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Parental Influence in Adult Children’s Marital Relationships

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Introduction

Parents’ couple relationship quality is highly associated with their adult children’s relationship quality with their own partners (Amato & Booth, 2001; Amato & Cheadle, 2005).

According to social learning theory, children discover from observing their parents’ interactions that certain behaviors are linked to certain outcomes. They are more willing to follow those behaviors and attitudes which will help them attain their own desired goals. (Akers, La Greca, Cochran, & Sellers, 1989; Bandura, 1977; Sellers, Cochran, & Branch, 2005)

Drawing on Social Learning theory, the current study uses relationship self-regulation as the measure (Wilson, Charker, Lizzio, Hallow, and Kimlin, 2005) to understand how specific behavioral efforts could effectively bring about positive outcomes in couple relationships.

In addition to behavioral efforts, the current study also uses a measure of “familism” (Schwartz, 2007) to explore how parents’ attitudes towards marriage influence their adult children’s couple relationship quality.

The following questions are addressed in the current study: (1) How are parents’ relationship self-regulation patterns associated with adult children’s self-regulation and the value they place on the importance of marriage? (2) How do adult children’s relationship self-regulation and attitudes towards the importance of marriage influence their own relationship quality?

Participants

- 435 men and women, ages 18-77, identified as married, remarried, divorced, or widowed.
- 73 percent of the respondents had lived with both parents for 18 years or more, 27% had lived with both parents for 1 to 17 years.
- 88% of the participants were Caucasians. 12% participants included African Americans, Asians, Latinos and other races.
- 44% of the participants had received a bachelor’s degree or higher education.
- 83% of the respondents were in the first marriage, and 17% were remarried, divorced, or widowed.
- 34% of the participants had yearly gross income under 20,000 US dollars. 20% of the participants had yearly gross incomes between 20,000 and 39,999 US dollars.

Results

Perceived parental relationship self-regulation accounted for 4% of the variance in adult children’s relationship self-regulation and 6% in adult children’s attitudes towards marriage.

Parents’ relationship self-regulation had a positive association with adult children’s relationship self-regulation. Parental relationship self-regulation was also positively associated with adult children’s familialistic orientations towards marriage. Both adult children’s relationship self-regulation and familialistic orientation to marriage contributed to greater relationship satisfaction and stability. Relationship self-regulation had a larger direct influence on relationship satisfaction than did familialistic orientation to marriage.

Conclusions

Findings suggest that children observe, define, and emulate parents’ behaviors. Adult children bring these relationship self-regulation patterns and attitudes into their own future marital relationships. However, the parents’ relationship self-regulation variable only accounted for 4% of the variance in adult children’s relationship self-regulation and 6% of adult children’s attitudes towards the importance of marriage, pointing out that parental influence may be significant yet small. Adult children’s relationship self-regulation had a strong positive influence on adult children’s relationship satisfaction and their relationship stability. The effort they put into their relationships and their use of creativity in improving their relationships was positively associated with their relationship satisfaction and stability.

Findings from this study affirm that parents’ behaviors in relationship were associated with their adult children’s marital attitudes and behaviors. Although parental influence was associated with adult children’s behaviors, the association was found to be significant yet small, indicating that children may differ substantially from their parents’ relationship self-regulation patterns and attitudes. This finding suggests tremendous room for adjustment on the part of children in changing patterns and attitudes they observed in their parents to attain more positive outcomes in their own relationships. Not all aspects of parental relationships will be passed on to the coming generation, and can in fact be changed.

Figure 1

Measures and Analysis

Measures:
- Perceived Parental Relationship Self-regulation: Parental Relationship Satisfaction scale.
- Adult Children’s Relationship Self-regulation variable: Self-Regulation Items scale.
- Adult Children’s Attitudes towards Marriage variable: Importance of Marriage scale.
- Adult Children’s Relationship Satisfaction variable: Relationship Satisfaction scale.
- Adult Children’s Relationship Stability variable: Relationship Stability Scale.

Analysis: