

Warm Fathers and Competent Mothers? Stereotypes and Attitudes Towards Single Parents in Hungary

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Abstract

Public attitudes and stereotypes significantly influence how mothers and fathers share parental responsibilities and who is considered the custodial parent after family separation. This study examines the differences between social perceptions of single mothers and fathers in post-socialist Hungary during the 2010s–2020s, a period marked by conservative governments reinforcing traditional gender roles. Using the stereotype content model and the concept of involved fatherhood as theoretical frameworks, the study presents three separate investigations from surveys conducted on representative and quota samples. The first examines general perceptions of single mothers ($N = 416$) and fathers ($N = 407$) through open-ended questions. The second assesses the perceived competence in solo parenting and its determinants using representative survey data ($N = 1027$). The third investigates perceptions of the difficulty of solo parenting for both mothers and fathers ($N = 289$) through free associations. Results show that besides the overall positive perceptions of both genders, single fathers were more frequently associated with warmth traits (e.g., likeable, friendly). Single mothers, however, were perceived as more competent, particularly regarding raising children alone. Qualitative data showed that while most respondents viewed single motherhood and fatherhood as equally difficult, gender stereotypes persisted—mothers were seen as more capable caregivers, fathers as better breadwinners. Quantitative results were more nuanced: More liberal views on parenting roles were linked to greater acceptance of both single mothers' and fathers' competence, but only to some extent. Emotional and relational aspects of parenting remain tied to the two-parent ideal, while financial concerns continue to influence perceptions of single mothers' adequacy as providers.

Keywords

gender roles; Hungary; involved fatherhood; single fathers; single mothers; stereotype content model

1. Introduction

As single-parent families—defined as households where only one parent lives with the child(ren) and no partner is present—make up a significant share of families in advanced societies, many studies have examined their situation. However, examinations usually focus on related policies, the employment or socioeconomic status of the parents, and the well-being of the parents and children (e.g., Nieuwenhuis & Maldonado, 2018). The perception of single parents is less often analyzed, although studies from the United States have drawn attention to the role of such perceptions in single parents' well-being (e.g., Grolnick & Gurland, 2002). Single parents might experience stigmatization simply because they are not living in a two-parent family formation. However, as the American scholarly literature highlights, perceptions of single parents also differ based on the gender of the parent (e.g., Bennett & Jamieson, 1999; Bryan et al., 1986; DeJean et al., 2012; Haire & McGeorge, 2012).

These studies tend to conclude that single fathers have a more positive image in American society than single mothers, as they are perceived as heroes by taking on a non-traditional role and becoming the primary caregiver for their children. In contrast, perceptions of single mothers are not as positive, as single mothers are often seen as responsible for the dissolution of the two-parent family, which is referred to as “mother-blaming” in the literature (Grolnick & Gurland, 2002; Leslie & Clossick, 1992; Leslie & Southard, 2009). In one aspect, however, single mothers are usually perceived more positively than single fathers: They are judged to be better caregivers of children (Bennett & Jamieson, 1999; Greif, 1995; Haire & McGeorge, 2012). These findings reveal a double standard regarding the perception of single parents, although this standard has two aspects: Perceptions of single fathers are generally more positive, but single mothers are perceived as more competent in parenting.

Such perceptions follow the traditional view of mothers as carers and fathers as breadwinners, leaving no room for mothers to be seen as economically independent from men or for fathers to be seen as caring and involved parents. As previous studies have highlighted, these perceptions can directly affect how mothers and fathers share parental responsibilities and who is considered the custodial parent after family separation. Viewing fathers solely as breadwinners can lead to automatically favouring mothers when deciding on child custody (Meyer & Garasky, 1993; Visontai-Szabó, 2014). Meanwhile, the perception of mothers as primarily caregivers, along with related policies and disadvantages in the labour market, may contribute to women remaining in unsatisfying or harmful relationships in order to maintain economic stability (Orloff, 1993).

This article aims to examine public perceptions of single parents in a context outside the United States—specifically, post-socialist Hungary in the 2010s and 2020s. Beyond its post-socialist character, Hungary offers a particularly relevant case because this period was marked by conservative governments that reinforced traditional gender roles. Since the formation of the second Orbán government in 2010, policies have promoted “traditional families,” defined as heterosexual married couples with children, and have aimed to reinforce the traditional gender division of labour by emphasizing women's roles as mothers while placing less focus on men's roles as fathers (Fodor, 2022; Pető & Juhász, 2024). At the same time, however, census data show an increase in the proportion of single fathers between 2011 and 2022, and legislation on joint custody has become more lenient. This mixed context provides a fruitful setting to investigate stereotypes about single mothers and fathers.

For a theoretical framework, this article uses the stereotype content model (SCM; Cuddy et al., 2008; Fiske et al., 2002): Such a distinction reflects the concept of warmth and competence stereotypes, according to which groups' perceptions are often mixed. While high-status groups are perceived as being competent, cooperative groups are seen as being warm. For single parents, previous results show that single mothers are seen as competent but less warm, while single fathers are seen as warm but less competent. This theoretical framework provides a promising way to evaluate differences in perceptions.

This article also draws on the theoretical foundations of “new” and “involved” fatherhood. While previous literature on perceptions of single parents has often approached the issue through a dichotomous lens—suggesting that consistent gender stereotypes shape public attitudes—the concept of involved fatherhood offers a more dynamic perspective. It emphasizes the evolving and shared nature of parental responsibilities, allowing for a more flexible understanding of caregiving and breadwinning roles beyond traditional gender norms.

Based on the literature and theoretical considerations presented above, the article aims to answer the following research questions:

1. How are single mothers and fathers perceived in Hungary, and how do these perceptions relate to the dimensions of warmth and competence? Does the same double standard exist in the perceptions of single parents in Hungary as in the US?
2. How do attitudes on traditional gender roles, traditional family formation, and involved fatherhood explain these perceptions?

The article is structured as follows. It first reviews the literature on perceptions of single mothers and fathers, then outlines the theoretical framework of the SCM and the concept of involved fatherhood. The empirical section includes three studies: Study 1 analyses stereotypes from open-ended responses using SCM; study 2 examines perceived competence of single mothers and fathers in raising children; and study 3 explores perceived difficulties of single parenthood in order to better understand competence differences. The conclusion interprets the findings through the SCM and the concept of involved fatherhood and offers policy recommendations to address the double standard.

2. Literature Review on Stereotypes About Single Parents

Single parents often face stereotypes, regardless of their gender. The highlighted source of stereotyping in the literature is that people tend to compare other family forms to the heteronormative standard, which perceives families as healthy only when both a mother and a father are present (Haire & McGeorge, 2012; Oswald et al., 2005). Therefore, families are perceived differently according to how far they correspond to the heteronormative ideal, and attitudes are usually the most negative towards never-married single parents (Bryan et al., 1986). However, previous studies focusing especially on never-married single parents have also identified gender differences in the perceptions.

2.1. Single Mothers Are Perceived More Negatively

The perception of single mothers is more often investigated than that of single fathers. Furthermore, there is a substantial body of American scholarly literature on the negative perception of single mothers receiving welfare benefits (e.g., Foster, 2008; Gilman, 2014; Hancock, 2004). The American stereotype of the “welfare queen”—a Black, lazy single mother from the underclass who has children only to avoid work—was extremely salient in US welfare debates during the 1990s (Hancock, 2004). In addition, existing literature about the general perception of single mothers shows that they are perceived more negatively than other mothers: They are imagined as deviant, unhappy, less competent (Ganong et al., 1988; Ganong & Coleman, 1995), promiscuous, and disrespectful towards the ideal of the traditional family (Ganong et al., 1988).

As single motherhood has been associated with a series of negative stereotypes in the US, it is not surprising that studies conducted in the country have found that single mothers are less positively perceived than single fathers (DeJean et al., 2012; Haire & McGeorge, 2012). DeJean et al. (2012) used three different types of attitude questionnaires and surveyed 1350 respondents to explore beliefs about single mothers and fathers. Respondents rated single fathers as more responsible, moral, economically advantaged, secure, and good parents. Furthermore, financial hardship, which was more likely to affect single mothers, was also associated with worse parenting skills, suggesting that single mothers are perceived as less competent parents due to their greater economic disadvantage.

Haire and McGeorge (2012) identified similar patterns through a feminist thematic analysis of undergraduate students’ responses regarding single parents. They found that negative stereotypes of single mothers were primarily linked to personal characteristics—such as being neglectful, irresponsible, insecure, or promiscuous—whereas negative views of single fathers were associated with situational challenges, including difficulties with childcare and forming new partnerships. In line with earlier studies (Leslie & Clossick, 1992; Leslie & Southard, 2009), their findings suggest that American society holds single mothers more personally responsible for family breakdowns, blaming them for not waiting to enter a relationship or for being unable to maintain one. Meanwhile, single fathers are often praised for taking on caregiving roles. As a result, single mothers are expected to overcompensate by becoming “super-mothers” in order to counter the more sympathetic, even heroic, image of single fathers (Anderson & Anderson, 2005; Grolnick & Gurland, 2002; Haire & McGeorge, 2012).

2.2. Single Fathers Are Perceived as Having Poorer Parenting Skills

The research evidence presented above has shown that single fathers have a more positive image in general, although there is one aspect in which perceptions of single mothers are more favourable, namely parenting skills (Bennett & Jamieson, 1999; Haire & McGeorge, 2012). For instance, Bennett and Jamieson’s (1999) study investigated the perception of four different groups of mothers and fathers and found that fathers, in general, were seen as having poorer parenting skills and family relations and as being less caring than mothers. Haire and McGeorge’s (2012) feminist thematic analysis found that single mothers are perceived as better able to meet their children’s special needs than single fathers. Fathers were seen as less competent in everyday tasks like cooking or choosing clothes, and they were perceived as unable to handle “girl activities,” such as menstruation or puberty. In contrast, no similar concerns were raised about single mothers managing boys’ puberty. However, mothers were still seen as unable to fully take on paternal roles—being

described as too protective and lacking certain, often unspecified, “father skills,” unlike the clearly defined “mother skills.” The authors argue that the inability to specify fathers’ skills in parenting limits fathers’ role to breadwinning and disciplining, leaving no space for caring responsibilities. Respondents also explained that while mothers are inherently competent in parenting, fathers have to learn these skills. The stereotype that fathers cannot be sensitive enough with their daughters was also salient.

In contrast to the findings presented above, DeJean et al. (2012) found that single fathers were perceived as better parents by undergraduate students. However, most prior research indicates that single fathers are perceived as less competent in caregiving than single mothers.

3. Theoretical Background

3.1. *Warmth and Competence*

The research findings presented above could be understood through the lens of the SCM (Cuddy et al., 2008; Fiske et al., 2002), according to which there are two general groups of social stereotypes: warmth and competence. Groups are perceived as competent if they are seen as able to be successful in self-interested tasks. On the other hand, groups are perceived as warm if they are oriented to help others more than themselves. The positions of groups in these dimensions are dependent on their perceived status and cooperativeness. While groups with a high level of status are seen as competent, groups that display cooperative behavior are perceived as warm. The perception of groups, however, is often mixed across these two dimensions.

For instance, due to traditional images, women, in general, are seen as warm but not competent (Eagly & Mladinic, 1994; Eagly et al., 1994). First, women are seen as less competent because they, traditionally, have a lower status than men. Second, women are seen as cooperative (warm) and not competitive because men are intimately interdependent with them in close relationships (e.g., as mothers or wives; see Glick & Fiske, 1996, 2001). Different subgroups of women, however, score differently on these two dimensions (Eckes, 2002; Fiske, 2010). Women in non-traditional roles, such as career women and feminists, are often seen as competent but not warm (Glick & Fiske, 1996). Similarly, mothers working in occupations traditionally associated with the male sex are seen as worse parents than non-working mothers by gaining competence but losing warmth (Okimoto & Heilman, 2012).

The differing perceptions of single mothers and fathers offer a new gendered perspective on the model: single mothers are viewed as more competent but less warm than single fathers. This may be because, in the context of single parenthood, competence is linked to family tasks rather than work outside the home. As a result, traditional gender roles are inverted—mothers are seen as more competent caregivers, while fathers, stepping outside their expected roles, are viewed as warmer and more cooperative. In contrast, single mothers may be seen as less cooperative for not maintaining the family unit, a role traditionally assigned to women.

3.2. *Involved Fatherhood*

The SCM provides a valuable theoretical foundation for examining gender differences in perceptions of single parents—particularly in relation to traditional gender roles; however, it is also useful to introduce an additional framework to account for shifting norms in parenting, and especially in fatherhood.

While the traditional gendered division of labour positioned men as breadwinners and women as caregivers, these roles have shifted considerably in recent decades, leading to a growing overlap between them. Since the latter half of the 20th century, women's participation in paid work has become increasingly common, while more recent discussions have highlighted evolving models of "new" fatherhood—framing fathers not only as providers, but also as active, caring, and emotionally involved parents (Dermott, 2008; Gerson, 2010; Townsend, 2002).

The norms of involved fatherhood require men to be present both at home and in the workplace, often creating tensions in balancing work and family life. Fathers may struggle to reconcile the nurturing role with the traditional expectation of being the primary provider (Takács, 2020). Although societal norms still pressure fathers to prioritize economic provision—typically involving longer working hours and less time at home—empirical findings remain inconclusive regarding whether fathers actually work longer hours than non-fathers (Dermott, 2008; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 2000; Townsend, 2002).

Previous studies also highlight the importance of attitudes in shaping father involvement. Evidence shows a positive association between fathers' egalitarian gender attitudes—particularly those supportive of caring father roles—and their engagement with children (Bulanda, 2004; Hofferth, 2003). Fathers who hold more non-traditional views are also more likely to reduce their working hours and spend more time with their children (McGill, 2014).

Fathers' attitudes toward parenting can also play a crucial role in family separation, influencing both decisions about custodial arrangements and the likelihood of establishing joint physical custody. Fathers who are actively involved in parenting are more likely to pursue custody of their children. Meanwhile, not only fathers' attitudes but also society's stance on fathers' role in parenting is a decisive factor. Research shows that fathers are more likely to receive custody when decisions are made out of court by the parents themselves, whereas judges tend to favour mothers (Coles, 2009; Hamer & Marchioro, 2002). Qualitative studies also highlight fathers' negative experiences with the child custody system, where they are often treated as secondary parents and must exert greater effort to prove their competence (Shorey & Pereira, 2023; Turchi, 2014).

Examining the social perceptions of single fathers thus provides a valuable test of how a society truly engages with the idea of involved fatherhood, as these fathers are potentially the most engaged in day-to-day parenting (Greif, 1995).

4. The Hungarian Context of Single Motherhood and Fatherhood

Since 2010, the Orbán government has developed a gender regime in which policies and accompanying discourses primarily emphasize women's roles as mothers, framing motherhood as the central means of achieving population growth. Within this so-called "carefare regime," care work is not commodified but instead reassigned to the private sphere—specifically to mothers—rather than being supported through public services (Fodor, 2022). At the same time, economic pressures compel women to engage in the labour market, resulting in a double burden of paid employment and unpaid care responsibilities, while promoting gender equality in the labour market is not among the government's objectives. Gender studies programs have been banned (Rohde & Takács, 2023), and both national curricula and government discourses reinforce traditional gender roles (Pető & Juhász, 2024). The government explicitly rejects the use of the term "gender," asserting that only biological sex is relevant (Fodor, 2022; Pető & Juhász, 2024).

Achieving population growth is also closely linked to the promotion of traditional gender roles and heteronormative family structures in the government's rhetoric. As a result, newly introduced family policy measures, such as the childbirth incentive loan (*babaváró hitel*) and families' housing subsidy plus (CSOK Plusz), are tied to heterosexual marriage (as well as to employment status and higher income), thereby excluding alternative family types, such as single-parent households, from being eligible. Moreover, since women are viewed as primarily responsible for caring and demographic growth, fathers are frequently marginalized in these policies. For instance, in 2019, the government introduced a tax benefit for young mothers under the age of 30, as well as a full income tax exemption for mothers with four or more children—an exemption that is planned to be extended to mothers with three and eventually two children starting in 2025. These policies completely disregard the caregiving contributions of fathers and exclude single fathers from access to such benefits.

The government's promotion of heteronormative nuclear families is also reflected in changes to the adoption system. Since 2020, single individuals are only permitted to adopt with ministerial approval and only if no suitable married couple can be found anywhere in the country. This restriction has led to a measurable decline in single-parent adoptions, disproportionately affecting single men ("2023-as örökbefogadási statisztika," 2024).

While post-2010 policies have generally limited fathers' roles in childcare, shared custody legislation marks an exception by expanding paternal rights. A 2014 legal change enabled joint physical custody by eliminating the requirement to designate one parent as the child's primary residence, thus preserving both parents' custody rights (Szalma & Rékai, 2019). In 2022, another reform allowed courts to grant shared custody at the request of just one parent, provided it serves the child's best interest. While the change in 2022 was welcomed by fathers' organizations, it has drawn feminist criticism, particularly over risks in cases involving domestic violence, where it may allow abusive parents to maintain access to children and former partners (Monostori, 2023).

These changes in child custody legislation may also have contributed to the rising proportion of single-father households among single-parent families with children under the age of 18. According to Hungarian census data, their share increased from 9% in 2011 to 16.8% in 2022 (HCSO, 2025). While Hungary previously aligned with the European Union average in terms of single-father representation, this increase brings the country closer to post-socialist contexts such as Romania and Estonia, where the share typically approaches 20% (Jordan et al., 2019). However, despite this rise, it remains an open question how single fathers are perceived publicly—especially within a policy and discursive environment which continues to frame caregiving as primarily a woman's responsibility.

4.1. Stereotypes and Attitudes Towards Single Fathers and Mothers in Hungary

Previous research on perceptions of single mothers has shown that the stereotypes are less negative in Hungary than in the US. Single motherhood is more likely to be associated with situational stereotypes; for instance, the public believes that they are poor, overworked, and in a rather difficult situation (Herke, 2021). Based on these findings, we could suppose that single mothers are not perceived significantly more negatively than single fathers in Hungary. Other results, however, show that there are some differences in the general perception, at least based on re-partnering statistics. A Hungarian study (Murinkó & Szalma, 2016) showed that the re-partnering rate was highest among those men who lived with their children at

least part-time. Therefore, single-parent status appears to increase men's attractiveness, whereas single mothers often remain alone for quite a considerable period (Monostori, 2015).

Other findings underline the existence of a double standard in the perception of single mothers' and fathers' parenting skills. Statistics show that parents agreed that the mother should be the custodial parent in 90% of the cases. In contrast, fathers had a higher chance when the court decided on custody, being selected as custodial parents in 40% of these cases (Grád et al., 2008; Visontai-Szabó, 2014). Therefore, related legal studies have concluded that while gender stereotypes about parenting skills are not particularly strong among judges, parents still decide according to social expectations: Fathers might feel that they have no chance of winning custody, while mothers may feel the pressure to fight for their children, even if they believe that the father would be a better custodial parent (Visontai-Szabó, 2014). Although the presented statistics support the existence of a double standard in the perception of single parents' parenting skills, no previous Hungarian study has specifically investigated public opinion regarding this issue.

5. Data and Analysis

To investigate public perceptions of single mothers and fathers in the Hungarian context, the study draws on three different data sources and analytical approaches.

5.1. General Perceptions of Single Mothers and Fathers: Warmth and Competence

First, to explore the general perception of single mothers and fathers, an open-ended question was asked. To reduce social desirability bias, the question did not focus on the personal opinion of the respondent, but rather asked about society's views: "In your opinion, how does Hungarian society see single mothers/single fathers? Please provide three words." This question was part of a survey, with a sample of 1200 respondents, representative of the Hungarian population in terms of gender, age, education, and settlement type. The survey was administered face-to-face in December 2019 by a market research company, Szociográf. The sample was split, and one part of the respondents received the question about single mothers, while the other was asked about single fathers. Due to the high non-response rate and the type of question, it cannot be stated that the results are representative of the population, but the collected data capture stereotypes among a heterogeneous sample. For the version asking about single mothers, 416 respondents (69%) provided at least one association, while 407 respondents (68%) answered the question about single fathers. Female respondents represented 56% of those answering the single mother version and 48% in the single father version.

The results of the open-ended questions were coded in two steps. First, stereotypes were coded together when different words or expressions conveyed the same underlying idea. For example, "overworked" and "tired" were treated as a single category, both reflecting the perception of being overextended. Second, these categories were reviewed to determine whether they contained stereotypes connected to the warmth or competence dimensions. Stereotypes referring to single parents' social relations or interactions with others were coded as warmth-related, while those concerning their ability, performance, or goal achievement were coded as competence-related. For warmth, positive stereotypes reflected traits considered desirable in social interactions, whereas negative warmth stereotypes reflected socially undesirable traits. For competence, positive stereotypes indicated traits that facilitate goal achievement, while negative competence stereotypes reflected traits suggesting an inability to achieve goals.

Some words clearly reflected one of the SCM dimensions (e.g., “strong” as a competence stereotype, “friendly” as a warmth stereotype), whereas others could not be easily categorized. For these latter cases, categorization relied on the emotion the stereotype appeared to elicit, corresponding to the emotional dimensions of the SCM (admiration, pity, envy, or disgust; see Cuddy et al., 2008). Stereotypes reflecting *pity* formed a particularly notable category in the analysis. These included descriptors such as “lonely,” “stressed,” “poor,” or “disadvantaged.” Such stereotypes were coded as high in warmth but low in competence, reflecting the perception that these individuals are morally valued yet lack the ability or resources to achieve their goals. Stereotypes reflecting admiration—for instance, describing single parents as “responsible” (which relates both to positive social relations and to a positive outlook on achieving goals)—were coded as high in both warmth and competence. Stereotypes implying disgust or contempt, including descriptors such as “irresponsible,” were coded as low in both warmth and competence. Envy-related stereotypes, such as portraying single parents as overly confident or privileged—low in warmth but high in competence—were not observed in the sample.

In cases where a stereotype could potentially fit into two categories, but its valence on one dimension (warmth or competence) was ambiguous, coding was based solely on the clearer dimension. For instance, “strong” was coded as high in competence—a clearly positive attribute—but was not classified on the warmth dimension, as it can carry both positive and negative connotations, and therefore could be seen as eliciting admiration but also as threatening and evoking envy.

5.2. Competence of Single Mothers and Fathers: Quantitative Data

Second, to examine the perceived competence of single fathers and mothers, the Hungarian database of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) 2022 was used, which was administered to a representative sample of 1027 respondents from the Hungarian population. The survey included the following statements: “A single mother can bring up her child as well as two parents together,” and “A single father can bring up his child as well as two parents together.” Respondents had to evaluate the statements on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = *strongly agree*, 2 = *agree*, 3 = *neither agree nor disagree*, 4 = *disagree*, 5 = *strongly disagree*. A *can’t choose* option was also specified. Besides comparing the results of these two statements, the article also analyzes the determinants of these attitudes. For a temporal comparison, the article also presents results from the ISSP surveys conducted in 1988 and 2013 (TÁRKI Omnibusz, 1988, 2013), which included the same questions. However, the regression analysis focuses exclusively on the 2022 data to model the determinants of these attitudes in contemporary society.

Separate ordinal regression models were applied to analyze attitudes toward the perceived capabilities of single mothers and single fathers. For the analysis, the categories of the dependent variables were recoded, with 5 representing *strongly agree* and 1 representing *strongly disagree*. The same sets of independent variables were included in both models. Responses of *neither agree nor disagree* were treated as a middle category on the ordinal scale. The proportional odds assumption was tested in both models and was met in the final models.

The first set of independent variables assessed attitudes toward parenting roles to examine how beliefs about traditional gender roles and involved fatherhood influence the outcomes. Respondents were asked to consider a family with a mother and father raising a five-year-old child and indicate which parent should: (a) provide financially, (b) care for the child daily, (c) play with the child and take part in the child’s leisure activities, and

(d) serve as a role model. Response options included: *the mother mostly, the mother somewhat more than the father, both parents equally, the father somewhat more than the mother, the father mostly, can't choose, and prefer not to answer*, with the latter two excluded from the analysis. For daily care and play, father-related answer categories were combined due to low response counts. The questionnaire also contained items on teaching behaviour and advising the child; however, these were excluded from the analysis as they were not significant predictors, simplifying the model and reducing overfitting.

As a second set of independent variables, attitudes towards non-traditional family forms were added; therefore, the models also control for views on marriage and same-sex couples. While the questionnaire included only gender-specific items regarding same-sex couples, the statement about the acceptance of a female couple was included in the model analyzing attitudes toward single mothers, while the statement about a male couple was included in the model analyzing attitudes toward single fathers.

Finally, the models controlled for alternative explanations, such as demographic variables: gender, age, marital status, settlement type, education, religiousness, presence of children in the household, subjective income status, minority status, and party preference.

5.3. Competence of Single Mothers and Fathers: Qualitative Data

Third, to better understand how competence is perceived for single parents, the article analyzes responses to a two-step question asking: Is raising a child alone more difficult for a mother or for a father? The answer options were: (a) more difficult for a mother, (b) more difficult for a father, and (c) equally difficult for both. Respondents then provided brief explanations. This two-step question was part of a survey administered in November 2017 by a market research company (NRC) using a quota sample of 1000 Hungarian internet users. Only half (510) received this question, and 289 offered explanations. Though not representative and conducted five years before the ISSP, the data offer valuable insights into perceptions of single mothers' and fathers' competence.

The responses were analyzed with thematic analysis, as the aim was to identify, analyze, and report patterns found in the data. The process included the steps advised by Braun and Clarke (2006): getting to know the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing the themes, defining and naming the themes, and finally producing the report.

6. Results

6.1. Stereotypes: Warmth and competence

In total, 21 stereotype categories were distinguished based on the answers to the open-ended questions ("In your opinion, how does Hungarian society see single mothers/single fathers? Please provide three words"), of which thirteen reflected on the competence dimension, four were connected to warmth, and thirteen contained stereotypes connected to both warmth and competence.

Before analyzing the stereotypes based on the warmth and competence theory, it is worth looking at the raw categories as they also contain relevant information about the perception of single parents (Table 1). In regard

to mothers, respondents most often associated them with being in a difficult situation (20.4%), being strong (19.2%), persistent or tough (17.3%), and busy or overdriven (13%). On the other hand, when respondents were asked about stereotypes of single fathers, the most frequent categories were being family-oriented or related traits (14.7%), being persistent or tough (12.8%), and being heroic (11.8%).

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the differences in perceptions of single mothers and fathers based on warmth and competence. Regarding competence, single mothers were more often described as strong (19.2% vs. 8.6%) and persistent or tough (17.3% vs. 12.8%), but also as weak or vulnerable (7% vs. 3.2%). Furthermore, single fathers were more often described as brave (11.1% vs. 8.7%). The perceptions of warmth show clearer results. Positive stereotypes connected to warmth were mentioned more often in the case of single fathers: A larger share of respondents described them as heroic (11.8% vs. 5.5%), family-oriented (14.7% vs. 2.9%), responsible (4.2% vs. 2.4%), self-sacrificing (4.2% vs. 1.4%), and likeable (7.6% vs. 5.5%; respondents also used other positive character traits belonging to these categories to describe them). Single fathers, furthermore, were not described as irresponsible by any of the respondents, while 4.3% applied this characteristic to single mothers.

Table 1. Free associations about perceptions of single mothers and fathers.

Warmth or competence? Positive or negative?	Categories	Single mothers		Single fathers	
		N	% (of all respondents)	N	% (of all respondents)
W (+) C (–)	in a difficult situation, disadvantaged	85	20.4	38	9.3
C (+)	strong	80	19.2	35	8.6
C (+)	persistent, tough	72	17.3	52	12.8
W (+) C (–)	busy, tired, overdriven, working a lot	54	13.0	8	2.0
W (+) C (–)	society looks down and blames them	50	12.0	14	3.4
W (+) C (–)	needs more state help	45	10.8	17	4.2
W (+) C (–)	lonely, depressed, stressed	41	9.9	21	5.2
W (+) C (–)	poor, financially disadvantaged	38	9.1	7	1.7
C (+)	brave	36	8.7	45	11.1
C (–)	weak, vulnerable	29	7.0	13	3.2
C (+)	ambitious, determined	27	6.5	24	5.9
W (+) C (+)	heroic, honorable, admirable	23	5.5	48	11.8
W (+)	likeable, sincere, friendly, other (+)	23	5.5	31	7.6
C (+)	confident, decisive	22	5.3	26	6.4
C (+)	diligent, hard-working	20	4.8	14	3.4
C (+)	skilled, capable	19	4.6	12	2.9
W (–) C (–)	irresponsible	18	4.3	–	–
C (+)	independent	17	4.1	18	4.4
W (–)	ridiculous, lame, other (–)	14	3.4	13	3.2
W (+) C (–)	society helps them	13	3.1	12	2.9
W (+) C (–)	to be pitied	13	3.1	12	2.9
W (+)	family-friendly, self-giving, caring, affectionate	12	2.9	60	14.7

Table 1. (Cont.) Free associations about perceptions of single mothers and fathers.

Warmth or competence? Positive or negative?	Categories	Single mothers		Single fathers	
		N	% (of all respondents)	N	% (of all respondents)
W (+) C (+)	responsible, reliable	10	2.4	17	4.2
W (+) C (–)	unlucky	8	1.9	7	1.7
W (+)	self-sacrificing, adaptive	6	1.4	17	4.2
C (+)	usual situation	4	1.0	–	–
W (+) C (–)	their partner left them	1	0.2	9	2.2
C (–)	lacking parenting skills	1	0.2	4	1.0
C (+)	good parenting skills	1	0.2	6	1.5
(C–)	unusual situation	–	0.0	22	5.4
	other	32	7.7	19	4.7
Total number of respondents		416		407	

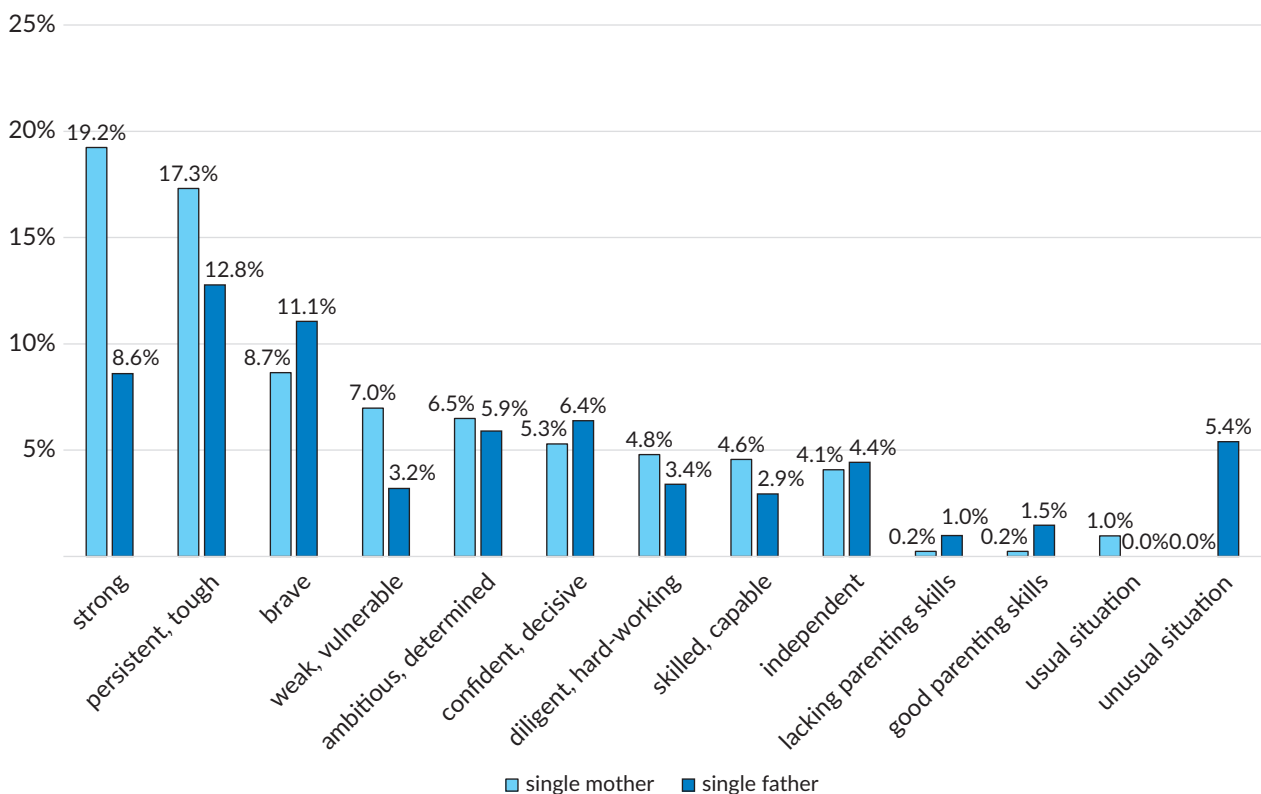


Figure 1. Stereotypes connected to competence (single mothers and single fathers).

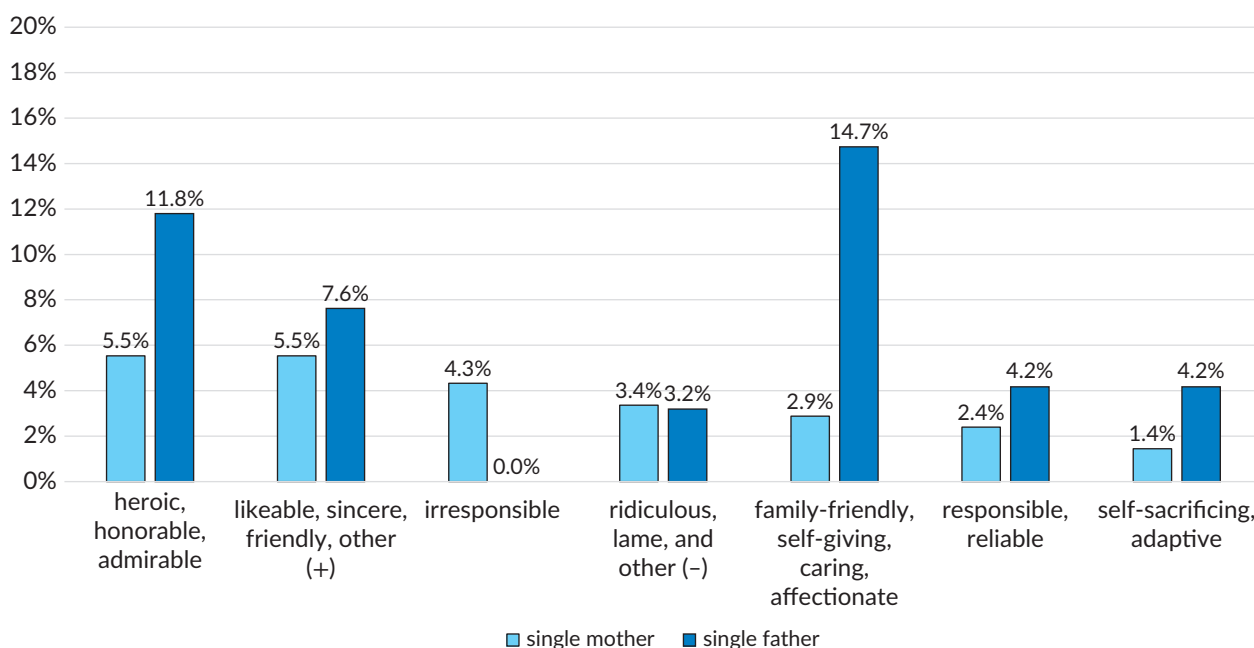


Figure 2. Stereotypes connected to warmth (single mothers and single fathers).

If we investigate the share of those respondents who mentioned positive and negative stereotypes connected to warmth and competence (Table 2), the differences are even more noticeable. A higher share of respondents associated positive stereotypes connected to warmth with single fathers (35.6%), than with single mothers (16.3%), and a lower share of them mentioned negative stereotypes connected to warmth about single fathers (3.2% vs. 7.5%). Regarding competence, there is no large difference; however, respondents slightly more often mentioned positive traits connected to single fathers (44.2%) than to single mothers (42.3%). Negative competence traits, however, were (slightly) more often associated with single fathers (9.6%) than with single mothers (7.2%). Regardless of warmth and competence, 63.9% wrote positive stereotypes in the case of single fathers, and 49.3% in the case of single mothers. The share of negative associations was also higher for mothers (14.2% vs. 12.8%). Even more salient was that the proportion of

Table 2. The share of warmth, competence, and positive, negative, and situational stereotypes.

Warmth or competence? (Positive/negative)	Single mother		Single father	
	N	% (of all respondents)	N	% (of all respondents)
W(+)	68	16.3	145	35.6
W(-)	31	7.5	13	3.2
C(+)	176	42.3	180	44.2
C(-)	30	7.2	39	9.6
(+)	205	49.3	260	63.9
(-)	59	14.2	52	12.8
W(+) C(-)	256	61.5	118	29
W(+) C(+)	33	7.9	65	15.9
W(-) C(-)	18	4.3	—	—
Total	416	100	407	100

stereotypes evoking pity—reflecting high warmth but low competence—was substantially higher for mothers than for fathers (62.5% vs. 34.4%).

6.2. Single Mothers' and Fathers' Ability To Raise Children Alone: Focusing on Competence

The data show that an increasing share of people agree that single mothers and single fathers are capable of raising a child as effectively as two parents in Hungary (Table 3). For single mothers, the proportion agreeing or strongly agreeing rose from 25% in 1988 to 29% in 2013, and to 41.8% in 2024. For single fathers, support increased from 13.1% in 1988 to 17.6% in 2013, and to 30.4% in 2024. However, the gap in agreement between single mothers and single fathers remained at approximately 10%.

Table 3. Share of responses to the statement: “A single mother/father can raise her/his child as well as two parents together” (1988, 2013, 2024).

Survey year	Single mother			Single father		
	1988	2013	2024	1988	2013	2024
strongly agree	4,4	7,0	18,1	1,9	3,1	15,1
agree	20,6	22,1	23,7	11,2	14,5	15,3
neither agree nor disagree	16,1	33,1	29,0	17,4	33,3	27,6
disagree	48,0	24,6	23,0	52,6	30,8	27,1
strongly disagree	10,0	10,8	5,9	15,9	15,9	14,5
do not know	0,8	2,1	0,2	0,8	2,3	0,4

Source: Hungarian database of ISSP 1988 (N = 1737), 2012 (N = 1012), 2022 (N = 1027).

Analysis of the 2024 data using regression models reveals significant findings regarding perceptions of specific parental roles. Views on who should be the main financial provider in a family influence attitudes toward the perceived capabilities of single mothers and fathers—but in different ways. Individuals who see mothers as primarily responsible for providing financially are less likely to support single motherhood than those who believe this role should fall to fathers. In contrast, individuals who believe that both parents should share financial responsibility are more supportive of single fatherhood than those who view breadwinning as solely the father's role.

Thus, while less traditional views about breadwinning are associated with greater support for single fatherhood, they are linked to reduced support for single motherhood—highlighting how shifts in gender role expectations can have asymmetric implications for mothers and fathers. The negative relationship in the case of single mothers may reflect the perception that women occupy a more vulnerable position in the labour market. Consequently, those who believe that mothers should serve as the primary breadwinners may also recognize that, when raising a child alone, balancing financial provision and caregiving becomes particularly difficult given their vulnerable position in the labour market.

The results also show a mixed picture regarding who should do the day-to-day care of children. These attitudes influence only the single mother model, showing that those believing in the equal participation of the two sexes or that fathers should do this more likely to support single mothers' ability, suggesting that less traditional views on caring for children are associated with greater support. However, for the last two variables related to specific parenting roles, the results contradict this finding. Individuals who believe that playing with children

and serving as a role model should be the responsibility of both parents—or of fathers rather than mothers—are less likely to support either single motherhood or single fatherhood.

These findings suggest that less traditional views on parenting roles do not straightforwardly translate into higher perceived capability for single mothers or fathers. In this sense, an attitude towards the more equal distribution of parenting roles may actually reinforce the perceived need for both parents to be present in the family. While core tasks such as breadwinning or day-to-day caregiving may be seen as manageable by a single parent (especially in cases where the labour market and financial supports make it possible), respondents seem to believe that a child would still be missing out on a role model or a play companion. Thus, even when individual roles are seen as transferable, the emotional and relational aspects of parenting remain tied to a two-parent ideal.

Controlling for traditional family attitudes, beliefs about the importance of marriage were significant at the 10% level and only in the single father model. Those who believed people should marry before having children were less supportive of single fatherhood. In contrast, agreement that same-sex couples can raise children as well as two parents significantly increased support for both single motherhood and fatherhood. This variable explained the most variation, raising pseudo R^2 from 6.6% to 14.4% in the single mother model, and from 6% to 16.7% in the single father model.

The results indicate that different demographic factors are associated with support for single mothers and single fathers. Women are more likely than men to believe that single mothers can raise children as well as two parents. In the case of single mothers, religiosity also matters, with individuals who never attend church showing greater support than those who attend weekly. Additionally, respondents who self-identify as Roma are less likely to support single motherhood.

For single fathers, marital status is a significant factor, as single respondents express greater support compared to those in a relationship but not married. Age also plays a role, with older individuals being less supportive of single fatherhood. Furthermore, those living in villages are less likely to support single fathers than those residing in large cities.

Two demographic factors predict support for both single mothers and single fathers in a similar way. Individuals in a better financial situation are more likely to express supportive attitudes toward both groups. Likewise, supporters of parties other than the governing party coalition FIDESZ-KDNP tend to be more supportive, although in the case of single motherhood this effect is only significant at the 10% level.

Table 4. Ordered logistic regression models of single mothers' and fathers' perceived competence.

	Single mother			Single father		
	b	p	ci95	b	p	ci95
Provide for the family financially (ref. father)						
Mother	−0.62	0.01	−1.09, −0.16	0.23	0.37	−0.27, 0.74
Equally	−0.01	0.96	−0.36, 0.35	0.80	0.00	0.38, 1.22
Take care of the child on a daily basis (ref. mother)						
Equally or the father	0.41	0.04	0.03, 0.79	−0.30	0.13	−0.69, 0.09

Table 4. (Cont.) Ordered logistic regression models of single mothers' and fathers' perceived competence.

	Single mother			Single father		
	b	p	ci95	b	p	ci95
Play with the child and take part in their leisure activities (ref. mother)						
Equally or the father	-0.78	0.00	-1.19, -0.37	-0.37	0.08	-0.79, 0.04
Serve as a role model for the child (ref. mother)						
Equally	-1.15	0.00	-1.74, -0.56	-1.11	0.00	-1.83, -0.39
Father	-1.65	0.00	-2.49, -0.82	-1.29	0.01	-2.30, -0.28
People who want children ought to get married (ref. disagree)						
Neither agree nor disagree	-0.29	0.10	-0.63, 0.05	-0.34	0.05	-0.68, 0.00
Agree	0.03	0.88	-0.34, 0.40	-0.35	0.06	-0.73, 0.02
A female/male couple can raise a child (ref. disagree)						
Neither agree nor disagree	1.07	0.00	0.70, 1.44	1.52	0.00	1.15, 1.89
Agree	2.41	0.00	1.98, 2.83	3.16	0.00	2.67, 3.66
Gender (ref. male)						
Female	0.28	0.04	0.01, 0.55	0.11	0.45	-0.17, 0.38
Education (ref. max. elementary)						
Vocational training without baccalaureate	0.65	0.01	0.13, 1.16	0.18	0.50	-0.34, 0.70
Baccalaureate	0.46	0.08	-0.06, 0.99	0.13	0.64	-0.43, 0.69
Higher education	0.38	0.19	-0.20, 0.96	-0.12	0.68	-0.71, 0.46
Marital status (ref. single)						
Married	-0.10	0.63	-0.50, 0.30	0.01	0.97	-0.40, 0.41
In relationship	-0.51	0.07	-1.06, 0.03	-0.64	0.02	-1.16, -0.12
Divorced	0.10	0.71	-0.41, 0.60	0.19	0.46	-0.31, 0.69
Widow/widower	0.11	0.75	-0.55, 0.76	0.02	0.95	-0.64, 0.69
Age	-0.01	0.21	-0.02, 0.00	-0.01	0.03	-0.03, -0.00
Church attendance (ref. at least weekly)						
Monthly	0.31	0.29	-0.26, 0.88	0.07	0.84	-0.62, 0.76
Couple times per year	0.11	0.66	-0.39, 0.62	0.28	0.37	-0.33, 0.89
Never	0.64	0.02	0.08, 1.19	0.08	0.82	-0.58, 0.73
Subjective income status (ref. have financial difficulties)						
Coping with present income	0.47	0.04	0.03, 0.90	0.16	0.47	-0.28, 0.60
Make ends meet or live comfortably	0.55	0.03	0.06, 1.03	0.25	0.31	-0.23, 0.74

Table 4. (Cont.) Ordered logistic regression models of single mothers' and fathers' perceived competence.

	Single mother			Single father		
	b	p	ci95	b	p	ci95
Children in the household (ref. no children)						
At least one child	−0.03	0.86	−0.40, 0.34	−0.26	0.16	−0.62, 0.10
Settlement type (ref. larger cities)						
Smaller cities	0.33	0.07	−0.02, 0.69	0.11	0.54	−0.26, 0.48
Villages	−0.01	0.95	−0.35, 0.33	−0.34	0.04	−0.68, −0.01
Ethnic background (ref. Hungarian)						
Roma	−0.69	0.04	−1.37, −0.02	−0.48	0.24	−1.27, 0.32
Other ethnic minority	−0.30	0.47	−1.11, 0.51	0.74	0.17	−0.32, 1.80
Party preference (ref. FIDESZ-KDNP)						
Other party	0.35	0.06	−0.01, 0.71	0.40	0.03	0.03, 0.77
Unknown preference	0.25	0.17	−0.11, 0.60	0.20	0.27	−0.15, 0.55
cut1	−2.90	0.00	−4.05, −1.76	−2.87	0.00	−4.10, −1.64
cut2	−0.61	0.30	−1.76, 0.54	−0.98	0.11	−2.20, 0.24
cut3	1.07	0.07	−0.10, 2.23	0.73	0.24	−0.50, 1.97
cut4	2.62	0.00	1.42, 3.83	2.00	0.00	0.72, 3.28
Observations	969			961		

6.3. Differences in Competence: Qualitative Reasons

Of the 500 respondents, 22 selected “do not know,” and 488 answered the closed question (“Is raising a child alone more difficult for a mother or for a father?”). Forty-eight (9,8%) believed that it is more difficult for single mothers, while 77 (15,7%) replied that single fathers have a more difficult task. Consequently, the remaining 363 respondents found single fatherhood to be as difficult as single motherhood. Furthermore, there is no remarkable difference regarding the gender of the respondents, as 11.8% of female and 7.8% of male respondents replied that the situation of single mothers is more difficult, while approximately 13% of both genders believe that the task of single fathers is more difficult. Thirty respondents gave an explanation for their answer about single mothers, 52 did so about single fathers, and 206 gave their opinions on the neutral position.

Almost all of the explanations regarding the difficulty of single motherhood emphasized that women tend to be financially poorer than men. Respondents elaborated that it is more difficult for women to find a job, and women usually have a lower level of income than men, and that single mothers are in an even more disadvantageous situation in the labour market. The other theme was the perception that mothers generally have to deal with more tasks than men, but the respondents did not elaborate on this aspect. A 64-year-old female respondent explicitly claimed that single fathers are usually not the real caregivers of their children: “Most of the fathers dump their children on grandparents or find a stepmother as soon as possible. There are some honorable exceptions, but those are very rare.”

Regarding fathers, the most dominant category mentioned was the traditional caregiver role of mothers and how this makes single fathers less competent. Respondents emphasized that women have a maternal instinct, while fathers need to learn how to be a good parent. Fathers were, furthermore, seen as less caring and patient with their children and incapable of understanding children's feelings. For instance, a 31-year-old female respondent highlighted: "Mothers are biologically more capable of meeting their children's needs, they hold them, hug them differently, they organize their tasks better, they sing more beautifully, they are more efficient, and they cook delicious foods." A 21-year-old male respondent highlighted, in particular, that it could be harder for single fathers to raise girls, but he also added that it might not be easier with boys. A 30-year-old male respondent remarked that, in his opinion, it depends on the age of the child. The other connected theme was that fathers do not have a routine regarding performing household tasks. In addition, a group of answers highlighted that single motherhood is more accepted in our society than single fatherhood. As a 26-year-old male respondent explained: "The mother-child relation is highlighted in our society. Single parenthood is more unnatural for fathers, it is not expected, it is alien to the classic male role. It could lead to humiliating situations, or to stigmatization."

Those respondents who selected the neutral position usually emphasized that single mothers and fathers need to face the same problems: They need to do the work of two parents, they have to be both breadwinner and caregiver, and the family has only one income instead of two. Respondents also explained that single parents cannot fulfil the gender-specific tasks of the other parent: "Both partners have strengths and vulnerabilities, and they could compensate for each other. However, there is no balance when there is only one of them; so it can happen that they have different problems, but both have some" (19-year-old female).

Another group of respondents highlighted that, as neither single-father nor single-mother families are traditional ones, the children will suffer in some way, irrespective of the gender of the custodial parent. Two respondents described this aspect as follows: "The two-parent family is the traditional, adequate and balanced" (50-year-old male); and "It is hard to the same extent for both mothers and fathers, as the child is going to be brought up in a broken family. He/she will suffer both financially and emotionally" (33-year-old female).

7. Discussion and Conclusion

The article contributed to the literature by testing the existence of the double standard previously identified in studies from the US on perceptions of single mothers and fathers within another context: Hungary in the 2010s–2020s. This context provided a particularly relevant setting for investigation, as Hungary, since the 2010s, was marked by conservative governments promoting traditional family ideals and gender roles. At the same time, the increasing share of single fathers and more lenient joint-custody legislation suggested that this double standard might be weakening. Furthermore, the article expanded the field by linking perceptions of single parents to the SCM and the concept of involved fatherhood.

The results showed that respondents more often associated positive warmth-related traits—such as heroic, likeable, family-oriented, responsible, or self-sacrificing—with single fathers, similar to findings in the United States. In contrast, perceptions of competence were mixed, with some traits linked more to mothers and others to fathers. Overall, although positive traits were more often attributed to single fathers, single mothers were not viewed negatively; most respondents assigned them either positive or mixed stereotypes, often

conveying pity or compassion. This suggests that in Hungary, the double standard in this dimension exists but is less pronounced.

The second analysis focused on single mothers' and fathers' perceived competence in parenting alone. Results showed that a larger share of the Hungarian population viewed single mothers as just as capable of raising their children as two-parent families, indicating that a double standard exists in the competence dimension. Support for both single mothers and single fathers increased steadily between 1988 and 2024—from 25% to nearly 42% for single mothers, and from 13% to 30% for single fathers. Single mothers consistently received more support, and there was a gap of about 10% throughout the examined period.

Regarding the determinants of single mothers' and fathers' capability, the results showed that the traditional hypothesis that more liberal views on parenting predict more acceptance of both single mothers and fathers, seems to be only partly true: only regarding the breadwinner role of fathers and the caring role of mothers. Meanwhile, in the case of single mothers, the belief that mothers should be primarily responsible for breadwinning was associated with a lower likelihood of accepting single motherhood.

This suggests that, beyond traditional gender views, economic considerations may also play a role. In this context, financial realities likely influenced attitudes, as those who believed mothers should take on the main financial responsibility may also have recognized that women still faced structural disadvantages in the labour market. As a result, they may perceive single motherhood as less viable due to the difficulty of combining breadwinning and caregiving on typically lower incomes and in less secure positions compared to partnered households, where a male partner can help to balance these two roles. The importance of financial resources was also evident in both models when controlling for subjective income status. In both cases, individuals with a better financial position were more likely to support single motherhood or fatherhood, suggesting that financial stability plays a key role in shaping perceptions of single parents.

Furthermore, results also highlighted the importance of incorporating the concept of involved fatherhood in the investigation of these attitudes. Agreement with the idea that fathers should be engaged in playing with their children and serving as role models was associated with a decreased perception of the capability of both single mothers and single fathers. This suggests that, even when practical parenting tasks are seen as manageable by a single parent, the emotional and relational dimensions of parenting remain tied to the ideal of a two-parent family. It also indicates that the notion of involved fatherhood does not necessarily imply that a father is perceived as fully capable of handling all parenting responsibilities on his own.

Meanwhile, qualitative results also showed that gender stereotypes still influenced perceptions, as respondents emphasized that mothers are naturally better caretakers than men, while regarding single mothers, respondents noted that they tended to be poorer. Furthermore, qualitative results indicated that the age of the child is an influential factor, suggesting a smaller gap in perceived competence between single fathers and mothers of older children. Beyond parenting roles, attitudes toward alternative family forms also appeared to be influential in both quantitative and qualitative investigations.

Altogether, these results showed that attitudes partly aligned with the government's policies. While joint custody had become easier, supporting the involvement of both parents and elevating fathers' roles, there was moderate support for the idea that a single parent could raise a child as well as two parents together.

The data also suggested that involved fatherhood was viewed as belonging mainly to two-parent families, not necessarily supporting either single mothers or single fathers. Furthermore, consistent with the government's strong emphasis on "traditional families," the results indicated that acceptance of alternative family types was the most important explanatory factor. This suggests that in Hungary, perceptions of single parents are shaped less by gender stereotypes and more by attitudes toward family norms.

Finally, these results underline that policies supporting parents' work–life balance (e.g., paid leave, childcare, part-time work) can strengthen single mothers' and fathers' perceived ability to raise children. Promoting women's employment and financial support can improve their earning capacity and bolster their dual role as carers and breadwinners. Likewise, encouraging fathers' involvement—especially with young children—can enhance their perceived caregiving competence and narrow the gap in how single mothers and fathers are perceived compared to two-parent families.

Limitations of the study include the fact that the different datasets analysed were collected in different years over the past decade. However, as attitudes and stereotypes typically change slowly, this may introduce some temporal bias, but it likely still reflects stable societal views. Moreover, the study focused more on the competence dimension than on warmth; therefore, qualitative interview data or more specialized survey questions could provide a more nuanced understanding of perceptions related to warmth.

Further research could investigate different subgroups of single parents, as the double standard might be stronger regarding never-married single parents and weaker in the case of widowed or divorced single parents. It would also be important to investigate international differences in these perceptions to explore the link between policies and stereotypes/attitudes.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The dataset generated during the current study is not publicly available, as it contains proprietary information that the author acquired through a license. Information on how to obtain it and reproduce the analysis is available from the corresponding author on request.

LLMs Disclosure

The author utilised ChatGPT (OpenAI) to review the manuscript for grammar and style. ChatGPT was used exclusively for language editing and not for any other aspect of the manuscript.

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