

Was Your Glass Left Half Full? Family Dynamics and Optimism

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Students' levels of a frequently studied adaptive schema (optimism) as a function of parenting variables (parental authority, family intrusiveness, parental overprotection, parentification, parental psychological control, and parental nurturance) were investigated. Results revealed that positive parenting styles were positively related to the presence of optimism, whereas negative parenting styles were inversely related to the presence of optimism. In addition, the examined parenting variables explained nearly 50% of the variance in students' optimism.

For over a century, psychologists have argued that numerous parental behaviors have wide-ranging and significant influences on the thoughts, behaviors, and emotions of children (Maccoby, 1992, 2007). It is believed that these influences can be beneficial or costly for the children and can constrict or widen the possibilities for children's futures (Bugental & Grusec, 2006). While the theories explaining this relationship have shifted

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historically with the psychological paradigm of the time, the conviction has remained that parenting behaviors influence many aspects of children's internal and external lives.

Within this context, Piaget (1954) and Bowlby (1969, 1973) posited that parental practices contribute to the early development of internal working models (schemas) of reality. These schemas serve as an organizational framework for the way people make sense of their lives (Leahy, Beck, & Beck, 2005). The schemas also act as lenses in a person's life, influencing the way one selects, interprets, organizes, and evaluates experiences (e.g., Beck, 1995; Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1979; Milton, 1981; Persons, 1989).

Included in this group of internal cognitive working models (i.e., schemas) is a particularly well-studied adaptive schema, namely optimism (e.g., Rogers, Hansen, Levy, Tate, & Sikkema, 2005; Schou, Ekeberg, & Ruland, 2005). Optimism is the perception that there is more positive than negative in life and that things will work out for the best (Seligman, 1995). This adaptive schema has far-reaching positive implications for emotional health and personal well-being (e.g., Seligman, 2002, McNicholas, 2002; Wimberly, Carver, & Antoni, 2008, Isaacowitz, 2005).

Because optimism is a schema that is thought to be extremely protective and adaptive (Frederickson, 1998), it seems fitting to examine the extent to which parenting behaviors can predict optimism. If there are specific methods of parenting that increase the chances of a child forming the optimistic schema, then parents may be able to offer their children "psychological immunization," as proposed by Martin Seligman in *The Optimistic Child* (1995).

Indeed, it seems logical to hypothesize that various parenting behaviors will predict an individual's optimism. Because psychological study has historically been dominated by the research of disorders (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), we must begin our evidential basis for this hypothesis by looking at the ways in which parenting styles and behavior predict depression.

Many researchers have demonstrated that different parenting characteristics are clearly associated with levels of depression in children (e.g., Dallaire, Pineda, Cole, Ciesla, Jacques, LaGrange, & Bruce, 2006), adolescents (e.g., Brennan, Le Brocque, & Hammen, 2003), and adults (e.g., Bok & Taris, 1997). Some of these characteristics are inversely related to depression, such as parental nurturance (Garber, Robinson, & Valentiner, 1997; Eisenberg, Gershoff, Fabes, Shepard, Cumberland, Losoya, Guthrie, & Murphy, 2001) and authoritative parenting (Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991; Radziszewska, Richardson, Dent, & Flay, 1996). Other parental characteristics are positively related to depression, such as parental authoritarianism (Simons & Conger, 2007), parental psychological control (Bean, Barber, & Crane, 2006; Garber, Robinson, & Valentiner, 1997), parental overprotection (Denollet, Smolderen, van den Broek, & Pederson, 2007), parental intrusiveness (Martin, Bergen, Roeger, & Allison, 2004), and parental divorce (Marquardt, 2005).

Based upon Beck's (1976) theoretical and empirical framework for depression, many researchers have recently begun to link depression with the presence or absence of certain schemas. In a subset of this field of research, depression tends to be linked with an absence (or weakness) of the optimism schema. There is evidence that depression is related to a weaker optimism schema in young adolescents (Yarcheski, Mahon, &

Yarcheski, 2004), high school and university students (Jackson, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Pancer, 2005), adult men (Giltay, Zitman, & Kromhout, 2006), and adult women (e.g., Yamashita, Iwamoto, & Yoshida, 2003, Grote, Bledsoe, Larkin, Lemay, & Brown, 2007).

Because of the substantial links between parenting and depression as well as between depression and optimism, it is reasonable to expect that parenting styles would also be associated with a stronger or weaker presence of optimism. Thus, children who experience negative parenting should demonstrate a weaker presence of optimism. In a similar way, children who experience positive parenting should experience a stronger presence of optimism.

The present study looked at college students' perceptions of various parenting variables as being predictive of the presence of optimism, an adaptive schema, in the student. It is hypothesized that positive parenting characteristics (parental nurturance and authoritativeness) will be positively related to optimism and that negative parenting characteristics (authoritarianism, parental inconsistency, family intrusiveness, parental psychological control, parentification, parental overprotection, and parental divorce) will be negatively related to optimism.

It is important to note a couple of reasons for looking at students' perceptions of parenting rather than at other measures of parenting. First, Piaget's theory of schema development states that schemas are constructed by the individual, and thus are influenced only by what the individual perceives (Wadsworth, 1996). Secondly, viewing this study in the light of symbolic interactionist theory may be very helpful. Symbolic interactionists (e.g., Cooley, 1902) suggest that one's view of the self and of the world is more influenced by how one perceives interactions with others than by the interactions

themselves. Therefore, an individual's schemas (i.e., his or her perceptions of the self, the world, and others) will be influenced more by how the individual perceives interactions with family members than the interactions themselves. It is with this in mind that the present study aims to make connections between perceived parenting behaviors and maladaptive and adaptive schemas.

Method

Participants

Participants were 79 university students recruited through various classes. Some received credit or extra credit in a psychology class for participation. Data for seven participants were discarded due to incomplete questionnaires. For the remaining participants, 17 were from non-intact families and 55 were from intact families. Twenty males and 52 females provided data. The mean age was 22 years old.

Materials

Parental Nurturance. This variable was measured by the Parental Nurturance Scale (PNS; Buri, Misukanis, & Mueller, 1988), which consists of 24 statements to which participants were asked to respond on a Likert scale with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The statements, such as "My mother is easy for me to talk to," or "I don't feel that my mother enjoys being with me" (reverse scored), are used in order to measure the extent to which the participant perceives his or her relationship with his or her mother as being close, warm, accepting, and nurturing.

Each participant completed two forms of this scale, with one measuring the perceived nurturance of the participant's mother and the other measuring the perceived nurturance of his or her father.

Parental Authority. The Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ; Buri, Louiselle, Misukanis, & Mueller, 1988) was used to measure Parental Authority. This scale consists of 30 statements to which participants were asked to respond on a Likert scale with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). These statements evaluate the type of authority exercised by the parents. There are three categories of parental authority measured in this questionnaire: permissiveness (low control), authoritarianism (rigid control with little reasoning), and authoritativeness (flexible control with a good amount of reasoning). One statement measuring parental permissiveness is, “As I was growing up, my mother allowed me to decide most things for myself without a lot of direction from her.” An example of a statement measuring parental authoritarianism is, “As I was growing up, my mother let me know what behaviors she expected of me, and if I didn’t meet those expectations, she punished me.” One of the statements measuring parental authoritativeness is, “As the children in my family were growing up, my mother consistently gave us direction and guidance in rational and objective ways.”

Participants completed two versions of this scale, one evaluating the parental style of the participant’s mother, and the other evaluating the parenting style of the participant’s father.

Family Intrusiveness. The measurement for this variable was the Family Intrusiveness Scale (FIS; Gavazzi, Reese, & Sabatelli, 1998), which is composed of 13 statements to which the participant responds on an interval scale with responses ranging from 1 (never) to 7 (always). These statements, such as, “Family members tell me what I

should be doing with my career,” measure the extent to which the participant’s family intrudes in his or her personal affairs.

Psychological Control. The Psychological Control Subscale of the Children’s Report of Parental Behavior Inventory (CRPBI; Schaefer, 1965) was used to measure psychological control. This is a 10-item subscale that measures the amount of psychological control a parent employs when dealing with a child. Psychological control is mostly composed of emotional manipulation. Items such as “My mother is a person who, if I have hurt her feelings, stops talking to me until I please her again,” are responded to on a scale composed of 1 (not like her), 2 (somewhat like her), and 3 (a lot like her).

Participants completed two versions of this scale, one measuring the psychological control employed by the participant’s mother, and the other measuring the psychological control employed by the participant’s father.

Parental Overprotection. The Parental Bonding Instrument: Overprotection Subscale (PBI-O; Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979) measured parental overprotection. This subscale is a collection of 13 statements of parental attitudes and behaviors. The statements are meant to measure the extent to which parents did not allow the individual freedom and/or independence. One such statement is, “My mother invaded my personal privacy.” The participant was then asked to rate the extent to which the statement is like his or her mother on a scale from 1 (not like her) to 4 (exactly like her).

Participants completed two versions of this scale. The first measured the overprotection of the participant’s mother. The second measured the overprotection of the participant’s father.

Parentification. This variable was measured by a modified version of the Parentification Scale (PS; Mika, Bergner, & Baum, 1987) which includes 30 descriptions of behaviors and responsibilities that one may be expected to shoulder as a child. One such statement is, “One parent would come to me to discuss the other parent.” Participants were asked to rate the frequency of the behavior or responsibility before age 16 on a five-point scale from 1 (never) to 5 (always). The goal of this scale is to get a measure of how much the participant was asked to act like a parent while he or she was still a child.

Optimism. The Revised Life Orientation Test (LOT-R; Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 1994) was used to measure optimism. This scale contains six statements, three of which relate to a person’s optimism, such as, “In uncertain times, I usually expect the best” and three of which relate to a person’s pessimism, such as, “If something can go wrong for me, it will.” Participants respond to these statements on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). In addition to the optimism and pessimism scores, there is a composite optimism score, which is computed by adding the answers on the optimism subscale to the pessimism subscale reverse-scored.

Demographic Information. Participants also provided information about their age, gender, and parents’ marital status.

Procedure

Participants were given a packet containing all of the questionnaires, which had been counterbalanced. Participants were instructed to answer with their initial response. They were told that their data were anonymous and they were asked to answer all

questions honestly. Participants were reminded that it was important to complete every questionnaire and not to spend too much time on any one item.

Results

Parenting variables were entered into multiple regression analyses as predictors of the strength of the optimism schema for the research participants who came from intact families. Data from participants from non-intact families were not entered into analyses due to the qualitatively different structure of these families (Marquardt, 2005). Rather than employing the more typical criterion of the strength of the bivariate correlations as the sole basis for entry of the independent variables in the regression equations, in the present analyses, the parenting factors were broken into three groups: (a) the non-nurturance variables, (b) the nurturance variables, and (c) inconsistencies between the mother and father in the parenting variables. These three groups were then used for the order of entry of the individual variables into the regression analyses (i.e., non-nurturance variables first, then the nurturance variables, and lastly, the inconsistency scores). Within each group, variables were entered based upon the strength of the bivariate correlations.

The group of non-nurturance variables included the authority variables (permissiveness, authoritarianism, and authoritativeness), parental overprotection, parental psychological control, family intrusiveness, and parentification.

The second group of variables consisted of maternal and paternal nurturance. This group was saved to be entered into the regression analysis second in an effort to avoid an exaggeration of the influence of parental nurturance in the explanation of the optimism schema. Admittedly, all of the variables employed in the present study have a subjective element to them (since all measurements were based upon the personal perspective of the

participants themselves). But participants' assessments of parental nurturance may be especially problematic in this regard. Therefore, the nurturance variables were entered into the regression only after the non-nurturance variables were entered.

The third group consisted of inconsistencies between the mother and the father. Inconsistencies were evaluated for all variables for which participants completed separate scales for mother and father: authority, psychological control, overprotection, and nurturance. Inconsistency in authority was calculated as the absolute value of the mother's authoritarianism score minus the father's authoritarianism score (i.e., |mother's score – father's score|). The authoritarianism scores were used for two reasons: (1) this difference (among the authority differences) was most strongly correlated to the total for the students' schemas and (2) the nature of authoritarianism in a parent is such that it is strongly inversely related to permissiveness and authoritativeness, so that differences between mothers and fathers in authoritarianism will also take into account differences between parents in permissiveness and authoritativeness. Inconsistency in psychological control, overprotection, and nurturance were all calculated with the absolute value of the mother's score minus the father's scores. These inconsistency variables were entered last into the regression analysis because it seemed most efficacious to look at the variance such inconsistencies explained beyond the variance explained by variables that are more commonly studied.

Results of the multiple regression analysis with parenting variables as they are predictive of optimism are summarized in Table 1. Family intrusiveness accounted for 25.8% ($p < .001$) of the total variance in optimism with father authoritativeness adding an additional 8.8% ($p < .05$) and mother overprotection an additional 4.8% ($p < .05$). In

addition to these variables, there were two other variables that approached significance in the multiple regression equation: father's nurturance adding 4.8% ($p < .10$) explained variance and difference in nurturance adding 4.6% ($p < .10$) explained variance. When including these variables, the total variance in optimism explained is 48.8%.

Table 1.

Multiple Regression with Family Dynamics as predictors of Optimism (Composite LOT-R)

variable	Δr^2	p
Family Intrusiveness	.258	<.001
F Authoritative	.088	<.05
M Overprotection	.048	<.05
M Psych Control	.001	<i>ns</i>
M Authoritative	.001	<i>ns</i>
F Overprotection	.002	<i>ns</i>
F Psych Control	.003	<i>ns</i>
F Nurture	.048	<.10
M Nurture	.001	<i>ns</i>
Difference in Authority	.011	<i>ns</i>
Difference in Nurture	.046	<.10
Difference in Psych Control	.023	<i>ns</i>
Difference in Overprotection	.014	<i>ns</i>

Discussion

As the results demonstrate, the hypotheses were supported. Negative parenting variables were predictive of a lower presence of optimism. Additionally, positive parenting variables were predictive of a higher presence of optimism. The relationships between specific parenting variables and specific groups of schemas are quite interesting.

Schemas are formed when an individual encounters an event that he or she needs to interpret, organize, or classify. If an individual experiences an event for which he or she does not have an applicable schema, the individual will form a new schema or will strive to make that experience fit into existing cognitive frameworks. When an individual uses an existing schema in the interpretation of an event, that schema is then

strengthened. As a schema is strengthened, it becomes more generalizable and more difficult to change. Since children have numerous daily encounters with their parents, the schemas through which the children interpret their relationships with their parents are continually strengthened. It is understandable, then, that parenting variables are so predictive of this particular schema.

Not only is this relationship understandable but it is also important and influential. Though the analyses included in this research were correlations and multiple regressions (and therefore cannot ensure that parenting directly influences the optimism schema), there are some very practical implications for these findings. In the promissory note to his book *The Optimistic Child*, Martin Seligman elucidates the potential, and need, for psychological immunization for children (1995). Optimism is a positive schema that is able to broaden the set of actions and thoughts a person sees as possible in situations, and it also serves to build personal internal resources (Fredrickson, 1998). This function of broadening and building allows optimism to act as a resilience tool for individuals, thus making them less susceptible to psychological disorders. The findings discussed in this paper demonstrate ways in which parents can provide their children with this “psychological immunization.”

Family intrusiveness was the single most powerful variable in the explanation of variance in students’ optimism. The nature of family intrusiveness is such that it does not matter what the individual does; it seems as if his or her family will never be satisfied. This trait is what sets intrusive families apart from families who are close and involved in each other’s lives in a healthy manner. People who experience family intrusiveness may then begin to think that no matter what they do, their families will be disappointed in

them and will see them as failures. The perception of inevitable failure (at least in the eyes of one's family) would logically lower one's optimism. An individual cannot be optimistic while at the same time expecting failure in or negative outcomes from every option in every situation.

Father authoritativeness is also significantly predictive of a student's optimism. Parents who are authoritative have healthier relationships with their children (Durbin, Darling, Steinberg, & Brown, 1993). The children over time begin to expect positive exchanges between themselves and their parents. Viewing one's relationship with his or her father through this expectation of good outcomes will strengthen the optimistic schema, which can then generalize to other situations. The relationship between father nurturance and optimism seems to reflect the same sort of mechanism. The child comes to expect good outcomes in many different settings involving his or her father, leading to a strengthened optimistic schema.

Mother overprotection involves excessive maternal worry, a lack of boundaries between the mother and the child, and freedom and autonomy withheld from the child. Mother overprotection is significantly predictive of optimism. This relationship is not as clear as some of the others, though it may be mediated by locus of control. There are two types of locus of control: internal and external. People who have an internal locus of control believe that they have some amount of control over their lives and that consequences come from their actions. People with external locus of control believe that consequences come randomly and that there are external factors (e.g., luck, fate, others' actions) that determine the state of the individual's life (Rotter, 1966). It would make sense that maternal overprotection would give the individual a sense of external locus of

control. Children would learn over time that the circumstances of their lives are controlled by another person (i.e., the child's mother). This idea could then generalize to a generally external locus of control, which is negatively related to optimism (Seligman, 2002).

Future Directions:

There are many interesting factors that merit further exploration. One of these factors is the apparent difference in the contributions of mothers' behavior versus fathers' behavior to the prediction of an individual's optimism. Further research may explore whether there are mechanisms underlying the relationship between mothers' behaviors and optimism distinct from those underlying the relationship between fathers' behaviors and optimism. If there indeed are distinct mechanisms, it is important to understand the implications of this for parents in the day-to-day goings-on of raising children.

Another avenue of research that follows from the results outlined above is to empirically examine the notion of "psychological immunization" by studying the ways in which optimism may mediate the relationships between parenting and negative outcomes for the children. For example, as outlined in the introduction to this paper, negative parenting behaviors are related to higher levels of depression and positive parenting behaviors to lower levels of depression. It is possible and even probable, given the relationships described here, that the roles parents play in a child's optimistic schema mediates this relationship. Thus, then, certain types of parenting would offer psychological immunization in the form of optimism.

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