RESEARCH NOTE

The Role of Father Involvement and Mother Involvement in Adolescents’ Psychological Well-being

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Summary

This study of 2,722 British adolescents aged 14–18 years explored whether paternal involvement can protect against low levels of well-being even when maternal involvement and risk and protective factors are controlled for. Results showed that although both father and mother involvement contributed significantly and independently to offspring happiness, father involvement had a stronger effect. Furthermore, the association between father involvement and happiness was not stronger for sons than for daughters. There was no evidence suggesting that family disruption weakens the association between father involvement and happiness, or that father involvement is more strongly related to offspring happiness when mother involvement is low rather than high.

Some psychologists believe that today’s epidemic levels of depression stem from impoverished social connections in our increasingly individualist society (Pennebaker, 1990). In fact, the link of relatedness to subjective well-being is so strong that studies suggest that of all factors that influence happiness relatedness is
at or very near the top of the list (Ryan and Deci, 2001). Rigby’s (2000) recent study, one of the few attempts to disentangle the precursors of well-being in adolescents, showed that perceived support by teachers, best friends, students in class, mother and father contributes significantly to students’ well-being.

Following up this line of research, this study tested whether the perception of social support by one’s immediate family protects against unhappiness in adolescence. In particular, we tested whether perceived father involvement and perceived mother involvement are associated with adolescent well-being. Research on fathering has expanded in scope and breadth over the last several decades (Cabrera et al., 2000) but investigations of and conceptualizations about men’s behaviours in and attitudes toward families are still sparse compared to studies of mothering and family processes more generally. This lack of emphasis on fathering is especially unfortunate given that father involvement has been shown to make a unique contribution to offspring happiness (Hwang and Lamb, 1997) and life satisfaction (Amato, 1994). More relevant to the present study is Flouri and Buchanan’s (2002) study on the moderating role of father involvement and peer victimization in adolescent boys’ life satisfaction, which showed that father involvement contributed significantly to high levels of life satisfaction, and its contribution was greatest in cases where bullying was experienced most. Studies of adults also show supporting evidence. For example, Amato (1994) showed that closeness to fathers during childhood is positively related to adult daughters’ and sons’ educational and occupational mobility and their psychological adjustment and well-being. On the other hand, studies consistently suggest that father absence is a factor contributing to the lower well-being of children in mother-only families (see Amato, 1994, for a review). It is also suggested, however, that fathers play peripheral roles in their children’s lives once economic factors are controlled for. Although other studies have shown that even when these factors are controlled for, father absence continues to be associated with an increased risk of child problems (Amato, 1993), there is sufficient disagreement to cast some doubt on father’s non-economic contributions to children. Additionally, objections have been raised as to whether fathers make an independent contribution above and beyond that of mothers. It is possible that families in which fathers are highly involved are also those in which mothers are involved, and therefore the extra attention of fathers may be largely redundant, once the mother’s involvement is taken into account.

This study tested the hypothesis that, controlling for risk and protective factors, relatively high levels of both perceived paternal involvement and perceived maternal involvement are associated with emotional well-being in adolescents. It was further hypothesized that father involvement is positively associated with adolescent well-being independently of the degree of the mother’s involvement. On the other hand, research has shown that apart from relatedness, self-efficacy (Ryan and Deci, 2001) and, for adolescents in particular, career development and career plans (DeGoede et al., 1999) are also among the most important correlates of emotional well-being. Finally, because the tendency to experience negative affect and emotional well-being are inversely related (DeNeve, 1999; DeNeve and Cooper, 1998), this study also controlled for feelings of negative affect. At the same time, it has been suggested,
although the evidence is inconclusive (see Grossman and Rowat, 1995, for a review),
that family structure can have an effect on self-reported happiness of adolescents
such that adolescents from intact families report higher levels of satisfaction with
their lives than their counterparts from non-intact families. This study also tested
this claim. Like family structure, age and socio-economic status were controlled for
as they can also moderate the relationship between parental involvement and off-
spring well-being. On the other hand, because there is evidence that father involve-
ment has a greater impact on sons than daughters (see Amato, 1994 for a review)
this study explored whether the association between perceived father involvement
and offspring well-being is stronger for boys or girls.

However, it should be pointed out that this study did not directly address the
issue of causal relationships between father involvement and adolescent well-being.
This was a cross-sectional study and therefore claims of causality cannot be made.
Theoretically, this study linked with Amato’s (1994) study which showed that self-
reported closeness to fathers was associated with adult children’s psychological well-
being independently of closeness to mothers. But whereas Amato explored the effect
of emotional closeness to fathers and mothers, this study looked at the effect of
specific aspects of fathering and mothering as perceived by the adolescent.

Method

Participants

The data for this study came from a confidential questionnaire researching the views
and experiences of British adolescents aged between 14 and 18 years. In all, 2,722
adolescents of whom 1,124 were male and 1,402 female (196 adolescents did not
state their gender) took part in the study. A total of 8,500 anonymous questionnaires
were distributed into schools and youth clubs where entire classes or groups under-
took to complete them, usually within the school day or youth club setting. A tape
recording of the questions was provided for those who had trouble with reading.
Equal numbers of girls and boys were targeted with as wide a range of educational
institutions as possible. In schools, head teachers gave permission for the question-
naires to be distributed. People not in education were reached via hostels, care homes
and probation services. The mix across the country included inner-city and rural
locations. The majority of the sample lived in England. Only 3.6 per cent of the
closest sample came from Scotland, 1.5 per cent from Wales, 0.9 per cent from Northern
Ireland and 0.7 per cent from the Republic of Ireland. A sizeable 24.5 per cent lived
in London, 18.4 per cent in the north-west of England, 5.1 per cent lived in the
north-east, 7.8 per cent in Yorkshire and Humber, 2.2 per cent in the south-west,
17.6 per cent in the south-east, 5.2 per cent in east Midlands and 7.1 per cent in the
east. Of the 2,722 adolescents who took part in the study 923 (33.9 per cent) reported
that the highest educational qualification achieved in their family was a university
degree, and 167 adolescents (5.9 per cent) reported that no one in their family
worked, which is significantly lower than the average proportion of workless house-
holds in Britain (19 per cent) at present (Living in Britain, 1998). However, 20.5 per cent of participants reported that they had received free school meals at some point during their schooling, which compares well with the 19.8 per cent of pupils known to be eligible for free meals in nursery and primary schools and 17.5 per cent of pupils in secondary schools in England (Statistics of Education, 1998).

Measures

The measures used in the study were as follows:

Happiness. Happiness was assessed with a 1-item measure asking participants to rate how often they feel ‘happy and confident’ about themselves on a 4-point scale anchored with ‘never’ and ‘often’. Of the 2,722 adolescents, 2.9 per cent answered ‘never’, 6.8 per cent ‘hardly ever’, 47.9 per cent ‘sometimes’, and 42.4 per cent ‘often’. The 4-point scale was subsequently recoded into a dichotomous one as ‘never’, ‘hardly ever’ or ‘sometimes’ as opposed to ‘often’.

Self-efficacy. Five items measured in 5-point scales anchored with ‘strongly disagree’ and ‘strongly agree’ were taken from the Measure of Guidance Impact (MGI), developed for the Employment Department by the National Foundation for Educational Research (Christophers et al., 1993) to measure self-efficacy. The items were: ‘I have made a plan for my future working life’, ‘I know what I would need to get into the education or training that interests me’, ‘I know what I would need to get into the job that interests me’, ‘I can see the steps I must go through to make a decision’ and ‘I know myself well enough to know what kind of help I want’. Cronbach’s alpha was .80.

Feelings of depression. A 3-point measure asking participants if they ‘ever feel depressed’. Answers were ‘often’, ‘sometimes’ or ‘never’.

Father involvement. Father involvement was measured with four of the five items of Flouri and Buchanan’s (2002) father involvement scale. Participants were asked to indicate on a 4-item 3-point scale how involved their father (or father figure) was with them. Participants were asked to what extent their father (or father figure) ‘spends time with you’, ‘talks through your worries with you’, ‘takes an interest in your school work’, and ‘helps with your plans for the future’. Cronbach’s alpha was .83.

Mother involvement. To assess perceived mother involvement questions comparable to those asked about the father or father figure were used. Participants were asked to indicate on a 4-item 3-point scale how involved their mother (or mother figure) was with them. Participants were asked to what extent their mother (or mother figure) ‘spends time with you’, ‘talks through your worries with you’, ‘takes an
interest in your school work’, and ‘helps with your plans for the future’. Cronbach’s alpha was .81.

*Parental conflict*. A dichotomous item asking participants to indicate whether ‘conflict at home’ made them stressed or not.

*Age*. Age was measured in years, ranging from 14 to 18.

*Gender*. Gender was ‘male’ or ‘female’.

*Socio-economic status*. SES was assessed by asking participants if they have ever received free-school meals.

*Family structure*. The structure of the parental family was ‘intact’ if the participants stated that they lived with both their parents and ‘non-intact’ if they reported that they lived otherwise (i.e. lived with a parent, in a stepfamily, with other relatives, on their own, were cared for in a home, etc).

**Results**

Of the 2,722 adolescents who completed the questionnaire 1,745 (64.1 per cent) reported that they lived with both their parents and 977 (35.9 per cent) said that they lived otherwise. There was no difference in the distribution of gender in the two family structures (chi-square = .01, df: 1, p > .05). As expected, father involvement and mother involvement were correlated ($r = .42, p < .001$). To explore the specific effects of our independent variables on self-reported happiness, a hierarchical logistic regression analysis was carried out (Hair *et al*., 1995). The results are shown in Table 1.

As can be seen in Table 1, of the socio-demographic characteristics of the participants only male gender was positively related to self-reported happiness. In Model 2 we entered the family variables of structure and conflict and found that, apart from male gender, which continued to be significant, age was also positively and parental conflict was negatively related to self-reported happiness. These variables continued to be significant in Model 3, which included the ‘internal’ variables of self-reported self-efficacy and feelings of depression. As expected, depression was negatively and self-efficacy was positively related to self-reported happiness. Model 4 included father involvement, whereas Model 5 included mother involvement. With both father involvement and mother involvement included simultaneously in Model 6, each made a significant contribution to adolescent happiness. As can be seen in this final model (chi-square = 288.702, df: 10, p < .001), neither family structure nor parental conflict had a significant effect on happiness. As in the previous models, compared to girls, boys were more likely to report often feeling happy. Self-efficacy and age were positively and depression was negatively related to happiness. Socio-economic status was not a significant predictor of happiness in any model.
Table 1 Hierarchical logistic regression results showing predictors of self-reported happiness (N = 1907)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Model 1 OR(CI)*</th>
<th>Model 2 OR(CI)*</th>
<th>Model 3 OR(CI)*</th>
<th>Model 4 OR(CI)*</th>
<th>Model 5 OR(CI)*</th>
<th>Model 6 OR(CI)*</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Socio-demographic characteristics</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Free-school meals</td>
<td>.996 (.887, 1.120)</td>
<td>1.013 (.897, 1.143)</td>
<td>1.014 (.894, 1.151)</td>
<td>1.024 (.902, 1.163)</td>
<td>1.041 (.916, 1.183)</td>
<td>1.043 (.918, 1.185)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>1.052 (.970, 1.141)</td>
<td>1.087 (1.000, 1.181)*</td>
<td>1.098 (1.008, 1.191)*</td>
<td>1.115 (1.022, 1.216)*</td>
<td>1.117 (1.023, 1.219)*</td>
<td>1.123 (1.029, 1.226)**</td>
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<td><strong>Family variables</strong></td>
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<td>Intact family structure</td>
<td>1.100 (.983, 1.232)</td>
<td>1.077 (.958, 1.211)</td>
<td>1.045 (.928, 1.177)</td>
<td>1.008 (.893, 1.137)</td>
<td>1.000 (.866, 1.129)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Parental conflict</td>
<td>.813 (.738, .896)**</td>
<td>.899 (.812, .996)*</td>
<td>.923 (.832, 1.023)</td>
<td>.929 (.837, 1.031)</td>
<td>.938 (.845, 1.041)</td>
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<td><strong>'Internal' variables</strong></td>
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<td>Often depressed</td>
<td>.406 (.335, .491)**</td>
<td>.915 (.342, .503)**</td>
<td>.422 (.348, .512)**</td>
<td>.425 (.350, .515)**</td>
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<td>Sometimes depressed</td>
<td>.758 (.664, .865)**</td>
<td>.751 (.658, .858)**</td>
<td>.760 (.665, .868)**</td>
<td>.765 (.661, .864)**</td>
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<td>Self efficacy</td>
<td>1.067 (1.037, 1.098)**</td>
<td>1.059 (1.029, 1.091)**</td>
<td>1.058 (1.028, 1.090)**</td>
<td>1.056 (1.025, 1.087)**</td>
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<td><strong>Parental involvement variables</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Mother involvement</td>
<td>1.128 (1.071, 1.188)**</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.071 (1.013, 1.133)*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Father involvement</td>
<td></td>
<td>1.138 (1.091, 1.188)**</td>
<td>1.113 (1.063, 1.166)**</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chi-square (df)</td>
<td>101.870 (3)**</td>
<td>124.052 (5)**</td>
<td>246.464 (8)**</td>
<td>267.733 (9)**</td>
<td>282.879 (9)**</td>
<td>288.702 (10)**</td>
</tr>
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</table>

* Odds Ratio (95 per cent Confidence Intervals); *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.
The next step in the analysis involved examining possible moderator variables. We first calculated interaction terms between gender and father involvement, and between gender and mother involvement and entered them in the model along with all the other variables shown in Model 6. However, neither the interaction between gender, mother involvement and happiness (OR = .972, 95 per cent CI = 924, 1.023, p > .05), nor the one between gender, father involvement and happiness (OR = 1.013, 95 per cent CI = .971, 1.056, p > .05) were significant. Next, we calculated interaction terms between family structure and paternal and maternal involvement. Again, neither the interaction between family structure, mother involvement and happiness (OR = 1.045, 95 per cent CI = .991, 1.102, p > .05), nor the one between family structure, father involvement and happiness (OR = 1.032, 95 per cent CI = .987, 1.079, p > .05) were significant. This finding is inconsistent with the notion that family disruption makes the father–child relationship less salient at least in respect to offspring happiness. Finally, to see if the impact of father involvement depends on the degree of the mother’s involvement with the adolescent, we included the interaction term between father involvement and mother involvement in model. The interaction term was again insignificant (OR = 1.005, 95 per cent CI = .986, 1.025, p > .05) however.

Discussion

The present study was able to go beyond previous studies of parental involvement and adolescent emotional well-being by considering father involvement independently from mother involvement and investigating a variety of moderator variables. The results generally supported the notion that fathers are salient figures in the lives of their adolescents. As hypothesized, the psychological well-being of adolescents was related independently to the degree of perceived paternal involvement and to the degree of perceived maternal involvement. In fact, for self-reported happiness the unique effect of perceived father involvement carried more weight than that of perceived mother involvement.

Some psychological research suggests that fathers are more important in the development of sons than daughters. However, this study found no evidence to support this notion. Father involvement appeared to be as closely bound up with the well-being of daughters as it is with that of sons. This study did not find any evidence to support the notion that family disruption weakens the salience of fathers for children’s well-being either.

Caution is needed in interpreting these findings, however. To start with, both the main dependent variable of the study (self-reported happiness) and two of the main predictor variables (depression and parental conflict) were single-item proxies. Second, it is possible that some of the respondents might have come from the same family and therefore it is possible that there is a degree of clustering within the data. Third, the results from this cross-sectional study do not allow us to establish which factors, if any, have a causal status. While it is possible that father’s and mother’s involvement may protect against unhappiness in adolescence, it is also possible that
an ‘unhappy’ or ‘difficult’ adolescent may elicit low levels of father and mother involvement. Even though this study could not make any causality claims, it showed, however, fathers’ involvement and mothers’ involvement are positively related to the psychological well-being of their adolescents and arguably their provision can make an important contribution to their children’s well-being.

References


Acknowledgements

This study is based on data from the Reach for the Sky project, undertaken by Oxford University in association with the charity Young Voice, funded by Sky TV.