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Marriage, Coparenting, & Family Work Over Time: A Latent Growth Curve Analysis

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SCHOOL OF FAMILY LIFE

ABSTRACT

Using data from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development, researchers considered the associations between parenting, similarity in parenting, and emotional intimacy. Mothers’ initial level of family work responsibility was the most significant predictor of emotional intimacy for both Fathers and Mothers. More traditional, adult-centered parenting beliefs were also associated with decreased emotional intimacy for Mothers. Similarity in family work and parenting beliefs showed stability over time. In general, similarity in parenting and consensus in family work activities was not as significantly associated with emotional intimacy as the individual parenting constructs.

BACKGROUND AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Becoming parents increases stress, decreases leisure, and changes role division in households. Despite these changes, the addition of a new child may deteriorate, enrich, or have little impact on one’s marital union (Belsky & Hetherington, 1988; Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Cox, Paley, Burchinal, & Payne, 1999; Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrera, 2000). What accounts for the variability in individual trajectories of parents’ marital change? Family systems theory (Bowen, 1978; Minuchin, 1974) suggests that the family is an interconnected unit in which each individual—and each relationship among individuals— influences all the others.

The systemic idea of an “executive subsystem” highlights the importance of the coparenting dyad in family life. Thus, how each spouse parents the children, how the other parent views the parenting, and how spouses parent together (coparenting) should influence the parents’ marital relationship. Coparenting is defined as “the ways that parents work together in their roles as parents” (Furman, 2002, p. 173).

METHODS

Data was taken from the NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development. Researchers recruited participants from 31 hospitals in or near 10 geographic sites across the United States. Recruitment resulted in a sample of 1,364 healthy infants and their families. A subset of married or cohabiting participants was used in this study (n = 1,024 couples).

In cases where complete data was not available at all time points full maximum likelihood estimation was used to account for missing values.

MEASURES

Responsibility for family work and child care (Glymph & Vandell, 1992)

Traditional, adult-centered parenting beliefs (Shafer & Edgerton, 1985)

Similarity between parents in each of the parenting measures (Intraclass Correlations)

ASSESSMENT PLAN

We first calculated similarity between spouses in report of family work and child care responsibility and in traditional parenting beliefs. We used the Intraclass Correlation between parents, adjusted for stereotype accuracy, based on the recommendations of Kenny, Kashy, and Cook (2006).

Next, using latent growth curve analysis in Mplus version 5 (Muthén & Muthén, 2007), we modeled change in each of the variables over time, necessarily considering non-linear trajectories of change.

RESULTS

Based on the model fit indexes, the model fit the data well, χ²(677) = 1062.427, p < .001; CFI = .966; TLI = .952; RMSEA = .024.

In general, parents showed a small amount of similarity in parenting beliefs, with a mean similarity intercept of .103. They showed much more similarity in report of responsibility for family work, with an mean similarity intercept of .315. Similarity scores were stable over time, with little change in mean similarity levels.

Fathers’ mean emotional intimacy intercept was 23.974, with an average linear slope of -.169 and an average quadratic slope of .008.

Mothers’ mean emotional intimacy intercept was 23.838, with an average linear slope of -.221 and an average quadratic slope of .010.

Thus, in our study, mothers’ emotional intimacy decreases at a higher rate than does fathers’. However, the quadratic slope for both mothers and fathers showed a slight increase as children moved into grade school.

Fathers’ intercept for report of family work (2.442) was notably lower than mothers’ (3.972) and both showed stability over time.

Fathers’ also tended to have slightly more traditional parenting beliefs (2.814) than Mothers’ (2.757). Traditional parenting attitudes also showed stability over time for both parents. As would be expected Fathers’ and Mothers’ emotional intimacy intercepts were significantly correlated (r = .437). Their linear and quadratic slopes were also highly correlated (r = .852 and .872 respectively).

For Mothers, her own report of family work responsibility was most highly correlated with her level of emotional intimacy (-.199), with a report of greater responsibility for family work being associated with a decreased level of emotional intimacy.

Interestingly, for Fathers, Mothers’ report of family work responsibility was also most highly associated with his level of emotional intimacy (-.159). Thus, as the Mother shoulders a greater proportion of family work, emotional intimacy declines for both spouses.

Mothers’ intercept for traditional parenting beliefs was associated with a decreased level of emotional intimacy for mothers only (r = .117). Mother and father intercepts of traditional parenting beliefs were also correlated (r = .466).

CONCLUSIONS

Perhaps the key finding of this study is that parenting is associated with emotional intimacy over a significant amount of time.

• For the overall sample, similarity in parenting seems to have only a small effect on emotional intimacy.

• Gendered distinctions between fathers and mothers seem to indicate that spouses may consider the impact of family work and parenting in distinct ways, depending on their gender.

• Future research can examine variability in couple relationships across parenting and marital subsystems. Considering how couples group together may be useful to better understanding the dynamics between the parenting and marital subsystems.

IMPLICATIONS

Couples may do well to periodically evaluate the way they partition roles within the home and consider the impact their roles have on their marriage.