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Late Adolescents' and Young Adults' Perceptions of the  
Parent Role

By

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A Doctoral Project in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirement for the Degree of Doctor of Psychology in the  
Department of Psychology at Pace University

New York

2004

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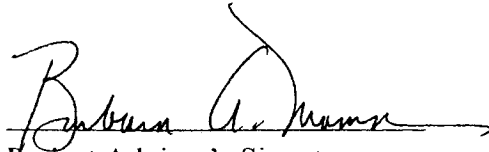
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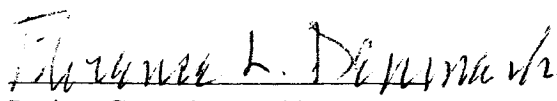
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***This doctoral project is dedicated to:***

*My parents for their unconditional love and support:*

***Maureen and William Clifford***

*To my daughters for continuously amazing me with  
inspiration and cultivating my research into the  
complexities, dimensions, and pure joys of parenting:*

***Killeen Kelly 12/20/94***

***Mairead Mary 04/22/00***

*My Grandparents, especially my Grandmother, for believing  
in me and my professional endeavors before I could, and  
their love, kindness, uniqueness, card games, after-school  
pick ups, and "conferences":*

***Myre Clifford 1920 - 1999***

***William P. Clifford***

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to especially thank Dr. Barbara Mowder, my Project Advisor, for her professional guidance and expertise through the years of the present research. Dr. Mowder consistently provided availability, assistance, and kindness through this intense process. Dr. Mowder is an ideal mentor and role model for myself, as well as for my graduate peers.

I would also like to thank Dr. Florence Denmark for her valuable input and assistance on this doctoral project. Dr. Denmark is also an expert in the field of psychology who exemplifies to her students constantly her dedication to our education.

Lastly, I would like to thank all of the Psychology Faculty who educated me through my years at Pace University, and inspired my passion for the field of School and Child-Clinical Psychology, especially, Dr. Al Melino, Dr. Beth Hart and Dr. John Stokes.

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Verbal Consent Form

Parent Role Questionnaire (PRQ)

PREVIEW

## ABSTRACT

Parenthood is arguably the most important social role an individual may acquire, yet one that has no associated structured or mandated training and education. Often psychologists and other child oriented professionals provide consultation to foster and improve parent-child relationships. Yet little empirical research has been conducted in this area to define specifically what a parent conceptualizes his or her role to be. The Parent Role Development Theory (PRDT) is a theoretical guide which can be used to understand an individual's perception of the parent role, how those perceptions develop over time, and how they change and shift in response to the different child development stages from birth to adulthood. Based on this theory, the Parent Role Questionnaire (PRQ) was created to investigate parent role cognitive schemata.

The college-age population, specifically late adolescents and young adults (e.g., ages 18-29), is a group which has not been examined utilizing the PRQ. A better understanding of late adolescents' and young

adults' perceptions of the parent role would increase psychologists' and other child professionals' appreciation of those perspectives and provide a basis for working with individuals regarding parenting.

In this study, questionnaire data was collected from college students at a private, urban university. The PRQ was administered to 127 participants to sample their parenting perceptions. Qualitative and quantitative analyses were conducted to determine late adolescents' and young adults' conceptualization of the parent role. The data suggest that these respondents define a parent role which mirror characteristics defined by the PRDT. Like prior research, the results reveal developmental trends involving parent role characteristic importance. Results also indicate that subjects' age, sex, ethnicity and parental status influence some aspects of parent role perceptions. Limitations of the study, as well as implications for professionals and future research, are discussed.

## Chapter I

### Introduction

Parenthood is the oldest, and arguably, most crucial role known to humankind. Individuals typically assume the parent role with no formal training. With parenting being one of the most significant positions in life, psychologists have worked on defining what it means to be a parent. While searching for a description of this role, professionals have focused on narrowing down specific parent characteristics (Edwards, 2002).

For centuries parenting was considered a simple and natural process which individuals performed innately (Edwards, 2002). Yet researchers find that parenting is a multidimensional complex construct. Within the last several decades, research has focused on studying these multi-dimensions of parenting (Galinsky, 1987).

The most likely predictor of an adult's parenting or child rearing method is the style in which that adult was parented as a child. This concept is termed intergenerational transmission of parenting. Research from numerous sources indicates the main characteristics of child rearing are transmitted from one generation to another, even though the mechanisms by which they are

transmitted are unclear (Lundberg, Perris, Schlette, & Adolfsson, 2000). For example, the most substantial evidence regarding the transmission of parenting behavior is that abusing parents were themselves abused as children (Barber, 2000; Chalmer & Contratto, 1982). More specifically, children who were abused are more likely as adults to incorporate that behavior in their parenting style than adults who were not abused.

In Frieberg, Adelson, and Shapiro's (1975) much quoted paper entitled, *Ghosts in the Nursery*, they write, "In every nursery there are ghosts. They are the visitors from the unremembered past of the parents: the uninvited guests at the christening" (p. 387). The ghost refers to observations made by mental health professionals who researched parents and their infants. The researchers observed a number of babies who seemed to be suffering by the oppressive past of their parents. More specifically, these writers felt that parents seemed condemned to repeat the tragedy of their own childhood with their own babies.

Intergenerational transmission of parenting is also supported by studies documenting parents' history of the quality of parenting they received and the type of

parenting style they utilize with their own children (Belsky, 1984; Heinecke, 1995). For example, Belsky (1984) asserts that parents function based on their own childrearing experiences of their parents. That is, often adults' parenting qualities and styles rely heavily on the influence of their own parents' qualities and styles. The transmission is the carrying on of these characteristics when parenting.

With parenting being one of the most difficult and essential role individuals assume, the way in which a child is parented significantly affects the outcome of individuals as adults. Parenting style most often moderates the relationship between specific parental behaviors and child developmental outcomes of a child (Darling & Steinberg, 1993). One focus of research is the positive and negative outcomes of children who have experienced certain parental style and characteristics. For example, Barber (2000) finds the investment a parent makes (e.g., the time spent with children, their attitude and behavior towards their children, and their perception of their children), has a significant influence on how a child will later parent as an adult.

Further, parental investment influences academic potential and the proneness to delinquency and depression (Barber, 2000). Often the amount of time parents invest in their children is correlated with academic success or delinquent behavior. Research has shown that parents, who play active roles in supporting and encouraging their children academically, have children who perform well academically (Barber, 2000). For example, a parent who invests time to communicate with their children, positively reinforce their children, and who assist in providing resources to their children for academic projects, have children who often succeed academically (Barber, 2000). However, parents who invest little to no time with their children may have children who display delinquent behavior (e.g. lying, opposition, shoplifting, bullying) (Barber, 2000).

In addition, Bremner (1998) finds that parent perceptions and behaviors (e.g., emphasis on education, communication skills, and attachment towards their children) have a crucial effect on the parent-child relationship, and subsequently impact the child's intellectual, social and emotional development.



Research indicates positive outcomes for children whose parents exhibit certain parenting. Children who experience a significant amount of attention and responsivity from their parents in the first ten years of life are less likely to be influenced by negative peer influences (e.g., substance and alcohol abuse and delinquent behavior) than children who have unresponsive and inattentive parents (Shaffer, 1994). Barber (2000) concludes that a warm emotional connection between parents and their children achieved in the first few years of life sets the foundation for secure attachments later in life.

These findings further support Eisenberg (1992), who finds that parenting at age five predicts empathic concern, in that same child, as an adult at age thirty-one. More specifically, the dimensions of empathic concern are influenced by parental support, affection from parents towards their children through praise, encouragement, warmth, physical affection, and related behaviors. The adult participants who reflected on their childhood and perceived their parents having empathic concern, which was displayed through praise,

encouragement, warmth, and physical affection, report positive relationships with their parents.

In relation to parent-child relationships, Bowlby (1969) introduced the concept of security of attachment. Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, and Wall (1978) later refined Bowlby's research using the Strange Situation Test, in which researchers categorize infants' attachment to parents. The infants' attachments to their mothers are defined as securely attached, insecurely attached-avoidant, or insecurely-attached ambivalent.

Compelling research suggests the reason why some infants are securely attached to their mothers while others are not is the result of the behavior of mothers towards their infants (Ainsworth et al., 1978). For example, the mothers whose infants are considered securely attached tend to be responsive and sensitive to their baby's needs. These mothers are quick to pick up a crying infant, behave affectionately towards their child, and are sensitive to the baby's desires, such as responding to food preferences. In summary, if the interactions between mother and infant are positive from the infant's perspective, then the infant feels that his

or her needs are being responded to, and consequently a secure attachment is created.

The effects of attachment between parent and child are significant as well. Carranza and Kilmann (2000) measured adult attachment, self-esteem, and interpersonal trust. Adults report their attachments with their parents when they were children. Positive correlations are found between secure attachment and their own self-concept, and positive memories of their mothers and fathers. Insecure attachment patterns are associated with low interpersonal trust, low self worth, distant and demanding fathers, and absent mothers. In fact the researchers find securely attached adults reflect back on their childhood positively and report that parents were supportive of, and took interest their in activities. The support and interest from parents to children are likely to foster positive self-esteem, interpersonal trust, and comfort in autonomy. Further, these same securely attached adults have more comfort with intimacy in romantic relationships than do insecurely attached adults (Carranza & Kilmann, 2000).

These findings are congruent with Main, Kaplan and Cassidy (1985) who find secure adults have positive

memories of their own parents' behaviors and attitudes towards them. Avoidant adults rate parents as being distant, unavailable and rejecting. Hazan and Shaver (1987) find secure adults report much warmer relationships with their parents than insecure adults. More specifically, Feeney and Noller (1990) find adults with secure attachments report more positive early relationships with parents than do insecure adults.

Yet unhealthy parenting is society's most serious dilemma (Groom, 1999). The negative consequences of unhealthy and poor parenting effect society as a whole. These consequences include delinquent behavior, increased alcohol and substance abuse and academic failure. The phenomenon of intergenerational transmission of parenting creates serious problems when the type of parenting being transmitted is from families who experience trauma and abuse through generations. For example, for parents who do not have the social network of extended family, their frame of reference for parenting is influenced heavily by their own intuition (e.g., their own perceptions and behaviors). For example, if a parent was abused as a child, then their frame of reference is primarily abuse when they are displeased with their own children's

behaviors (Barber, 2000). More specifically, when children of parents who were abused display oppositional and aggressive behavior, their parents may display a low frustration tolerance when dealing with their children.

Barber (1998) hypothesizes that harsh and inconsistent parenting teaches a child that there are no consistent social rules. When children are parented inconsistently or deficiently, they feel unsafe and have to utilize their own intuition before possibly being prepared developmentally to do so. In fact, the reduction of parental investment (e.g., time spent with children, communication, responsivity, affection) is often associated with the risk of the child becoming delinquent, using illegal drugs, dropping out of high school, being unemployed, joining gangs, and becoming a teen parent (Barber, 1998).

Resnik, Bearman and Blum (1997) conclude that children acquire information about how people behave by observing their own parents. If parents treat each other in a hostile and manipulative way, then their children tend to do the same in their personal relationships. As a result, these children learn the script of hostile interactions. For instance, the researchers find that

five-year-old boys, who are physically harmed by their parents, are more aggressive in their interactions with peers than children who are not physically harmed. Physically harmed children also tend to interpret social situations differently than others. For example, they tend to be less attentive to social cues, display impulsivity, exhibit poor social skills, and respond more aggressively than children who are not physically harmed (Katsurada & Sugawara, 2000; Olweus, 1980; Sears, Maccoby, & Levin, 1957).

Kaplan (1999) concludes that babies, ages two to six months old, are extremely sensitive to the quality of their mother's voice. These babies are sensitive to pitch, tempo, and tone of their mothers' voices. When a mother suffers from depression, her voice is less interesting and stimulating for the infant's brain. In fact, the more depressed the mother is, the less likely it is that the baby will attend to her voice than a baby whose mother is not depressed (Kaplan, 1999). Congruent with these findings, Shah and Waller (2000) also find that many adult patients who are diagnosed with major depression recall their childhoods as characterized by having depressed mothers who were unresponsive, uncaring

and overprotective. For example, the patients report that their mothers were unavailable to them emotionally, avoidant in their attachments, and not responsive to their physical and emotional needs.

Parent education and training programs are often designed to educate and train parents by providing effective parenting techniques. Historically, parent education and training in the United States began when Gordon (1962) created a course entitled Parent Effectiveness Training. Initially the course focused on helping parents who were having difficulty with their children. Later, the course expanded to include preventive training for parents before difficulties with their children began. Although Gordon (1973) believes that parents universally rely on the same methods of raising children as their parents did, he feels that parents can improve their parenting effectiveness. More specifically, Gordon's overall premise is that parents must learn to accept and communicate with their children.

Another parent training program by Dinkmeyer and McKay (1982) is entitled STEP: Systematic Training for Effective Parenting. This training includes weekly meetings, workbooks and activities. Topics include child

development, why children behave in certain ways, effective versus ineffective methods of problem solving, role-playing, and homework promoting insight into the parent-child relationship.

Pugh, Kidd and Torkington (1982) also created a parent education manual entitled, "A Job For Life." This manual focuses on the life cycle approach to parent education, and is based on the premise that today's parents are more acutely aware than their own parents of the crucial role parents play in children's lives. The manual includes activities offering preparation, education, and support to parents (Pugh, 1984).

Although there are some parent education and training courses, there is little empirical data or research on preventive parent education (Long, 1997). More specifically, preventive parent education focuses on addressing behaviors and attitudes towards children at different developmental stages. Educating parents on child development and incorporating that knowledge in parenting techniques during different developmental would be benefit the parent-child relationship. When parents have an understanding of child development it may prevent inconsistent parenting, which often results in delinquent