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PARENTAL ATTITUDES AND SOCIAL COMPETENCE IN ADOLESCENTS

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The aim of the study was to evaluate the relationships among perceived parental attitudes and domains of social competence in late adolescents. Forty boys and 40 girls, all aged 18, representing a population sample of high school second graders were examined. Self-report data were collected using questionnaires of parent-child relations and of social competence. Analyses detected a significant association between the maternal loving or protective attitude and competence in interpersonal relations in the combined sample of adolescents. However, gender was a moderator of this general relationship. Maternal control fostered their sons’ interpersonal relations, and no such relationship was observed toward daughters. Adolescents’ behavior was somehow less influenced by fatherly control. The findings are in line with the concept of familism as a dominant form of family organization, but implicate constraints in parental sentiments whose overly expression may backfire and do more harm than good in other domains of social competence of adolescents, such as assertiveness and performance during social exposure. The study may contribute to future research on how parenting style shapes adolescent social outcomes.

Key words: adolescents, familism, interpersonal relations, parental attitude, social competence

INTRODUCTION

There is a consensus that family is a dominant form of social organization (1). It is an organization in which the interests of the family group take priority over those of individual family members. Mutual interactions among family members are essential for setting family functions. Parents-children interactions seem of
special nature not only for family function but also for nurturing the children’s future social behavior (2). Parental attitudes belong to key social roles in society. These attitudes are gender-specific but also have elements that are common for both parents. Foundations of attitude depend on individual personality, family character, and a number of sociocultural and economic influences. Thus, parental social roles are changeable as they evolve along with the institution of family.

There are concerns about adolescents’ conduct in society (3). These concerns should take into account, which is not always readily recognized, that the way the children behave and their personality are, to a major extent, determined by the attitudes the parents exhibit toward them (4, 5). Parents’ engagement in the upbringing of their children is crucial for the children’s future and this engagement forms a unique personality of a future adult. Parents often undervalue the importance of their attitude on adolescents’ later life. Feelings and sentiments experienced in the home and emotional interactions with parents play a key role in children’s attitude toward their own future family and society. Interpersonal relations in the family are thus essential for the emotional development of children.

One of the basic features of the adolescents’ way is their social competence (6). Social competence is defined, in general terms, in this study as the effectiveness of one’s coping with, and performance in, everyday real life situations. In the current study we hypothesized that domains of adolescents’ competence, such as interpersonal or intimate relations, social exposure, and assertiveness might be variably influenced by parental style. The premise of the study also was that the parental style perceived by adolescents might bring to sight aspects of parental influence that are not readily transparent during self-reporting by parents. We addressed the issue by examining the relationships among parental attitudes, such as loving, rejecting, demanding, protecting, and casual, as perceived by late adolescents, and the domains of social competence. Gender differences were taken into account in assessing these relationships regarding both parents and their children. We also wanted to gather basic comparative information on social competence in a population sample of adolescents and the possible differences depending on school or family environment.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

Subjects

Informed consent was obtained from all participants of this study. Forty boys and 40 girls, all aged 18, were enrolled into the study. They were randomly drawn from a population of high school second graders in the medium-sized city of Opole, Poland. The students represented two main school profiles: general life sciences and vocational economics.
Psychometric tools

The study was conducted as a self-reporting group survey conducted in classrooms. The youths were surveyed at several occasions and several schools, one school class at a time, chosen randomly. The Parent-Child Relations questionnaire (PCR) by A. Roe and M. Siegelman (7), the 1983 Polish version by WS Kowalski (9) and the Questionnaire of Social Competence (QSC), the 2001 Polish version by A Matczak (10) were applied to all participants.

The PCR was used to assess the behavior of parents towards their late adolescent children, as experienced by the child. There were separate questionnaires for Father and Mother used. Either contained a total of 50 items to characterize the parent’s attitude as Loving, Demanding, Protective, Rejecting, and Casual or Liberal (8). Each of these 5 categories contained 10 items. The PCR is extensively used in studies of adults and of late adolescents and is assumed to be suitable for adolescents from the age of 14-15 years up. The responder has a choice of answers to each item: yes, rather yes, no, rather no, which are scored 4, 3, 2, and 1, respectively. The questionnaire is retrospective, i.e., the responder assesses the parental attitude as he had seen it before he turned 12 years of age. The questionnaire has been validated in Polish population samples of adolescents and was normalized by the use of a centile scale for 4 age-groups of school students, each spanning one year across the age of 15-18 years, corresponding approximately to the last 4 grades of schooling (8).

The QSC contains 90 items that are infinitival qualifications of different activities. The responder assesses on a four-degree scale (distinctly well, well, rather badly, distinctly badly) the effectiveness with which he performs or would perform a given task. The answers are scored 4, 3, 2, and 1, respectively (9). Of the 90 items, 60 concern social competence while the remaining 30 items do not have a social character, and as such are non-diagnostic and are not taken into account in the final assessment of social competence. The QSC measures the level of general social competence and, in addition, is subdivided into 3 categories being separately assessed:

- competence in interpersonal or intimate relations and situations;
- competence in social exposure;
- competence in situations requiring assertiveness.

Each subscale is scored separately, and the sum score refers to the overall social competence.

The QSC is a sensitive and specific measure of domains of social competence across various age groups. Validity and test-retest reliability of this measure have been extensively confirmed (9). The questionnaires were anonymous. The time to fill out the questionnaires was not limited, and on average amounted to 45 min.

Data analysis issues

Data are presented as mean values ±SE. Psychological test scores are accurate within a certain range, rather than to an exact score. To minimize overinterpretation of raw scores, quantiles were calculated for statistical analyses. Raw scores on the PCR scales were converted into a 10-point standardized sten scale, based on the distribution of scores of the reference group (8). Sten scores of 1-3 are interpreted as low, 4-7 as average, and 8-10 as high. The middle range represents approximately 68% of general population, whereas the high and low ranges represent the top and bottom 16% of the general population. The QSC scores were analyzed as raw data or were categorized into centiles, as indicated. Pearson’s correlation analysis was used to assess associations between parental attitudes and domains of social competence. A two-tailed unpaired t-test was used for comparisons of two groups and one-way ANOVA for comparisons of more than two groups. A value of P<0.05 was taken to indicate statistical significance in all data elaboration.
RESULTS

Relationships among parental attitudes and the adolescents’ social competence

The use of the parent-child relation and social competence questionnaires allowed assessing mutual relationships among parents’ attitudes and domains of adolescent children’s social behavior. Analyses of how adolescents, as a combined sample consisting of both genders, perceived the parents’ attitudes demonstrated only one significant relationship. Mothers’ loving attitude related positively to adolescents’ competence in interpersonal, including intimate, situations (P<0.05) (Fig. 1). No other relationships between different domains of social competence in the combined group of adolescents, on the one side, and different attitudes of either mother or father, as perceived by adolescents, on the other side, could be substantiated.

Splitting the results between boys and girls showed that the above-mentioned overall enhancing effect of mothers’ loving attitude on adolescents’ competence in interpersonal relations was due entirely to the mother-son attachment (Fig. 2, Panel A). A similar significant relationship also was found between the way the sons perceived the protective or attentive attitude of their mothers and the sons’ competence in interpersonal relations (Fig. 2, Panel B). No such relationships were found for the mother-daughter influence. Nor were there any appreciable associations between the perception by adolescents of either sex of other types of mothers’ attitude and the domains of adolescents’ competence studied.

On the father side, the results pointed to a significant negative correlation between fathers’ protective attitude and daughters’ competence regarding interpersonal relations in the gender-combined sample of adolescents.
social exposure (Fig. 3). In contrast, there was a positive correlation between fathers’ liberal attitude and their sons’ performance in situations requiring assertiveness (Fig. 4).
Social competence of adolescents

Application of the QSC questionnaire alone allowed collecting information on the level and differences in social competence in the population of late adolescents studied. We found a couple of distinct differences in social competence related to gender and to the school environment in which the adolescents spent most of their time. Girls had a significant edge over boys in dealing with interpersonal relations, which also resulted in a higher score the girls achieved as regards the overall social competence (Table 1, Panel A).

**Table 1.** Social competence related to adolescents’ gender (Panel A) and to the type of school they attended (Panel B).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Girls</th>
<th>Boys</th>
<th>P</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A – Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competence in</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>interpersonal relations</td>
<td>47.2 ±0.7</td>
<td>41.9 ±1.0*</td>
<td>0.001</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall social</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>competence</td>
<td>183.1 ±3.2</td>
<td>173.4 ±3.2*</td>
<td>0.035</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

|                  |                  |                  |     |
| **B – Type of school** |                  |                  |     |
| Competence in    |                  |                  |     |
| social exposure  | 6.1 ±0.3         | 4.9 ±0.3*        | 0.010|
| Overall social   |                  |                  |     |
| competence       | 6.1 ±0.3         | 5.3 ±0.3*        | 0.034|

A – Results are given in raw score; B – results are given in stens. Differences regarding gender and between types of school profiles were assessed with unpaired t-test. *P<0.05 denoted significant differences.

**Fig. 4.** Relationship between fathers’ liberal attitude and adolescent sons’ competence in situations requiring assertiveness.
Interestingly, in the gender-combined group, students of the vocational school profile performed worse in social exposure, and correspondingly in the overall social competence, than those who studied general life sciences in high schools (Table 1, Panel B). Finally, a self-assessment of the different domains of social competence by the adolescents showed that the majority regarded their competence as average. The proportion of students who regarded their competence as high was greater than those who regarded themselves low (Fig. 5).

**Perception by adolescents of parental attitudes**

Fig. 6 shows how the adolescents, as a combined group, perceived the 5 parental attitudes assessed: loving, demanding, protective, rejecting, and liberal displayed by both mothers and fathers. The demanding and rejecting attitudes, both having rather a negative connotation, although higher in fathers, scored the least in the adolescents’ perception of both fathers and mothers. Still, the demanding attitude was significantly less perceived in mothers than in fathers. Fathers’ liberal attitude clearly predominated over all the other attitudes in fathers.

**DISCUSSION**

In this study data were collected, using self-reported questionnaires, on adolescent social competence, and adolescents’ perception of their mothers’ and fathers’ parental styles. The main finding of the study was the presence of a
significant association between the maternal loving or protective attitude and the adolescents’ competence in interpersonal relations, which in this study also included intimate relations. However, gender was a moderator of this general relationship. Maternal control explicitly fostered their sons’ interpersonal relations, and no such relationship was observed toward daughters. Adolescents’ behavior seemed somehow less susceptible to, and less specifically influenced by, fatherly control. Analyses further detected that the overly protective fathers hampered their daughters’ ability to perform during social exposure and that fathers’ liberal approach helped their sons assert themselves. On balance, the findings point to a strong mother-son bond being most influential in shaping the adolescent social competence. However, the findings also point out that the usually positively connotated attitudes, such as loving and protective, although fostering the personal interactions of adolescents, may likely hamper the confidence in social exposure and in stating one’s position, if overly expressed by parents. Certain parental constraints in dealing with adolescent children may thus be advantageous. In this context, it is worth noting that fathers were perceived by adolescents as more rough a parent who was less involved in close control of children’s upbringing. Therefore, fathers seem to have counterpoised the more gentle attitudes of mothers.

The findings of the current study support the traditional point of view that underscores familism as a still dominant and culturally-approved form of family organization (1). In this form fathers are perceived as more prone to having a
demanding or less involved in the child’s matters attitude. In this form also, the role of parental style in child’s rearing and behavior is judged as highly influential. The findings of the current study extend the parental influence on the development of social competence into the late adolescence.

What differs the current study from the majority of previous investigations on the subject is that it was based on the perception of parental by adolescents rather than the other way around, i.e., from the adult parental side. On the whole, the current study lends support to those rarer previous works that underscore the importance of adolescents’ perception of the way the parents conduct themselves (10), as reflecting more truly and less biased the parental influence in shaping their adolescent children future social behavior. This study, however, seems to point to the possibility of overestimation of the parental role in the late adolescence. Although parents still retain an appreciable influence on adolescents’ social behavior, this influence concerns only certain dimensions of parental attitude and is essentially gender-dependent on both parental and adolescent sides. The loving and protective attitudes of mothers directed toward their sons have the greatest impact on their social competence, in particular on their interpersonal and intimate relations.

The study has limitations. The Parent-Child Relations questionnaire is of retrospective nature. The adolescents were investigated at the age 18 years and were asked to describe the parental style as the imagined they had seen it before they turned 12 years of age. Both the time elapsed and current psychoemotional issues may have skewed the memories of the past. Likewise, results of the Questionnaire of Social Competence are susceptible, to an extent, to the level of self-criticism or self-assurance of the investigated, apparently variably determined by the adolescents themselves (Fig. 5), which may skew the outcome. This also is particularly relevant in view of the gender-related and depending on the type of school differences in social competence found in the current study; with the girls and students of life sciences school profile scoring better than others. The influence of different school environments, part of which is interaction with peers, on psychological competence has also been underscored in other works (3, 11). These factors were not verifiably controlled for in the questionnaires used in the study, as was not taken into account the number of children in the family. Each additional child substantially enriches mutual interactions in the family, which may also affect adolescents’ external interpersonal relations. On the other side, however, there are reports that family size has negligible influence on the parent-child relations (10).

In conclusion, this study demonstrates the presence of an association between certain dimensions of parental style and the adolescents’ social competence. In particular, a mother-son bond is influential in the domain of interpersonal relations. On the whole, maternal control exerted through a loving attitude seems key for the shaping of adolescent children competence and behavior. The results are in accord with the concept of familism as a dominant form of family
organization, but call for constraints in parental sentiments whose overly expression may backfire and disadvantage other domains of social competence of adolescents, such as assertiveness and performance during social exposure. The findings may contribute to future studies on how parenting style shapes adolescent social outcomes.

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REFERENCES


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