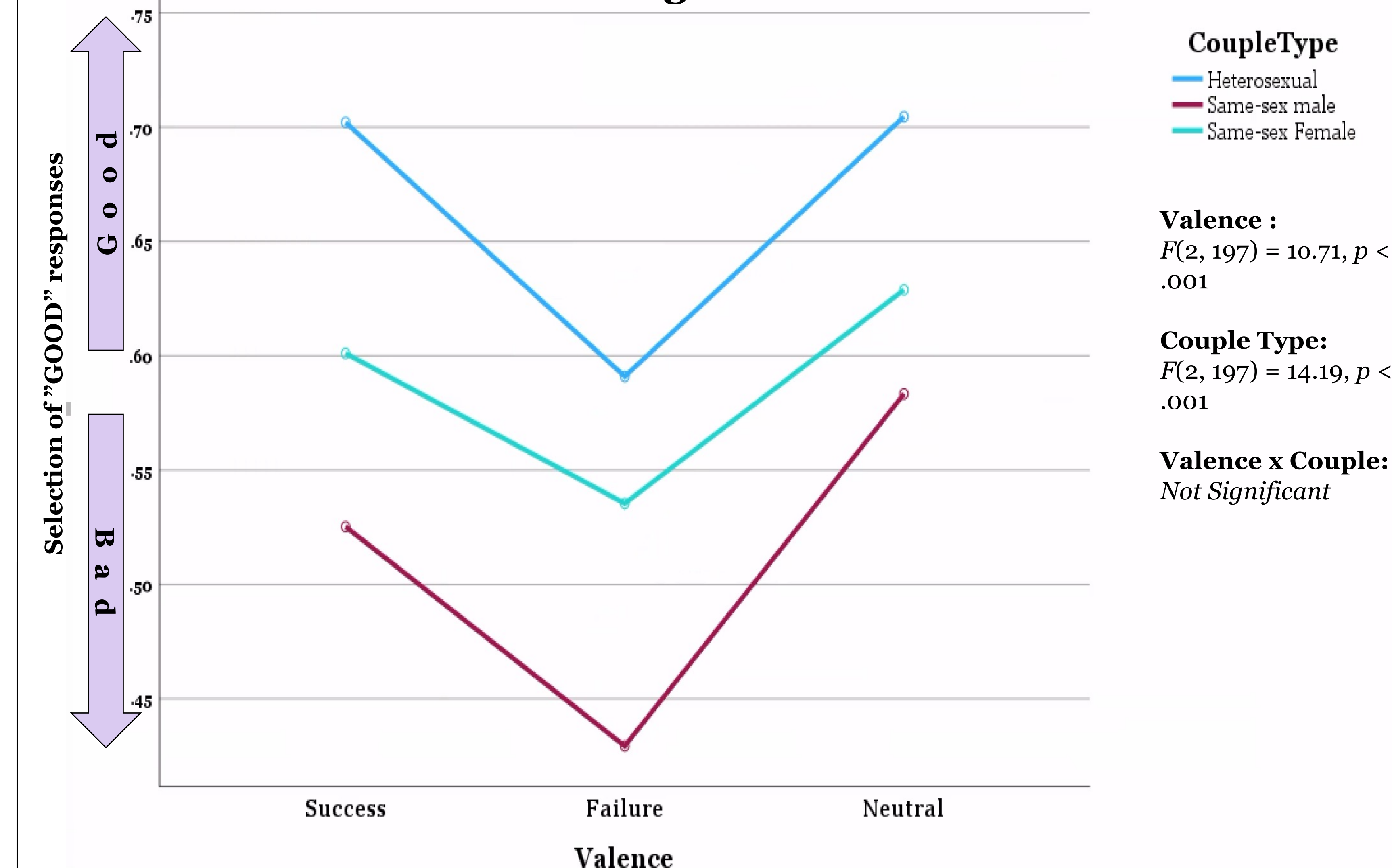


Figure 1. A comparison of the mean SEIs created based on the demographic makeup of the couples.