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Conflicting Influences: A study of emerging adults and their mothers’ marriage attitudes.

Justin J. Hendricks, Adam A. Rogers, Larry J. Nelson*

INTRODUCTION

Emerging adulthood is a period of change and discovery in which young people are able to explore themselves and their world. In particular, Arnett (2000) has suggested that emerging adulthood is a period of identity exploration. Thus, young people, between the ages of 18-25 are at a critical stage of personal development. Recent research suggests that parents and religion are among the factors that contribute to their development (Willoughby et al., in press; Roest et al. 2009; Ebythe, 2003).

Given that parents and religion both appear to influence emerging adults, there is reason to investigate what happens to an emerging adult when the teachings of a religion conflict with what parents believe. To analyze this relationship, we examined a group of Latter-day Saint (LDS) emerging adults and their mothers’ attitudes toward their children’s marriage and educational choices. While, LDS church leaders have emphasized the importance of education, they have also taught that family and marriage are to be the “first objective” (Hinckley, 1996, p. 92), and that marriage is central in LDS doctrine. Therefore, we examined how LDS mothers’ attitudes on the issue of education-before-marriage was related to their LDS emerging-adult children’s behaviors and beliefs.

We hypothesized that (1) mothers who view their child’s education as more important than marriage would have children who report lower levels of religiosity, as well as marital attitudes that are less consistent with LDS Church teachings. And (2) mothers with stronger “education-before-marriage” attitudes would have children who are less settled in certain aspects of their identity, namely dating, family, and values.

METHODS

Sample

N= 99 Emerging adult female and their mothers
N= 77 Emerging adult males and their mothers
100% of emerging adult participants were unmarried. The great majority were Caucasian.

Procedure

Participants completed the Project READY (Researching Emerging Adults’ Developmental Years) questionnaire via the Internet. Participants were recruited through faculty’s announcement of the study in undergraduate courses for extra credit and were provided with a student handbook that had a brief explanation of the study and directions for accessing the online survey. Informed consent was obtained online, and only after consent was given could the participants begin the questionnaires. Each participant was asked to complete a survey battery of approximately 448 items.

VARIABLES

Attitudes of Education Over Marriage

A single item was used to assess whether or not education was a priority before marriage during their emerging adult years. As it was positioned as “My child’s educational pursuits or career development should come before marriage at this time in his/her life”. To mothers it was posed as “My child’s educational pursuits or career development should come before marriage at this time in my life”. Participants indicated their level of agreement on a 6-point Likert scale (very strongly disagree to very strongly agree).

Marriage Attitudes

Participants assessed their marriage attitudes on five different items with scales ranging from “very strongly disagree” to “very strongly agree”.

Importance of Marriage (e.g. “Being married is a very important goal for me”)
Desire to be Married now (e.g. “I’d like to be married now”)
Cohabitation Acceptance (e.g. “A couple will likely be happier in their marriage if they live together first”)
Strength of Faith (e.g. “My religious faith is extremely important to me”)
Ego Identity

Religiosity

Personal Religious Practices Growing Up (e.g., “While growing up, how often did you do personal prayers?”)
Personal Religious Practices Recently (e.g., “During the past 12 months, how often have you studied the scriptures?”)
Family Religious Practices Growing Up (e.g., “While growing up, how often did you have family prayer?”)
Family Religious Practices Recently (e.g., “How often do you have family prayer?”)
Ego Identity

Participants rated themselves on a 6-point scale from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” with statements about their personal identity including:

Family (e.g., “I have family held views concerning my role in my family?”)
Dating (e.g., “If my beliefs about dating are firmly held?”)
Values (e.g., “My values are strongly congruent with the religious beliefs of my family?”)
Religion (e.g., “Regarding religion, my beliefs are likely to change in the near future?”)

RESULTS

Mother’s attitudes about education over marriage were correlated with the following scales. The more mothers felt that their child’s education should come before marriage the following child outcomes occurred:

Marriage Attitudes

FEMALES were:
- less likely to see marriage as an important life goal
- less likely to desire marriage now
- more likely to hold accepting attitudes toward cohabitation

MALES were:
- less likely to report having engaged in personal religious practices growing up
- less likely to report engaging in personal religious practices currently

Religiosity

FEMALES were:
- lower in their strength of faith
- less likely to report having engaged in personal religious practices growing up
- less likely to report engaging in personal religious practices currently

Ego Identity

MALES were:
- less likely to be accepting of cohabitation
- less likely to report having engaged in family religious practices growing up

DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis was confirmed. The stronger mothers endorsed education-before-marriage, the less likely their emerging adult children were to have strongly held convictions about their identity in areas of dating, family, and values.

The second hypothesis was also confirmed. The education-before-marriage attitude was linked with lower levels of religiosity. It was also linked with attitudes which are less consistent with LDS teachings. For example, females were less likely to view marriage as important and more likely to be accepting of cohabitation.

Another noteworthy finding of this study was the strong relationship between the mothers’ and the daughters’ education-before-marriage attitude. However, there was no relationship between the mothers’ and the sons’ education-before-marriage attitude.

Implications of these important findings include:

1. (When separate influences on identity conflict, emerging adults may have more unstable identities.)
2. (When parental and religious influences conflict, it seems that emerging adult children are strongly influenced by parental attitudes.)
3. (Attitudes about central tenets of a religion may be important predictors for its members’ personal religiosity.)
4. (Mothers may carry a unique influence on their daughters’ attitudes toward marriage.)

While the statistical analyses employed preclude making any further assumptions about the causal nature of these relations, the findings do underscore the link between parent attitudes and children’s attitudes, beliefs, and identity, and therefore emphasizes the need for attention and investigation in future research.

REFERENCES


Table 1. Pearson’s Correlation Coefficients: Mothers’ education-before-marriage attitude and child outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
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<th>Males</th>
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<td>Importance of Marriage</td>
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<tr>
<td>Desire to be Married now</td>
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<tr>
<td>Acceptance of Cohabitation</td>
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<td>Religion</td>
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<td>Strength of Faith</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ego Identity</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Religious Identity</td>
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<td>Dating Identity</td>
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Table 2. Correlation between mothers’ and children’s education-before-marriage attitude

<table>
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*p<.01; non-significant results omitted

Faculty Mentor