

Parenting Perceptions and Adult Attachment:
An Exploration of Intergenerational Aspects of Parenting

By
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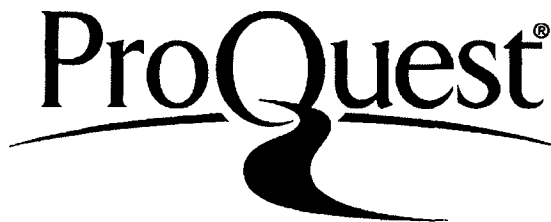
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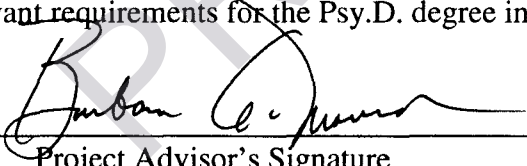
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PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

ABSTRACT

The literature on parenting is vast and encompasses a myriad of facets, including parents' perceptions, beliefs and cognitions. The parent developmental theory (PDT) provides a social learning and cognitive framework to explain the development and application of parental roles and beliefs. The PDT provides one explanatory framework regarding parenting. In contrast to addressing parenting perceptions and related behaviors, attachment theory describes how and why children cling to their caregivers and how individuals develop internal working models that inform future relationships.

Although there is research regarding parenting and attachment, few studies compare attachment styles to parenting perceptions. The purpose of this study was to discover whether a relationship exists between attachment security and parental beliefs and perceptions. The participants in this research study completed the Parent Behavior Importance Questionnaire-Revised and the Adult Attachment Questionnaire.

This study sheds light on aspects of parenting perceptions and adult attachment theory in relation to parenting. For individuals categorized as having an anxious attachment style, attachment security was significantly negatively related to all six parenting subscales of the PBIQ-R. No relationship was found between individuals with an avoidant attachment style and parenting perceptions. In terms of demographic variables, marital status and parental status were significant factors in the relationship between parenting and attachment. Results are discussed in relation to clinical and school psychology.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

The emotional bond between parent and child usually is thought of as beginning in the first moments of life. Upon a first embrace, the infant seems to sense its earliest experience of safety, while the parent is stirred by deeply held beliefs of caregiving, love and protection (Slade, 2005; Winnicott, 1957). Parental beliefs are developed through past experiences, learned behaviors, philosophical or religious orientations and social and cultural expectations. The quality of the relationship that forms between parent and child, resulting in the child's secure or insecure attachment style, has long lasting implications, and has been shown to affect the child's behavior as well as a child's future parenting behaviors (Ainsworth, 1989; Bowlby, 1973). As children develop, their future role as a parent is further comprised of perceptions of parenting which develop over time and ultimately influence their personal parenting behaviors (Mowder, 1993). Although there is ample research demonstrating the link between parental caregiving and children's attachment (George & Solomon, 1996), there is significantly less empirical evidence examining whether adult attachment style can accurately predict parenting perceptions and beliefs regarding the parental role. This chapter presents how parenting research has evolved over time, including a brief overview of attachment theory, and concludes with research questions pertaining to parenting perceptions and adult attachment style.

The study of parental caregiving behavior has evolved to reflect developing theories that range from the purely biological to strictly learned behaviors. At the start of the twentieth century, two broad schools of thought, behaviorism and

psychoanalytic theory, emerged and served as the basis for contemporary parenting research. With the development of classical conditioning by Ivan Pavlov in the 1920's and behaviorism by B. F. Skinner in the late 1930's, human behavior was seen to represent a series of learned actions that were unrelated to either physiological reactions or hypothetical constructs, but rather related to how children become conditioned to respond in certain ways (Pavlov, 1927) and how their behavior is motivated by positive and negative reinforcement (Skinner, 1974). In other words, parents and teachers provide instruction which influences the actions of their children. Behavior was seen as a learned process, either through conditioned responses to certain stimuli, or shaped by a series of positive and negative reinforcements that were reactions to contingencies set into place by caregivers. Socialization of children came about through the habitual responses that were slowly acquired through the child's lifetime (Maccoby, 1992). Thus, according to these theories, parenting practices were based on the training and conditioning of young children to behave in socially acceptable ways.

Sigmund Freud contributed to the study of parenting as part of the development of psychoanalytic theory in the mid 1900's (Freud, 1940). According to Freudian theory, children progress through a series of psychosexual stages during their first five years of life. Freud believed that each stage must be resolved before children can advance to the next stage. In the event that the stage-specific crisis is not resolved, children are delayed and unable to progress to the next stage of psychosexual development, resulting in potential psychopathology at a later point in time. Freud further proposed that human behavior is motivated by two intrapsychic

forces: sexuality, also known as the libido, and aggression. Through the lens of psychoanalytic theory, human personality is comprised of these two primary drives. How caregivers respond to the sexual and aggressive urges of their children determines the quality of their children's early experiences and greatly impacts children's future behavior and personality. Parental responses to their children's urges include either encouraging their children to suppress their desires or enabling their children to channel those desires into acceptable behaviors. Furthermore, children develop sexual wishes for their opposite-sex parent. These feelings are accompanied by fears that their same-sex parent will reject them as a result of their incestuous wishes. According to Freudian theory, one of the primary ways in which children resolve sexual urges towards their own parents is to identify with the same-sex parent. Through identifying with the same sex parent, the child internalizes the attitudes and beliefs of that parent, and, in addition, acquires gender-specific behaviors.

As children receive guidance in socially appropriate behavior, they slowly internalize their parents' and society's values and beliefs. This gradual acquisition of societal and parental values regarding sexuality, aggression and other societal demands is believed to lead to the formation of the superego, or conscience, which allows the child to self-regulate primitive impulses. Thus, psychoanalytic theory informs the development of the parental role by illustrating that parents engage with their children in order to channel their children's instinctive urges and by the children's abilities to internalize parental beliefs. This stands in contrast to the

behaviorist approach, which places emphasis on the near “tabula rasa” in which infants enter this world (Maccoby, 1992).

Since the start of the 20th century, much has changed in the way parenting is conceptualized. Although many of Pavlov’s, Skinner’s and Freud’s concepts are still accepted today, other scholars veer away from purely behavioral and psychoanalytic theories and branch out towards more varied approaches of development. As a result, views on parenting practices have taken on different forms.

During the 1960’s, Alfred Bandura, in his work on imitative behavior, formulated the concept that children have the innate ability to acquire new behaviors by simply imitating others; that is, children can learn without the presence of a reinforcing agent (Bandura, 1975). Thus, through observations made of others being rewarded or punished, children learn that certain behaviors are acceptable and others less so. In this vein, parents and teachers continuously serve as models for behavior. Over time, the term and conceptualization of ‘imitation’ has been replaced by the term ‘modeling’ (Nielsen & Blank, 2011). Modeling, in conjunction with positive and negative reinforcement, are still considered to be the underlying influences of children’s behavior from a social learning perspective (Bandura, 1975).

Theories regarding parenting continued to evolve with the development of attachment theory. Attachment theory, as developed by John Bowlby (1969) and Mary Ainsworth (1963), emphasizes the role of maternal behavior as related to healthy development in human infants. Although trained as a psychoanalyst, Bowlby disagreed with the psychoanalytic approach which posited that an infant’s internal life was driven by fantasy rather than actual events (Klein, 1958). Working from an

ethological standpoint, based on his studies of animal behavior, Bowlby stressed the evolutionary advantage that infants have in their preferential need for their primary caregivers. For example, the concept of dependence (Beller, 1955) refers to the way children cling to their mother, and resist separation from her. The notion of dependence was previously perceived by social learning theorists as sets of behaviors that were necessary for the children's survival yet intended to be dropped as children became increasingly independent (Beller, 1955; Heathers, 1955). Attachment theory viewed an infant's need for dependence differently. According to attachment theory, parental responsiveness to children's dependency needs lead to a decrease, rather than an increase, in clinging behavior so that children become able to detach from their parents and explore their expanding environment. In addition, the mother's increased level of sensitivity and attunement to her child is viewed as a way to promote healthy development. Were the mother to fail to meet the demands of her needy infant, maladaptive patterns of development would occur. Mothers' responses to children's cries, in the form of holding, cooing or coddling, form a stark contrast to the behaviorist school of thought which shunned such behaviors as reinforcement to the children's crying and unending needs. Yet, attachment research provides evidence that the literal and figurative holding of the infant is one of the determining factors which prompts psychological health and independence in growing infants (Ainsworth, 1969; Bowlby, 1987).

As the field of psychology continued to develop, various theorists emerged regarding human development. These new ideas in human behavior were accompanied by evolving views regarding the parental role. One of the first major

figures to break away from Freud was his contemporary, Alfred Adler. Despite beginning his career as a collaborator of Freud's, Adler quickly became a vocal opponent of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, particularly Freud's view that sexual and aggressive drives were the primary sources of human motivation. One of the main departures in thinking between Adler and Freud was in their conceptualizations of human behavior. Adler believed that humans engage in behaviors which draw the individual closer to long-term goals (Adler, 1964). Through his theory of personality development, Adler suggested that two forms of inefficient child rearing, namely overprotection and neglect, would yield near-certain problems in adulthood. Adler believed that pampering children would leave them ill-equipped to handle the negative aspects of life, causing them to doubt their own abilities and decision making skills. In contrast, neglected children forced to face life's challenges alone would soon develop a deep mistrust of others and have difficulty forming intimate relationships (Adler, 1982).

Adler believed that the best form of parenting was to expose children to the harsh realities surrounding them, yet through a veil of protection. In addition, rather than resolving the myriad of difficulties that children encounter, parents were encouraged to guide their children towards self-resolution of those challenges in order to promote children's sense of proficiency (Adler, 1998).

Over the past several decades, researchers have turned their heads towards the bi-directional relationship of children and their parents (Slade, 2005; Thompson, Lamb, & Estes, 1982). The concept of intersubjectivity (Stolorow, Atwood, & Ross, 1978), in which subjective states are shared between two or more people, has been

utilized to depict the parent-child relationship as a set of shared experiences. In particular, the concept emphasizes the nonverbal communication that takes place between the parent and child. Intersubjectivity allows parents and children to co-construct their communication patterns so that each contribute to and influence the other's responses. During the latter part of the 20th century, the use of video imagery became prevalent in analyzing moment-to-moment interactions between mothers and infants. The work of Daniel Stern (1971) linked shared states to infant attachment. Seconds-long intervals were captured on film and coded to reveal patterns in which mothers communicate with their children by imitating them and match their behaviors to their children's gestures. Stern noted that this creates a dyadic process that is reciprocal over time—each correspondence changes the response of the other. By skillfully responding to her infant, the social capacities of the infant expand, resulting in an increasingly reciprocal relationship between mother and child. In recent years, this field has seen a burst of research. There is evidence that the “match” between mother and infant, shaped by minute gestures and exchanges of affect, facilitates the development of identity and agency, as well the perception of children's inner and outer experiences (Sander, 1995; Steele, Steele, Croft, & Fonagy, 1999). Affective attunement, a mother's ability to accurately assess and respond to her child's mood state, needs and desires, is a cogent force that significantly contributes to the long-term capacity for intimacy and attachment security (Beebe, et al., 2010).

Research examining the socialization of children began to emerge within the literature in the mid-1900's. Socialization research began by examining

socioeconomic status and parental values (Kohn, 1959), conformity (Ellis, Lee & Patterson, 1978), parental encouragement of sex-type behaviors (Santrock, 1994), parental educational values (Bernstein, 1990), and social and cultural expectations (Baldwin, Baldwin, & Cole, 1990). The studies that surfaced led to the development of the parenting style construct. Societal demands to socialize children propelled parents to engage in several forms of child rearing behaviors. Growing out of behavioral and Freudian theories, questions arose as to what were the developmental consequences of different child rearing techniques. Initial efforts towards defining parenting styles focused on three critical components, namely parental beliefs, parental behaviors, and the emotional relationship between parent and child (Baldwin, 1948; Orlansky, 1949).

Baumrind (1966) developed a theoretical model that combined behavioral and emotional processes with a parental belief system to conceptualize parenting styles. In this theory, the critical element of the parental role was to develop the child's sense of personal integrity while conforming to the demands of others. Initially, Baumrind's theory (1971) included three prototypes of parenting: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive, with varying levels of parental demandingness (i.e. control) and responsiveness (i.e. warmth) as the two constructs underlying the three parenting styles. Authoritative parents exhibit age-appropriate levels of parental demandingness (i.e. they set standards that are appropriate to their child's developing needs and describe their reasons for discipline). These parents express anger when necessary, but also encourage their children to express their own point of view. Authoritative parents provide appropriate levels of supervision, while refraining from

being overly intrusive or overprotective. In addition, they display heightened levels of responsiveness (i.e. they are sensitive to their children's fluctuating moods and needs). Furthermore, authoritative parents are likely to display respect towards their children by understanding their individuality and potential for growth, as well providing them with affective warmth. In contrast, authoritarian parents are highly demanding, and expect their children to meet their disciplinary standards, yet are not particularly responsive towards their children's needs. Permissive parents have few behavioral expectations for their children and are overly permissive. While they are responsive to their children, their non-demanding behavior does not adequately facilitate competency in their children (e.g. social assertiveness, cognitive competence, social responsibility). In later years, Baumrind (1996) described the unengaged parent, who she presented as both non-demanding and non-responsive. Thus, Baumrind (1989) utilized the concepts of parental control and responsiveness to define how parents attempt to integrate their children into society.

Contributing to these theories, Darling and Steinberg (1993) suggest that although Baumrind's parenting styles may be universal, there are certain conditions under which similar parenting styles impact child behavior in different ways. Darling and Steinberg explain that there are three factors which together impact children's behavior. This includes the goals that parents have towards socialization, parenting practices used to achieve those goals, and the emotional climate, or parenting style, through which parenting takes place. Darling and Steinberg define parental practices as specific strategies that aim to maintain control and gain children's compliance. Parental practices can be expressed either as goal-directed, where parents perform

their parental duties, or as non-goal-directed, which take the form of parental gestures, tone of voice, and expressions of emotion. Parenting styles are defined as a constellation of attitudes that parents hold and communicate towards their children. This constellation creates an environment in which parents' behaviors are expressed and lead to the elicitation of specific behaviors in children (Darling & Steinberg, 1993).

Parenting research has continued to expand, with recent contributions further elucidating the parental role. Developed in the form of the parental role development theory (Mowder, 1991), the parental development theory (PDT; Mowder, 2005) was conceived by Mowder and has evolved over the past decade to provide a theoretical perspective for understanding an individual's parenting perceptions and behaviors (Mowder & Sanders, 2008). The PDT, which is primarily based on a combination of social learning (Bandura, 1975) and cognitive developmental theory (Piaget, 1952), provides a framework for understanding individual perceptions of parenting, as well as how these perceptions develop over time and evolve throughout the lifespan. Mowder suggests that parenting perceptions become modified as individuals socialize, for instance, within their cultural context or engage in parent-child relationships.

Mowder further posits that individuals generally perceive the parental role as comprised of six primary characteristics: bonding, discipline, education, general welfare and protection, responsivity, and sensitivity (Mowder & Shamah, 2010). The Parent Behavior Importance Questionnaire-Revised (PBIQ-R; Mowder, 2005) is a measure designed to assess an individual's assessment of the importance of parenting

behaviors associated with of each characteristic. The way in which an individual rates these behaviors in importance generally indicates their perceptions of the parental role. In addition, the PBIQ-R is divided into a positive parenting index, which encompasses positive parenting behaviors, (e.g., reading to your child) and a negativity index, which assesses the importance that individuals attribute to negative parenting practices, such as spanking. Thus, the PDT presents a theoretical model by which parenting behaviors can be further understood in the context of the parent role.

Role theory, as conceptualized by Mead (1934) and Moreno (1946), amongst others, is a sociological perspective that describes the behaviors that people engage in as stemming from given social roles and societal expectations (e.g., mother, friend, employer). From this perspective, human behavior is influenced to a great degree by expectations held by the individual and others about their role. Role theory posits that most observable human behavior is simply a manifestation of individuals carrying out their given or chosen roles. Many roles are often defined in terms of their relation to other roles, such as the mother and child dyad (Biddle, 1986). Galinsky (1987) explains that parents have expectations of how they will partake in the parenting role, including how their children will behave and respond. Galinsky speaks of six parenting stages which arise from modifications that parents make so that their expectations of their own behaviors as well as of their children's behavior match the mental images that they already possess. Ultimately, parents' perceptions of their role (which is specific to the parent-child dyad) guides how parents interact with their children (Mowder, 1993). Although much research exists on parenting styles

(Baumrind, 1966; Dreikurs, 1992; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Sears, 1995), there is relatively little research on the perceptions that parents have with regard to their role.

One of the purposes of this study is to investigate the relationship between parenting perceptions and attachment security. Parenting research has continued to evolve to include a better understanding of the nature of the relationship between parents and children. As developed by John Bowlby (1940, 1959, 1969), attachment theory describes the bond that exists between parents and children. Most notably, the theory explains that children attach to their primary caregiver as a way of establishing their sense of safety and security, looking to the caregiver for nurturance and protection. One of the main components of the bond between parent and child is the level and quality of responsiveness that the parent extends towards their child. Attuned parents who respond swiftly and appropriately to their children's needs will likely produce a child who is able to maintain a sense of safety and security (i.e., a secure attachment to their caregiver). Bowlby further explained (1959) that parents' relationships with their children should be influenced by their own experiences with their primary attachment figures. Notably, the attachment style that a parent had towards his or her primary caregiver has been shown to influence the manner in which those parents move on to parent their young (Ainsworth, 1989; Rholes, Simpson, Blakely, Lanigan & Allen, 1997).

The parental role is largely based on observations that individuals record during their youth which then lead to their current perceptions on parenting (Biddle, 1986). Thus, the manner in which an individual was parented is likely to impact the perceptions of parenting that they have incorporated into the parental role. Many

studies have examined adult attachment and caregiving (Adam, Gunnar, & Tanaka, 2004; Cohn, Cowan, Cowan, & Pearson, 1992; Van Ijzendoorn, 1995). However, none have examined the relationship between adult attachment and perceptions of parenting. The purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between adult attachment style and perceptions regarding the parental role so that intergenerational factors related to caregiving can be better understood. A more thorough understanding of these factors can help to elucidate the ways in which past experiences inform one's current approach to parenting. Ideally, understanding the link between one's childhood experiences and their subsequent parenting habits can serve to improve one's parenting abilities. As Siegel and Hartzell have found (2003), when parents have a clear understanding of how they operate internally, along with an acceptance of the unique traits that comprise their character, their innate sense and style of caregiving tends to mindfully emerge (Siegel and Hartzell, 2003).

This study was guided by several questions. The first question concerns the relationship between attachment style and individuals' perceptions of parenting, or, in other words, what is the correlation between childhood experiences and current or future perspectives on parenting. Thus, this research was developed to examine how attachment styles impact parenting perceptions and beliefs. This study also examined questions regarding age, gender, marital and parent status in relation to attachment and parenting perceptions. Ultimately, answers to these questions may help to strengthen the link between attachment theory and parenting perceptions, and provide valuable information for those working with children and their parents regarding