Parents' Attitudes of Persian Family Stereotypes: A Cognitive Linguistic Study

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1. Abstract

This article challenges the idea behind family stereotypes reflected in Persian teenage and youth humor jokes and expressions as well as the Iranian parents' attitudes of them, based on the prototype theory and most specifically the notion of Goodness-Of-Exemplar (GOE) of which a partially distinct linked concept is stereotypicality (Croft & Cruse, 2004).

The most basic definition of stereotype describes it as trait, characteristics or qualities attributed to a group or members of that group based on group membership (Schneider 2004, 24). The phenomenon seems to be deeply embedded in our minds and our culture as well.

For a detailed analysis of the content of Persian family stereotypes, the present descriptive analytic research paper collected 78 pieces of family jokes spread through cyber humor pages and virtual groups illustrating various father/mother role stereotypes. Then, using a three-scale, 10-item questionnaire the attitude of Iranian parents was evaluated.

Findings, explore six frequent features related to the father-role features as being sparing, nonsensical, invective, mean, hard-feeling and betraying, and six most frequent features referred to the mother-role as their fantastic air, scrupulosity (in neat household), indifference, invectiveness, disinterest in husband and children and their talkativeness. Studying parent attitudes indicates that they are not familiar enough with the issue and have no idea how to interpret and react to them.

Keywords: Cognitive Linguistic s, Stereotypes , Persian family .

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Introduction

Iranian families traditionally do care about family values and close relationships among family members. The family size is usually more extended than a so-called nuclear family and people keep connections with the other members who may live far away from them, and this is probably retrieved of the antique Persian communal culture. However, recently a cloud of humorous expressions and jokes has swept among the teenage and youth community, representative of changing these values at least in the minds of the new generation. Since humor can be considered as any verbal/non-verbal behavior, apparently delicate and droll, but demure and drastic in the backend, to manifest the conflicts and inconsistencies, as well as to make us laugh at fissure and flaws of the real life, we take this type of family jokes (here limited to father/ mother role) as kind of novel family stereotypes, breaching the old stereotype of a devoted father and sufferer mother to an apathetic father and impatient mother. This gives urgency to research the issue in detail, before we miss something of our family customs and validation.

Stereotypes, as conceptual categories, help to simplify the social world we inhabit, and are essential to productive thought; as they enrich our mental lives in various ways (Oakes et.al, 1994). By being able to place a person in a particular group, we can draw on a rich mix of theoretical and empirically based knowledge about his behavior and why he does the things he does. We divide the social world into categories not because we lack cognitive capacity, but because we want to create meaningful partitions of this world—ones that will facilitate our behavior (Schneider, 2004). Stereotypes claim that certain people have certain characteristics and can influence how we feel toward people. Stereotypes combine a multitude of attitudes and other mental states into a belief package. They also contain behavioral motivations, such as a tendency toward avoidance or attraction. This behavioral direction is shaped by the content of the stereotype (Buddeberg, 2011), the issue to which we often surprisingly pay little attention. Besides, no matter how well learned, stereotypes would not persist unless they performed some social or cognitive function for people that gained less attempts to discuss as well. The issue of what features handed in to make certain family stereotypes and to serve what functions made us to plan and conduct this study to answer the following questions regarding the Persian family stereotypes:

1. What features constitute the certain family stereotypes to rise up in the language of humor among teenage and the youths?
2. What is the Iranian parents' attitude toward the father/ mother stereotypes?

Next section considers the underlying mechanism and reasons leading to forming certain stereotypes in a communal society from the point of view of various psychologists and cognitive linguists.

Stereotypes as Cognitive Categories

The ability to categorize information about the world lies at the core of human knowledge acquisition and experience accumulation. Categories are groups of distinct abstract or concrete items that the cognitive system treats as equivalent for some purpose (Wang et. al, 2016). The act of categorization is one of the most basic human cognitive activities, as involves the apprehension of some individual entity, some particular of experience as an instance of something conceived more abstractly that also encompasses other actual and potential instantiations. This abstract mental construct is called a conceptual category which is one of the dominant views in cognitive psychology and linguistics. The theory that has the
most influence on the development of cognitive linguistics is the prototype theory and the
notion of Goodness-Of-Exemplar (GOE) of which a partially distinct linked concept is

The prototype view suggests that we assign things to appropriate categories when they are
similar enough to important other category members on important features, i.e. natural
conceptual categories are structured around the ‘best’ examples or prototypes of the
categories. The exemplar view suggests that we use concrete exemplars of a category as
standards to judge category membership. The fact that

similarity is often important for our judgments of category membership added to the
assumption that categories have an essence, aids our thinking about category members in a
variety of ways (Schneider 2004, 118). One of the most robust findings in categorization
research is the graded structure of categories. Every member of a category is not considered
an equally good example of the category; instead, items lie on a spectrum of category
This graded goodness-of-example effect is known as typicality. The standard way in which
typicality is measured is through goodness-of-exemplar (GOE) judgments; for example,
“How good an example is item A of category B?” This measure is so universally accepted
that the concept of typicality is often introduced as synonymous with category goodness. For
example, a classic paper on categorization asserts, “Instead of being equivalent, the members
of a category vary in how good an example (or how typical) they are of their category”
(Barsalou, 1985, p. 629, cited in Kittur et. al, 2006). The reason that typicality and GOE are
so often considered equivalent is quite simple: in most studies of categorization they are
indistinguishable. However, most studies of categorization also use categories structured by
central tendencies and represented by simple features. a fundamental assumption of a central
tendency structure is that the further from the “center” an exemplar gets, the worse an
element of the category it becomes. Importantly, we will refer to “central tendencies” here as
those metrics that depend only on the distribution of individual features. These may include
such metrics as familiarity, frequency of instantiation, shared features, and distance from a
prototype or exemplars. However, some researchers claim that GOE and typicality views are
not equivalent and a typical exemplar of a category is not necessarily an ideal member of that
category (Kittur et. al, 2006). Of course, GOE ratings can be strongly culture-dependent.
Also, Lakoff implies that we are much more likely to generalize properties from typical to
non-typical members than vice versa. In certain cases a known individual may be assumed to
be the typical of the class, for instance, if a person has limited experience of the class.
Typicality is an unconscious and automatic process, as well as a constant concept over a

The stereotypicality, a close but interestingly different concept to typicality, is also a
product of conceptual categorization. That is a natural, inevitable process of perception
(Allport, 1979, 30). It can happen at different levels of our awareness via conscious or
nonconscious processes. We perceive the environment in its richness largely automatically
without having to consciously make the effort to see every single thing. A fully conscious
process requires more effort and tends to be slower. It requires us to involve our conceptual
capacities, cognitive faculties that use concepts such as “bride” to bestow meaning when
describing the woman dressed in white as a bride about to get married. We are fully aware of
this process and can let it influence our actions or help make specific choices (Bargh &
Bar-Tal (1998) claims we continually join new groups as we move through life, and groups actively promote certain beliefs as the price of admission. To the extent these beliefs are seen as shared by group members, they may take on a kind of coercive quality as group beliefs (p.371). Besides, categories affect inferences we draw about people in those categories. This has potentially important implications for the ways we perceive individuals as members of categories, and how willing we are to infer features of other categories on members we do not know (p.113).

Turner (1987) argues that stereotypes are one way in which we differentiate ourselves and our groups from other groups, and do so in a way that is flattering to ourselves. Generally speaking, people have positive reactions to other people who facilitate their goals and values, and negative reactions to those who hinder these. Thus, it is natural both that we categorize people and that we assign groups evaluatively laden traits, or stereotypes. Such a process is universal and usually unconscious (p.235).

Stephan & Stephan (2000:23-45) have argued that when people are threatened, they will be more likely to engage in stereotypic thinking and exhibit their prejudices. One popular version of this theory is scapegoating (Allport, 1954:29). The argument is that people have trouble dealing with their conscious and unconscious anxiety about their shortcomings. As a way of dealing with the anxiety, these shortcomings are projected onto people in various outgroups.

Some studies suggest that when self-esteem (Fein & Spencer, 1997; Sinclair & Kunda, 2000; Spencer, Fein, Wolf, Fong, & Dunn, 1998) or values (Corneille, Yzerbyt, Rogier, & Buidin, 2001) are threatened, people are more likely to rely on negative stereotypes in evaluating out-group members (p.245). Stereotypes are not merely our cognitive take on what the culture preaches, but active attempts to provide explanations for deeply ingrained divisions. The individual perceiver makes use of various cultural representations, but applies them selectively and even creatively to explain the particulars of the social life he or she inhabits.

Stereotypes are weapons in cultural wars (Reicher, Hopkins, & Condor, 1997). Thus stereotypes are somewhat fluid, as the perceiver draws on different aspects of the cultural stereotype to fit the needs of the moment (Oakes et al., 1994) and reflect justifications for existing social, political, and economic arrangements within a given society, but meanings forged in everyday interactions with others as a way of defining relative positions (Van Langenhove & Harre, 1994).

**Methodology**

This study was conducted in two quantitative and qualitative phases. The instruments consisted of humorous piece of family jokes referring to both father and mother roles that were considered as the stereotypical features of father/mother role that the Iranian teenagers and youths are criticizing via making mockery of them. In the quantitative step a number of 156 pieces of family jokes (76 jokes related to mother role and 80 ones regarding father role) were collected from cyber humor pages and virtual groups and analyzed in terms of certain attributes referred to each mother/ father roles excluding the husband/ wife roles. The qualitative experiment was planned to explore the attitude of Iranian parents of the effects of the stereotypical assumptions under consideration on family relationships. 137 subjects participated in the study and the result will be investigated and discussed in details in the following section.
Results and Discussion

The selected data described situations in which either the daughter or son and one of the parents were in a casual conversation or daily story and the interaction resulted in a sense of perplexity and consternation in daughter's/son's mind and the depicted humorous irony makes us laugh at the inconsonance of the observed mother/ father reactions contrasting to their supposed characteristics. In what follows, some instances of Persian jokes of each role-type are represented:

1. The other day, I called dad: hi daddy, I had an accident and they took me to hospital.
   Dad: then you v lost your 1st life, how many remained until the game is over?!!

2. I happened to be the top student of class this semester. And guess what the reward from my parents was: daddy offered not to swich off the fan-conditioner for a week and my mom allowed me to drink water from the bottle!

3. My dad came in my room to find me checking my messages on the cell phone.
   Dad: what the hell are you doing with that?
   Me: wouldn't you think it s much better than a cigarette?
   Dad took his way toward the fan-conditioner to turn it off!

4. Pray not to find you dad's picture on the strangers' profiles on the Father Day!!

5. Last night our next building was all in fire. My dad and me was rushing to help when mom called.. let the trash out on your way!

6. Doctor: ma'm your son suffers from Rubeola.
   Mother: tasteless like his father! If it was on me, I'd choose the scarlet!

7. Mom calls out: I m going to next-door neighbors for a few minutes. Don't forget to check the oven every half hour!

8. I wish once I pour out the potato chips on the floor and my mom says it's ok sweat heart, I'll clean it up!

These are a few exemplars that mirror some of the parent role stereotypes used by teenage and youths to picture today parents characteristics and priorities, such as the indifference and inexorability attributed to father role (ex.1) as well as the economic priorities of him which sacrifice the comfort of other family members, by switching off the fan-conditioner in favor of money-saving affairs. The interesting point is that this "turn-off-the cooler" action gradually generalizes to encouragements (ex. 2) or punishments (ex. 3) instrument. Moreover, the betrayal to wife and children while getting multi-wives is another feature attributed to fathers (ex. 4).
And the features assumed to describe the mother role applied in humors are as the scrupulosity in cleaning the house and carelessness of others’ issues in the ambience (ex. 2, 5, 8) as well as her sense womanish of fantasy, and disinterest in her husband and children (ex. 6). From other characteristic referred to mothers are their being invective (here ironically shown in ex. 8) and talkative (ex. 7).

The six frequent features related to the father-role extracted from the data of this study are respectively their being sparing, nonsensical, invective, mean, hard-feeling and betraying, and the six most frequent features referred to the mother-role are respectively as follows: fantastic air, scrupulosity (in neat household), indifference, invectiveness, disinterest in husband and children and their talkativeness.

In the next step, a number of 150 Iranian educated parents, aged 27-55, invited to participate in the study filling a 10 item, 3-scale attitude questionnaire, to add the qualitative data detailed and more proper information. The questionnaire was designed by the researchers of this study regarding the underlying reasons to form stereotypes discussed in the previous section. 137 questionnaire forms were returned and the answers got analyzed. The findings are demonstrated in table 1, after calculating the frequency and percentage rate.

Table 1. The overall result of parents’ attitude questionnaires

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Q. Items</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>No Idea</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>This is nothing to worry about, just to show their independence and to differentiate their groups from others.</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>This is a negative reaction to their parents’ controlling sense and hindering their goals and values.</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>This may be resulted in the anxiety of exposing to a more real and serious world of responsibilities.</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>This notifies parents of their deficiencies and weaknesses.</td>
<td>78</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>This leads to the new generation disbelief in family system, thus makes a threat to family relationship.</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Description</td>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>This is a threat from our enemies in a cultural soft war.</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>This phenomenon is naturally fluid and need not to care much about it.</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>This leads to propagate the very negative features to future parent generation.</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>This leads to create a gap in parent-children relationships.</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>This is just for fun and has no effect on family relationships.</td>
<td>88%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The obtained data from the attitude questionnaires illustrates the viewpoints of Iranian parents of the stereotypes of parent role among the teenagers and youths. 66% looked at the whole story as funny and no threat to parent-children relationship. Also, 61% had compliant views that these stereotypical jokes formed due to the age of teens and youths and are temporary and transient. Moreover, about 57% of answers disclosed that parents think this warns them to rethink their behaviors and helps them get aware of their shortcomings and faults, since maybe they are too much busy with the challenges of outside responsibilities and affairs, while 45% think the phenomenon arises out of parents’ hindering their goals and values. 37% think the anxiety of exposing the burden of a more real world of charge and obligation. On the other hand, further findings show congruent views of parents as there's no need to worry about the stereotypes of parents roles as elicited from new generation humorous expressions (74%). They also don’t believe in soft war and cultural attacks this way (42%), transferring the so-called negative characteristics to next generation of parents (37%) or the effect of the kind of jokes on making a gap in parent-child relationships (35%). Furthermore, the answer sheets revealed that most of parents had no idea of the power of the mentioned stereotypes to knap the structure of inside-family relationships (73%), that the disregarded today parent-role features pass to the future parent roles (56%) or the thought behind these stereotypes to result in a distance between parents and children.

Conclusions
Stereotypicality is a related notion of the prototype theory in general and of the exemplar view in particular. Most studies of categorization also use categories structured by central tendencies and represented by simple features. We discussed that stereotypicality is a product of conceptual categorization composed of characteristics or qualities attributed to a group or members of that group based on group membership. This quantitative-qualitative research paper challenged the idea behind family stereotypes reflected in Persian teenage and youth humor jokes and expressions as well as the Iranian parents' attitudes of them. The qualitative phase aimed to answer the first question of the study by eliciting what features involved to form today parent-role stereotypes and explored the six frequent features related to the father-role features are respectively their being sparing, nonsensical, invective, mean, hard-feeling and betraying, and the six most frequent features referred to the mother-role are respectively as their fantastic air, scrupulosity (in neat household), indifference, invectiveness, disinterest in husband and children and their talkativeness. Next qualitative phase inquired the attitudes of parents of the effects of spreading parent-role stereotypes among the young generation to respond the second question of the study. Outcomes disclosed a number of facts about both the reasons and reactions of parents to these stereotypical
utterances. Most of parents agreed that these stereotypical jokes formed due to the age of
teens and youths and are temporary and transient, that is in line with Oakes et al. (1994) that
claims stereotypes are fluid and the perceiver draws on different aspects of the cultural
stereotype to fit the needs of the moment. Moreover, most of parents thought the
phenomenon arises out of parents' hindering their goals and values, that is compliant with
Turner (1987) and Stephan & Stephan (2000) that argue people have positive reactions to
other people who facilitate their goals and values, and negative reactions to those who hinder
these. Also, they confirm that the anxiety of exposing the burden of a more real world of
charge and obligation, which is approved with Allport (1954) claiming that people have
trouble dealing with their conscious and unconscious anxiety about their shortcomings.
Surprisingly, a remarkable number of parents felt there's no need to worry about the
stereotypes of parents roles as elicited from new generation humorous expressions that
contradict the underlying reasons behind both the humor and stereotype forming. They also
don't believe in soft war and cultural attacks through family stereotypes which contrast the
ideas of Reicher, Hopkins, & Condor(1997) as they claim stereotypes are weapons in cultural
wars. Another interesting point is the parents' opinion of the impossibility transferring the so-
called negative characteristics to next generation of parents, while Mc Elroy (2011) reports
the so-called "lack of interest in mathematics may come from culturally-communicated
messages about math being more appropriate for boys than for girls", thus the accepted
stereotypes can transfer between generations. Besides, the idea of the inability of the kind of
jokes on making a gap in parent-child relationships doesn't sound reasonable, since the nature
of stereotyping originated from ingrained divisions and as Stephan & Stephan (2000:23-45)
argue when people are threatened by outside-members, they will be more likely to engage in
stereotypic thinking. So, in the first step the young generation categorize themselves apart
from parents and there is a gap that possibly gets bigger after parents' out grading the
children. And finally the items which parents' had no idea of or not sure of their effects, as
the power of such stereotypes to attack family relationships, the transferability of today
parent-role features to the future parent-roles, reveals the necessity of studies on the nature
and power of stereotypes. The concluding point is that "Presumably children are taught
stereotypes by their parents, schools, and churches; such stereotypes are reinforced by
culturally created social realities and by limited contact with individuals from other groups"
(Schneider, 2004: 23).
References


