

Attitudes Toward Family Diversity: A Systematic Review and Conceptual Framework of Structure and Composition

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Background

Family structures have diversified across the globe, but attitudes toward these families have not always diversified at the same pace (Solaz et al., 2025). Even in contexts in which single-parent families, step- or reconstituted families, and same-sex parent families are increasingly visible, the heterosexual, two-biological-parent family formed in a first marriage remains the referential standard to which other configurations are compared (Furstenberg, 2019; Ganong et al., 1990; Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2016).

Earlier systematic reviews (i.e., Ganong et al., 1990; Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2016) showed very clearly that family structure itself functions as a cue for judgment: respondents tend to rate non-traditional parents and families as lower on parenting competence, stability, and expected child adjustment. Families that don't correspond to a two biological parents model are viewed as less normative even when individual characteristics of the raters (gender, age, or family background) could have been expected to diversify their views (Ganong et al., 1990). A later review extending the covered period to 2003–2013 confirmed the same logic, but with an important addition: the incorporation of same-sex parent families made visible the role of gendered and heteronormative expectations in stereotyping, and showed that these expectations can operate independently of any real difference in parental capacity (Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2016). At the same time, non-normative family structures have been linked to social exclusion, discrimination, and insufficient support from institutions and communities, again not because of empirically demonstrated deficits, but because of persistent cultural ideals about what “proper” families ought to look like (Dawes et al., 2021).

The present review takes those two earlier syntheses as its point of departure and asks a simple but overdue question: how have family structure stereotypes evolved in the period after 2013, when family diversity became more visible and more politicized? This period matters for two reasons that are already in the literature. First, diversification of family forms is a demographic trend across regions, even if its intensity varies by country and regime (Furstenberg, 2019). Second, stepfamily scholarship has argued that we have entered a “fourth era” in which intersectionality, family processes, and the interaction between structure and context take centre stage (Ganong & Coleman, 2018). If that is the case, then stereotypes about family structure should also have become more layered, more context dependent, and more sensitive to gender and sexual orientation.

Objectives

The aim of this review is to synthesize, for the period 2013–2024, empirical studies on attitudes, stereotypes and stigma toward non-normative family structures and compositions across different world regions, building on earlier syntheses that showed a stable evaluative hierarchy (intact two-parent families at the top, step/reconstituted families in the middle, single-parent families at the bottom) and asking whether, in more recent work, this hierarchy persists once newer constellations such as same-sex parent families, planned co-parenting or multi-residence arrangements are brought into the picture.

The review deliberately keeps family structure (two biological parents, single/lone parent, step or reconstituted, complex or multi-residence) analytically separate from family composition (heterosexual vs. same-sex parents, biological vs. social/stepparents) because the 1990 review and the 2003–2013 review both showed that structure alone already functions as a cue for stereotyping.

Methods

A systematic search was conducted in major social-science and psychology databases (e.g. Web of Science, PsycInfo, IBSS) for 2013–2024. Search strings combined:

- family-diversity terms: “single-parent”, “lone parent”, “stepfamil*”, “blended famil*”, “reconstituted famil*”, “same-sex parent*”, “homoparental”, “cohabit*”, “nonmarital parent*”, “bonus parent”, “tri-parent”, “polyamorous family”, “transnational/migrant family”; and
- evaluative terms: “attitud*”, “perception*”, “stereotype*”, “public opinion”, “stigma”, “discrimination”, “acceptance”, “approval”, “tolerance”.

Inclusion criteria were: (a) empirical, peer-reviewed research; (b) at least one family form that departs from the heterosexual, married, co-resident, two-biological-parent model; and (c) an explicitly evaluative outcome (e.g. parental competence, legitimacy of the family, moral acceptability, willingness to grant institutional support, expected child outcomes). Reviews, theses and papers that only described household composition without an attitudinal measure were excluded. Screening was carried out in two stages with double coding; reasons for exclusion were documented. To identify thematic and geographical clusters, a bibliometric mapping step was added (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017; Moher et al., 2009).

All included studies were coded along four axes: (1) *country/region and policy regime*; (2) *structure of the family presented to respondents*; (3) *composition of the family (different- vs. same-sex, biological vs. social/step)*; and (4) *level of outcome*. Following Park and Park’s (2014) distinction, we separated stereotype-level measures (cognitive evaluations, often vignette-based) from stigma-level measures (anticipated/refused placement, institutional reluctance, social sanctions). This distinction is necessary because several European studies report softening stereotypes but stable or even persistent forms of enacted stigma.

This review follows PRISMA to make the whole process transparent and replicable (Moher et al., 2009; Page et al., 2021). The search was conducted Web of Science, PsycInfo and IBSS, supplemented by hand-searching core journals in family, social demography, and psychology. The time window was 1 January 2013 to

31 December 2024 because 2013 marks the end of the period covered by the most recent earlier review on family structure stereotypes (Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2016).

Findings

We have developed the conceptualization of the *family type triangle*, which allows a framework to understand attitudes to family structure and composition (see Figure 1).

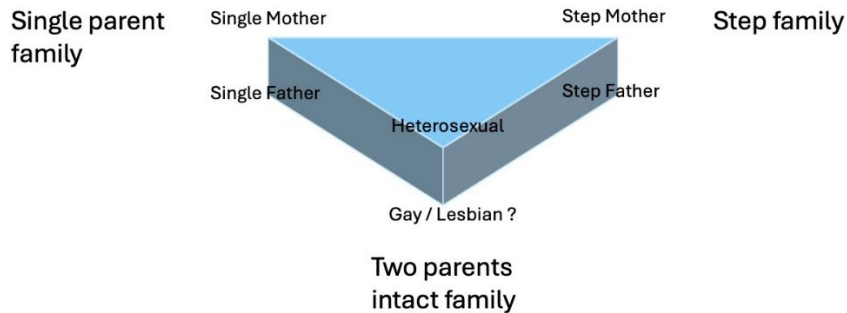


Figure 1. In the family type triangle, the form represents the structure, with each of the three corners referring to intact, single, and step family as distinct structures. And the depth representing composition. In our scope we review composition on the dimension of gender, which can be later extended to further depths to incorporate other dimensions of composition such as ethnicity, age, nationality etc.

Conceptually, the review shows that part of the inconsistency reported since the 1990s does not come from the data, but from how “family type” has been operationalized. Many studies treat “nontraditional” families as if structure and composition were the same thing. In our view, structure refers to the basic living arrangement and relational position in the household — two-biological-parent families, single-/lone-parent families, and step-/reconstituted families. Composition refers to the gender and sexual orientation of the parents — heterosexual vs. homosexual/gay/lesbian couples — which becomes especially salient once same-sex parent families are brought into the comparison set. When these two dimensions are blurred, a structurally non-normative but compositionally heterosexual stepfamily is compared to a structurally intact but compositionally same-sex family, and any difference in attitudes is hard to interpret. The two-dimensional perspective proposed in the review makes these distinctions explicit and shows that stereotypes are often activated at the intersection of the two dimensions, precisely where gendered expectations of caregiving and heteronormative ideas about children’s needs intersect with the more visible deviation from the “intact” model (Ganong & Coleman, 2018; Park & Park, 2014).

A second conceptual contribution is the clarification between family stereotypes and family stigma. Drawing on Park and Park (2014), the review distinguishes cognitive, relatively passive generalizations (“single-parent families are unstable,” “stepparents are less invested”) from their moralized, socially consequential

counterpart, stigma. Stereotypes label; stigma punishes. This matters because the 2013–2024 studies that were retrieved increasingly describe cases in which negative views of non-normative families are accompanied by rejection, disrespect, or institutional non-support, meaning that the boundary from stereotype to stigma has been crossed. This is consistent with the argument that such reactions are less expressions of personal prejudice and more reflections of socially shared norms about how families “ought” to be organized (Park & Park, 2014).

Taken together, these results support the view that research on attitudes toward family diversity is converging with the broader “fourth era” of family scholarship (Ganong & Coleman, 2018): attention is shifting from asking whether non-normative families are stereotyped to asking under what structural–compositional configurations and in which normative contexts such stereotypes become stigmatizing. The review therefore calls for future studies to (a) define family forms in explicitly multidimensional ways (structure × composition), (b) report contextual features systematically, and (c) track the point at which cognitive stereotypes become actionable stigma with consequences for families’ access to resources and recognition.

Discussion

A consistent finding since the 1990 review (Ganong et al., 1990) is that greater diversity in family forms has *not* displaced the evaluative hierarchy that centers the heterosexual, co-resident, two-biological-parent, first-marriage family; if anything, diversification has made that yardstick more visible. Intact families are still treated as the default, single-parent families are most often placed lowest, and step/reconstituted families tend to occupy an in-between, sometimes uncertain position. What more recent work seems to add is that this hierarchy now also needs to take account of *who* the parents are — especially their gender and sexual orientation — so that structure alone no longer tells the whole story (Ganong & Coleman, 2018).

Looking at family diversity on *two axes* helps: one for structure (intact, single-parent, step/reconstituted) and one for composition (heterosexual vs. same-sex). When those are mixed together, comparisons across studies look contradictory; when they are separated, a simpler pattern appears — the most negative judgments tend to show up where a family departs from the “intact” model and from the heterosexual model, probably because that is where gendered expectations about parenting and heteronormative assumptions about children’s needs are most easily activated (Park & Park, 2014). This may be why same-sex parent families are sometimes evaluated more harshly than stepfamilies, even though stepfamilies depart more clearly from a continuous family trajectory: part of the judgment is about composition.

The line between stereotype and stigma also matters. Stereotypes are quick, largely descriptive attributions; stigma adds a moral edge and practical consequences — questioning entitlement, withholding support, or treating a family as less legitimate (Park & Park, 2014). What seems to emerge across the studies is that these judgments are often activated when a family sits visibly outside the locally dominant model of “proper” family life. In other words, the problem is not necessarily observed deficits in parenting, but the fact that deviation from the normative template makes negative attributions easier — a contextual rather than strictly individual

mechanism. In short, the hierarchy described by Ganong et al. (1990) has probably not disappeared; it has likely become layered. Structural deviation still matters, but how strongly it matters may depend on composition and on the normative climate — a point that future, more comparative studies will need to test directly.

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