

The Implications of Early Family Experiences for Adolescents’ Perceived Romantic Competence

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Abstract:

Cultivating healthy romantic relationships is an important component of development. Youth’s perception of their competence plays a vital role in navigating these relationships. This study examined the effects of early family experiences, including both marital relationship dynamics and parent-child relationship quality, on adolescent perceived romantic competence. The data was drawn from a longitudinal study that tracked 201 families which included mothers’, fathers’ and their first born and second born children (studied from middle childhood through adolescence). All of the subjects identified as European American, but represented a range of working class and middle class families. Results from regression analyses revealed that as mothers’ reports of marital conflict increased adolescents’ reports of romantic competence decreased. Results also revealed that adolescents’ reports of intimacy with mothers’ was positively related to romantic competence.

Introduction

In the early 20th century, the Western cultural practice of adolescent romantic relationships emerged (Collins, Welsh, & Fuman, 2009). Cultivating healthy romantic relationships is an important component of development (Smetana, Campione-Barr, & Metzger, 2006). As a recent phenomenon, adolescent romance has received little scholarly attention (Giordano, Longmore, & Manning, 2006). The short duration of these relationships may partially account for why there is a lack of research on this topic (Collins et al., 2009). Adolescent romantic experiences have been linked with aspects of individual development and adjustment, including identity formation, satisfying peer relationships, and sexual identity development (Mueller, 1980; Smetana et. al, 2006). Any number of these factors affects the quality of romantic relationships in adolescents, which warrants researchers’ attention (Furman & Collins, 2009). This project examines the connection between adolescents’ early childhood experiences and their young adolescent romances.

Given that adolescent romantic relationships are typically short-lived, which makes them difficult to address, researchers have begun to turn their attention to the related concept of perceived romantic competence. Romantic competence refers to the ability to “facilitate the acquisition, development, and maintenance of mutually satisfying relationships (Hansson, 1984). Romantic competence has been linked to measures of passion, intimacy and commitment in romantic relationships (Shulman, Davila, & Schachar-Shapira, 2011). Romantic competence is also associated with positive features of relationship experiences that are typically reflective of high quality relationships (Shulman, Davila, & Schachar-Shapira, 2011). The aim of the current study was to explore linkages between family experiences in early childhood and perceptions of romantic competence.

Our research draws on data from a sample of 201 families with children that were studied longitudinally from middle childhood through late adolescence. Participating families all consisted of two married parents, with two siblings that were about one to four years apart in age. Given the ages of interest in the current study, we focused exclusively on the older sibling. Two domains of family experiences were investigated. First, we used the Social Learning framework to evaluate the impact of parents’ marital quality on romantic competence (Brauer & Tittle, 2012). Next, attachment framework (Bowlby, 1969) enabled us to assess how the quality of parent-child relationships affected romantic competence in adolescence.

Literature Review

Social Learning Theory

According to Social Learning Theory, people tend to observe and model the behaviors, attitudes and emotional reactions of others (Brauer & Tittle, 2012). Parents’ relationships may serve as a model for how adolescents interact with their romantic partners. Children from high-conflict homes experience more adjustment problems over time compared to children from low conflict homes (Booth & Amato, 2001; Harold, Shelton, Goeke-Morey, & Cummings, 2004). Children from families with high parental discord typically have more difficulties in dating, less happiness, less interaction and more conflict in marriage (Amato, 2007). Therefore, when a marriage begins to suffer the children in the family are affected tremendously. Since negative family experiences affect adolescents in the future, this study aims to determine how early family experiences will affect future romantic competence. It’s predicted that higher reports of marital conflict between parents will result in lower reports of romantic competence in adolescents. On the other hand, this theory has also lead to our second hypothesis that high reports of marital love will result in higher levels of romantic competence.

Parent-Child Relationship Quality

Attachment Theory has been used to understand that bonds between an infant and their care taker help establish the strength of their relationship (Bowlby, 2005). This theory states that attachment styles play a vital role from childhood through adulthood (Bowlby, 1969). Relations with parents during early periods of development have been correlated with the stability and quality of early adult romantic relationships (Simpson, Collins, Tran, & Haydon, 2007). Children who have strong bonds with parents typically have healthier romantic relationships in their young adulthood. (Collins & Sroufe, 1999). Drawing from attachment theory, we will study how the quality of parent-offspring relationships may affect romantic competence. Therefore, this study aims to investigate, if the quality of relationships with parents affects romantic competence in adolescents. In particular, it was hypothesized that there would be a correlation between

adolescent-parent relationship quality (i.e., the emotional tone of dyadic exchanges) and the adolescent's romantic competence.

Guided by previous research it is expected that children who witness high marital conflict between their parents will report lower levels of romantic competence. The literature has led to these expectations because children from families with high parental marital conflict are more likely to have issues with dating and marriage (Amato, 2007). Previous research has also led to the prediction that children who have a strong quality relationship with their parents will report higher levels of romantic competence.

Methods

Participants

Data for this research were drawn from a longitudinal study aimed at exploring family relationships and gender development from middle childhood through adolescence. By using a longitudinal design we were able to detect developmental changes. Conducting surveys ensured anonymous and confidential responses. Participants were fathers, mothers, and their first and second born children. These families were predominately European American working and middle class married families living in small towns in a northeast state. Though the sample was in some ways not representative of the average U.S. families it reflected the socio-demographic profile of families from the region of the northeast state where the data had been collected. Families were recruited via letters that were sent through schools to families with 4th and 5th grade children. These letters gave a detailed description of the study and the criteria for participation. Families that wished to participate returned a self-addressed postcard and completed a follow-up telephone screening. Of the eligible families ninety percent agreed to participate.

The sample included 201 families. At Time 1 the average age of mothers was 36.66 ($SD=3.92$) and the average age of fathers was 38.92 ($SD=5.00$). Average family size was 4.54 ($SD=.75$) and most families (>80%) included two or three children. Fathers' education level averaged 14.67 ($SD=2.43$) and mothers' averaged 14.57 ($SD=2.15$), a score of 12 represented high school graduate, 14 represented some college, 16 represented a bachelor's degree. Given that the study focused on dual-earner families' the majority of the parents held employment (92% of mothers' and 100% of fathers'). Mothers' typically worked part time jobs and fathers' held full time jobs (mothers', $M=28.55$, $SD=16.03$; fathers', $M=47.82$, $SD=10.99$). The total family income averaged \$28,612.84. Marital duration average was 13.59 years ($SD=2.44$). The older siblings averaged 16.47 years ($SD=0.79$), and younger siblings' age averaged at 13.89 years ($SD=1.15$). There was roughly an equal amount of boys and girls (103 boys, 98 girls).

Procedures

Every year of the study a team of interviewers conducted separate home interviews with mothers, fathers and the two siblings. Participants were asked questions regarding their personal qualities and family relationships. Home interviews were conducted on eight various occasions over a 10 year period. Based on our interest our analysis was limited to phases 1, 2, 3, and 6. After data collection was completed families received a \$100 or \$200 honorarium depending on the study phase.

Parents' marital quality

Each year mothers' and fathers' reported on conflict and love in their marital relationship. The Marital Interactions Scale (Braiker & Kelley, 1979) was used to measure marital conflict. Items (e.g., "How often do you and your partner argue with one another?") were rated on a 9-point scale from *not at all* or *never* to *very much* or *very often*. Love was also measured on The Marital Interactions Scale (Braiker & Kelley, 1979). Items (e.g., "To what extent do you love your partner at this stage?") were rated on a 9-point scale from *not at all* to *very much*. Cronbach alpha for love was .90-.92 and conflict was .56-.77

Parent-offspring relationship quality

Intimacy and conflict between adolescents and their parents was measured each year. Intimacy with mothers and fathers was measured by using an eight-item measure created by Blyth, Hill and Thiel (1982). Some items included "How important is your mother/father to you?" which were rated on a five-point scale. Conflict with mothers and fathers was measured by the frequency of conflict which was rated on 6-point scale. Cronbach alpha for older siblings intimacy with their mother and father was .76-.81 and conflict between older sibling and their mother and father was .80-.85.

Romantic Competence

The Harter (1982) five-point scale was used to assess adolescents' perceived romantic competence. Items for this measure instructed adolescents to read two statements then select the teenager they most identified with (e.g. "Some teenagers feel that they would be fun and interesting on a date but other teenagers wonder about how fun and interesting they would be on a date"). Then adolescents were asked if they felt the statement was "*really true*" or "*somewhat true*". The response scale ranged from 1-4, with a score of one portraying a low competence score and a score of four indicating a high perceived competence. Cronbach alpha was .80.

Results

Our results have been organized around our research goals, (1) To determine the effects of marital quality on adolescent romantic competence; (2) to examine parent-offspring relationship qualities as predictors of romantic competence. In order to address these goals we used a series of regression analyses. To avoid issues with multi-collinearity substantive predictors were entered into separate models.

Preliminary analyses showed various relationships between the variables of this study (see Table 1). These analyses showed that parents tended to report high levels of marital love. Reports also showed that boys reported higher levels of romantic competence, compared to girls.

To achieve our first goal of determining the effects of marital quality on adolescent romantic competence, we conducted a regression analysis. Marital quality stood as the predictor variable and adolescent perceived romantic competence as the outcome variable. Our first step was to enter marital love and marital conflict as the predictor variables to examine the extent to which marital quality affected adolescent romantic competence.

In order to test our second goal of the influences of parent-offspring relationship qualities on romantic competence, we performed another set of regression analyses. The predictor variable stood as parent-offspring relationship quality and adolescent romantic competence as the outcome variable.

We found that mothers' reports of marital conflict were negatively associated with youth's reports of romantic competence (see Table 2). Consistent with our expectations, these results support our hypothesis that negative marital quality will result in lower reports of adolescent romantic competence. Inconsistent with our expectations, however fathers' reports of marital love were not associated with youth's romantic competence (see Table 3). It was also found that there were no significant associations between mothers' marital love, fathers' marital conflict, and perceived romantic competence (see Table 5).

Our results revealed that adolescents who reported high levels of intimacy with their mothers' during early childhood reported higher romantic competence during adolescence (see Table 4). In accordance with our predictions, these results supported our hypothesis that positive relationships with parents tend to increase reports of romantic competence. There was no correlation found between father-child relationships and adolescent perceived romantic competence (see Table 5). Overall, marital conflict and parent-offspring relationships typically predict adolescent romantic competence.

Discussion

In sum, our research aimed to close a gap in the literature by examining the implications of early family experiences and perceived adolescents' romantic competence. First our results revealed that negative family experiences are correlated with lower perceived adolescent romantic competence. Specifically, mothers' reports of marital conflict were found to be negatively related to adolescent romantic competence, yet marital love was not found to be positively related to adolescent romantic competence. Previous research has shown that marital conflict has been linked to adjustment problems including aggression, noncompliance and maladjustment in adolescents (Long, Forehand, Fauber, & Brody, 1987; Jouriles et al., 1989; Wierson, Forehand, & McCombs, 1988). Marital conflict may present stronger predictions for levels of romantic competence because marital conflict may be more apparent and detrimental to youth. Since marital conflict has such great effects on children, marital love may not affect children as much. It has been found that strong marriages benefit children in multiple ways; a higher standard of living, exposure to effective and cooperative parenting, and less stress overall (McGuinness, T. M. 2006). Yet, there is very little research, if any, stating the relationship between parents' positive marital quality and adolescent romantic competence. Therefore positive marital quality may affect children in other ways, not including romantic competence. Explaining why our results showed no relationship between positive marital quality (parents' reports of love) and adolescent romantic competence.

Our results have shown that fathers' reports of marital quality and father-offspring relationship had no impact on adolescent romantic competence. To understand the lack of connection between marital quality and romantic competence, one must take into account that men who have employed wives tend to present greater happiness in their relationships (Booth & Amato, 1995). Therefore low levels of marital conflict may explain why fathers' reports weren't found to be related to romantic competence. Father-offspring relationships typically have different impacts compared to mother-offspring relationships. Research has consistently shown that fathers spend far less time with their children compared to mothers' (Lamb, M., 2004). Fathers have also been found to more directly affect families financially instead of socially and emotionally (Lamb, M., 2004). This lack of connection between fathers' and children may result in the little influence on adolescent romantic competence.

This study has revealed a positive relationship between mother-offspring intimacy and romantic competence. Previous literature shows that weak relationships between children and their parents can lead to various issues including academic, social, and mental challenges (Dillam, Purswell, Lindo, Jayne, Fernando, 2011). Therefore these results add to the literature by showing the positive effects of strong mother-offspring relationships.

Future Research

In order to effectively determine the cause of these results additional research needs to be done. To determine why fathers' may not implicate adolescent romantic competence father-offspring relationships require additional scholarly attention. It may be beneficial to replicate this study, and only focus on the implications of fathers' absence and romantic competence. To understand why marital love wasn't related to adolescent romantic competence future studies may focus on families with atypical high and or low reports of love. The parents included in this study were all married for over 10 years. The parents in this study presented low variability of marital quality in their marriages which may have resulted in the lack of relationships with romantic competence. Therefore studying families with variation in marital love may present a deeper understand as to why marital love showed no relationship to romantic competence.

Limitations

The present study had several limitations that should be addressed in future research. First our sample included working/middle class, European American two-parent families. It's imperative that future studies examine diverse families in terms of culture and financial backgrounds. Currently there is very little research focusing on adolescents from low-income or minority families. Indicators of poverty like unemployment and perceived financial instability have been associated with the quality of long-term stability of romantic relationships (Conger, Wallace, Sun, Simmons, McLoyd, & Brody, 2002). Therefore poverty may negatively affect marital quality, which has been found to lower adolescents' romantic competence. Given these difference, it would be beneficial for future work to replicate our findings with diverse samples. Next, our analyses were limited to self-reports' of marital quality and parent-offspring relationships. By using self-report scales we have relied on the honesty of our participants. It's not uncommon for participants to alter responses to be socially acceptable. (Fan, Miller, Park, Winward, Christensen, Grotevant, 2006). To combat this limitation one may want to observe families in personal settings or include peer reports of participants' romantic competence. The reliability of this study may also be increased if the sample size was increased. Also during this study we did not control for the number of previous adolescents' romantic relationships. Therefore some responses may be based on very few or several romantic relationships. To prevent this limitation in the future the amount of romantic relationships should be controlled. An additional recommendation for future research would be to control for current relationship status. Focusing on adolescents who are currently dating may present variation in romantic competence. Nonetheless, these limitations played a small role on the results.

Conclusion

In sum, our research adds to the literature on the implications of early family experiences on perceived adolescent romantic competence. This study also expands adolescent romantic

competence research in new directions. Although our research is not conclusive, it poses an important connection between early family experiences and adolescent romantic competence. Given the relationship between family experiences and adolescent romantic competence provides promising direction for future research on this intriguing topic.

Table 1

Means (SDs) and correlations for study variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	M(SD)
1. Romantic Competence	-												2.49(.75)
2. Marital Love (Mothers)	-.09	-											69.78(9.06)
3. Marital Love (Fathers)	-.008	.53***	-										68.35(8.43)
4. Marital Conflict (Mothers)	-.09	-.48***	-	-									19.51(5.65)
			.36***										
5. Marital Conflict (Fathers)	.02	-.42***	-	.50***	-								18.82(4.27)
			.46***										
6. Mother-offspring Intimacy	.12	.02	.06	-.09	-.04	-							31.02(3.79)
7. Father-offspring Intimacy	.05	.15*	.10	-.11	-.04	.53***	-						29.44(4.13)
8. Mother-offspring Conflict	-.15**	.03	-.03	.11	.02	-.19***	-	-					27.27(6.65)
							.18**						
9. Father- offspring Conflict	-.11	.06	.03	.07	-.01	-.11	-.15*	.82***	-				24.31(6.59)

10. Offspring Gender	.17**	-.17**	-.19***	.17*	.13	-.08	.19**	.04	.06	-			1.49(.5)
11. Mothers Education	-.04	-.11	-.03	.09	-.05	.07	-.01	-.006	-.06	-.09	-		14.57(2.15)
12. Fathers Education	.09	-.06	-.02	-.02	-.04	-.04	-.03	.05	-.05	-.09	.58***	-	14.67(2.43)
13. Offspring Age	.07	-.01	.04	.03	.11	-.13	-.09	-.05	-.01	.11	-.03	-.09	10.87(.54)

*p < .05 **p ≤ .01 *** p ≤ .001

Table 2

Coefficients and (SE's) for models testing parents marital conflict as a predictor of romantic competence

Variable	Romantic Competence	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>
Marital Conflict (Mothers)	-.02*	.01
Marital Conflict (Fathers)	.01	.01
Offspring Gender	.27**	.11
Mothers Education	.07	.07
Fathers Education	.01	.03
Offspring Age	-.03	.03
R ²		.06
F(186)	1.95	

*p < .05 **p ≤ .01 *** p ≤ .001

Table 3

Coefficients and (SE's) for models testing parents marital love as a predictor of romantic Competence

Variable	Romantic Competence	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Marital Love (Mothers)	-.008	.007
Marital Love (Fathers)	.007	.007
Offspring Gender	.247*	.113
Mothers Education	.0004	.03
Fathers Education	-.02	.03
Offspring Age	.06	.07
R ²		.05
F (187)	1.63	

*p < .05 **p ≤ .01 *** p ≤ .001

Table 4

Coefficients and (SE 's) for models testing parent offspring intimacy as a predictor of romantic competence

Variable	Romantic Competence	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>
Mother-offspring Intimacy	.04*	.02
Father-offspring Intimacy	-.01	.02
Offspring Gender	.28**	.11
Mothers Education	-.003	.03
Fathers Education	-.02	.03
Offspring Age	.07	.07
R ²		.06
F(189)	2.09	

* $p < .05$ ** $p \leq .01$ *** $p \leq .001$

Table 5

Coefficients and (SE 's) for models testing parent offspring conflict as a predictor of romantic competence

Variable	Romantic Competence	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>
Mothers-offspring Conflict	.007	.01
Fathers-offspring Conflict	-.01	.01
Offspring Gender	.25*	.11
Mothers Education	.004	.03
Fathers Education	-.02	.03
Offspring Age	.05	.07
R ²		.05
F(189)	1.62	

*p < .05 **p ≤ .01 *** p ≤ .001

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