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Perceived Parenting Style and Social Problem Solving Skills in Young Adults

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Abstract

The present study examined whether the type of parenting style as perceived by young adults is associated with social problem solving skills using a performance based task. Thirty-nine participants between the ages of 19 and 24 were given a Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ) and a performance-based Social Problem Solving Skills task (SPST). It was hypothesized that higher ratings on the authoritative style parenting scale would be correlated with more effective solutions for social problems and fewer self-critical and hostile attributions. Results showed a significant relationship between non authoritative parenting, specifically permissive, and content of chosen response, r(39) = -.36, p< .05, which supported the hypothesis. However, there was an interesting opposition to the hypothesis regarding self-critical attributions, where Authoritative parenting significantly correlated with more self-critical attributions, r(39) = .35, p< .05.

Literature Review

It is undoubted that parenting provides an influence on many aspects of a child's wellbeing. Parental influence including parenting style, involvement, responsiveness and conflict resolution has been linked to all areas of development in children and adolescents (Goodman, Barfoot, Frye, Belli, 1999; Landry, Swank, & Smith, 2006; Mounts, 2002). Much of this research has focused primarily on the social and behavioral tendencies in the areas of problem behavior, peer influence, and social problem solving in children and adolescents (Mounts, 2002; Vieno, Pastore, Santinello, & Nation, 2009).

Social problem solving skills have many influences on a person's wellbeing. As discussed in previous literature, effective problem solving has been associated to lowered expectations of depression, stress, anxiety, and antisocial behavior. Additionally, varying levels of problem solving serve as a basis in the differences of self-esteem, interpersonal competence, and use of problem focused coping strategies (Baker, 2006). Another interesting study was done regarding determinants of social problem solving which claims that chronic, poorly resolved conflict with parents is a powerful example of social problem solving.

Therefore it is conceivable that children who witness, or are regularly exposed to unresolved conflict may be at risk for the development of future ineffective social problem solving skills, which will eventually generalize towards peer relationships (Goodman et al., 1999). This study shows how social problem solving is a byproduct of the way we are raised by our parents or guardians. It shows that there is a link between specific aspects of parenting and how children and adolescents take what they have learned into the social world. The current study seeks to examine whether there is a direct link between perceived parenting style of one's parents during childhood and social problem solving abilities during young adulthood. Previous literature that addresses these related topics, such as parenting style and performance in college, is limited. In one particular study, parenting style was identified and compared to the students' academic adjustment and success in college (Strage, Swanson-Brandt, 1999). In this study, the research focused primarily on the advantages experienced by young adults whose parents had practiced authoritative style parenting over those whose parents did not. The study suggests that the long term effects of the relationship between the parent and child support the theory that adults' self-perceptions appear to be habituated greatly by the nature of the

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parent-child relationship during childhood. Results indicated that college students who reported more authoritative parenting had a mastery orientation to college than peers whose parents adopted a less authoritative parenting style, because they tend to be given more autonomy, support, and discipline (Strage, Swanson-Brandt, 1999). Although this study used parenting style as a determinant of adjustment and success in college, it provides excellent framework for future research to be done on other aspects that affects a young adult's life, including social problem solving skills. A bridge can be made between these two factors, since effective social problem solving skills are a necessary component to the transition from high school to college and an autonomous adult life. The goal of the current study is to bridge this gap and examine the direct relationship between parenting style and the skills that young adults take with them to resolve problematic social situations that they experience in their everyday life away from parental authority.

Parenting style illustrates the attitudes toward the child and the emotional nature of the parent-child relationship, rather than the actual goal-oriented behavior that the parent executes (Mounts, 2002). Parenting style for the purpose of this study will be operationalized using Baumrind's definitions of the three major parenting styles Authoritative, Authoritarian, and Permissive (Baumrind, 1972). Authoritative parenting is both demanding and responsive. For example, they are known to give children direction, however remain open and willing to hear the child's opinions. This type of parenting is effective in setting limitations to teach the child while still encouraging autonomy. Authoritarian parenting is also demanding, but labeled as unresponsive. An authoritarian parent attempts to shape, control, and evaluate the

behavior and attitudes of the child in accordance with a set standard of conduct. The authoritarian parent does not accept verbal protest or encourage constructive criticism, believing that the child should accept the word given for what is right (Baumrind 1972). This type of parenting is highly unresponsive and leaves little to no room for the development of autonomy for a child. Children raised with authoritarian parenting style tend to be less well-adjusted in school and with peers than those with authoritative parents (Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1994). The last category of parenting as defined by Baumrind is permissive. Permissive parenting is often associated with lenient tendencies where very little demands are expected of the children. Permissive parents often adopt an indulgent approach to discipline, however are very unresponsive. These parents greatly encourage the children to make many of their own decisions, however, most often at an age when they are not yet cognitively capable of doing so. Permissively raised children have much say in the way they choose to behave, often with little to no protest from parents (Baumrind, 1972).

Much of the existent literature on the link between parenting style and social adjustment focused mainly on young children beginning school, or on adolescents (Baker, 2004; Strage, Swanson-Brandt, 1999); few studies have been done which examine the role parenting plays in the lives of college students. Similarly, an abundance of studies have examined parenting associated with young children's and adolescent's peer relationships (Mounts, 2002; Steinburg et al., (1994). The literature on how parenting creates long term effects into young adulthood and beyond is quite limited. The current study seeks to identify the relationship between parenting style

adopted during childhood and present-day social problem solving skills in young adults. It is important to study the social problem solving skills of young adults because for the majority population of this age group, they are either enrolled in college, or recently graduated from college, which is an experience of seemingly being on one's own for the first time. It is suggested that factors learned from parenting styles might continue to play a role even when young adults are no longer in daily contact with their parents (Strage, Swanson-Brandt, 1999). Because of these findings, it is important to understand how the parenting styles the young adults were exposed to as children affect the way they solve problems when they are in an independent environment.

Concurrent with previous research, it is hypothesized that the parenting styles displayed during childhood will affect the participants in areas of social problem solving skills. Specifically, we expect to find positive associations between authoritative parenting styles and advanced social problem solving skills. This direction is assumed because without positive communication, where both child and parent provide feedback, the child does not develop as much ability or confidence in effectively overcoming disagreements with peers. As discussed earlier, this hypothesis is generally supported by previous research.

Methods

Participants

Forty participants, aged 19 to 24 (M=20.85, SD=1.23) were recruited on college campuses and asked to voluntarily participate as subjects in the study. The method of recruitment was a sample of convenience. Some participants were family members, friends, coworkers, as well as students from Iona College and nearby colleges. They were approached by an experimenter and asked if they would be interested in taking a brief study on how they interact socially. Approximately half (48%) of the participants were male. One participant withdrew from the study and their responses were destroyed, leaving 39 valid participants. The majority (87%) of the participants were currently enrolled in undergraduate studies, while the remaining have recently graduated (10%), or involved in post-graduate studies (3%).

Procedure

After meeting with the interviewer in a quiet room to avoid any distractions, the participant was asked to read and sign an Informed Consent Statement describing what the study is about, that their participation is completely voluntary, and they may withdraw at any time. Next, the participant was be handed a series of questionnaires, including a short demographics survey, and standardized self-report measures in which the participant read a series of statements and responded according to a scale. Descriptive statistics in the demographic survey consist of age, gender, and current level of education (entering college, enrolled in undergraduate, recently graduated, post-graduate studies).

The self-report measure used was the Parental Authority Questionnaire, as formulated and validated by Reitman, D. (2002). The PAQ is a 30 item self-report scale which includes statements about the tendencies of the participant's parents or legal guardians during childhood, such as "As I was growing up, once family policy had been established, my parent/guardian discussed the reasoning behind the policy with the children in the family."

Participants were told to respond according to a Likert scale of responses ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The PAQ is designed to measure parental authority from the point of view of the child at any age. It was designed to have three subscales: permissive, authoritative, and authoritarian, and scored by summing the individual items to comprise the subscale scores, ranging from 10 to 50, then dividing by the number of items in the subscale to find the mean. This final subscale score resulted in a range from 0 to 5. The higher the final score, the greater the level of the parental authority type measured. We calculated the Cronbach's alpha reliability statistic for each subscale, containing 10 items: Authoritative α= .69, permissive α= .76, and authoritarian α= .88. The performance based measure was the Social Problem Solving Skills Task (SPST) developed by Nock (2006). In this task the participant was read a series of four social situations that people are likely to experience in the areas of a romantic relationship, peer relationships, professional/job related, and school related. An example of the school related situation from the SPST includes: "You worked really hard on an English paper, which was a personal essay about what you admire about yourself. Your professor hands it to you and you got a C-. The major criticism is that you weren't specific enough". After being read the situation, the participant was asked a series of questions about the event such as "why do you think the other person did what they did?" and their reactions to the event: "Imagine this has just happened to you. When I say 'begin' tell me as many different ways of handling the situation as you can think of, until I say stop". The participant was also asked which of the reactions they are most likely to use, and lastly, their rating of how successful they believe they will be in causing the desired outcome provided.

Each vignette was recorded and coded based on consensus ratings between two of the study investigators in 4 criteria: Attribution (a continuous variable: number of self-critical attributions), Number of Responses (continuous variable), Content of Chosen "Most-Likely" Response coded as 1 (negative), 2 (neutral), or 3 (positive), and Self-Efficacy rating from, 1 (least effective) to 4 (most effective). Each criterion was treated as a dependent variable in the study.

There was counterbalancing with the order that the questionnaires as well as the SPST was be given. This was done to eliminate any sequencing effects. For example, some participants received the Social Problem Solving Skills Task first, then the Parental Authority Questionnaire and demographic survey, while others received the PAQ and demographics first and the SPST second. After all measures have been completed the participant was given a debriefing statement, highlighting the motives of the study in detail and was thanked for their participation and cooperation in the study. This study was approved by the Iona College Institutional Review Board.

Results

An independent samples t-test was performed to determine if there were any gender differences in Social Problem Solving Skills. There were no significant differences with respect to gender. Table 1 reports the descriptive information for the PAQ and the SPST for the entire sample, and males and females separately.

Pearson Correlations were performed to test the original hypotheses regarding parenting and social problem solving skills; See Table 2. Corresponding to the hypotheses, there was a weak, negative

correlation between Permissive Parenting Style and Positive Content of Chosen Response Solution; $r(39) = -.36$, $p < .05$. Participants who identified more with Permissive parenting had less positive responses to the task questions. Although not statistically significant, there was a slight negative correlation between Authoritative Parenting Style and Hostile Attributions; $r(39) = -.31$, $p = .05$. Participants who identified more with Authoritative Parenting Style displayed less hostile attributions. There was also a moderate, positive correlation between Authoritative parenting style and Positive Content of Chosen Response; $r(39) = .42$, $p < .05$. Participants who identified more with Authoritative Parenting style exhibited more positive responses.

Opposing to the hypotheses, there was a statistically significant, positive, weak correlation between Authoritative Parenting Style and Self Critical Attributions; $r(39) = .35$, $p < .05$. Participants who identified more with Authoritative Parenting style displayed more self-critical attributions than those of other parenting styles. This appears to be an interesting relationship and poses as an anomaly for future research to investigate. Authoritarian parenting style had no statistically significant findings in relation to any aspect of social problem solving skills.

Discussion

Although moderate at best, the correlations that were found in this study suggest interesting implications. Overall, it was generally supported that parenting style is significantly related to social problem solving skills in the areas of attribution and content of chosen response solutions. Participants who reported higher scores on the authoritative subscale of the PAQ were more likely to provide positive solution responses for various social problems, while those who reported higher non-authoritative parenting styles, specifically permissive, frequently chose more negative response solutions. Authoritative parenting style also had a slight weak correlation with hostile attributions, and although this relationship was not statistically significant, it provides excellent insight into the benefits of the authoritative parenting style, perhaps suggesting that children who were raised with parents who are more authoritative show less hostility towards others. One possible reason for this is that generally, authoritative style parenting encourages that the children become accustomed to resolving misunderstandings and disagreements with their parents through respectful dialogue as opposed to hostile arguing.

The significant relationships between authoritative parenting style and content of chosen response implies that the participants who reported being raised with more authoritative style parenting were more likely to choose a positive solution as their response to the situation. In other words, out of all the hypothetical responses they were asked to provide regarding how they would handle the situation, they reported more often that they would most likely handle it in a way that was considered effective and not socially damaging or harmful to themselves or the other person.

Contrary to hypotheses however, there was a positive correlation between authoritative parenting style and number of self-critical attributions reported. This suggests that young adults who were raised with parents who adopted more authoritative methodologies more frequently interpreted the situation with the idea that they did something wrong. This would be interesting for future research to investigate.

Limitations and Conclusions

One of the limitations of the present study was the relatively small sample size. Had the number of participants been larger, the correlations would most definitely be stronger and therefore more conclusive and could be generalized to larger populations. Larger sample size would also yield to a statistically significant correlation between authoritative parenting style and hostile attributions. Another limitation that could be named in this study was the fact that the participants were chosen through a sample of convenience. The majority of the participants knew the researcher on some level, therefore this relationship could have obstructed the subjects from being completely open and honest during the performance based task, for fear that they would be judged by a friend or acquaintance. Had there been a more random selection of participants, there may have been slightly different results, perhaps more significant than the present study. Another possible limitation is the fact that the participants were forced to look back when recalling how they were raised. Because of this, the data was retrospective, and therefore subject to memory bias.

Despite the limitations of this study, it is still a useful tool for investigating long term relationships between the way we are raised and the way we interact with our peers. There is much to be gained by establishing and understanding the effects our upbringing has on all areas of our adult life, especially in social situations. This study provides an excellent jumping off point for future research to be done in the areas of social problem solving in young adults, and other related areas.

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Table 1

	Total N=39	Males N=19	Females N=20
Parental Authority Questionnaire			
Permissive	M=2.54 (SD=.64)	M=2.54 (SD=.61)	M=2.55 (SD=.67)
Authoritarian	M=3.02 (SD=.78)	M=3.08 (SD=.68)	M=2.97 (SD=.88)
Authoritative	M=3.72 (SD=.47)	M=3.79 (SD=.36)	M=3.65 (SD=.56)
Social Problem Solving Skills Task			
Self-critical attributions	M=.68 (SD=.69)	M=.68 (SD=.67)	M=.70 (SD=.73)
Number of responses	M=3.64 (SD=.75)	M=3.49 (SD=.85)	M=3.78 (SD=.64)
Self-efficacy rating	M=3.06 (SD=.38)	M=3.10 (SD=.41)	M=3.03 (SD=.36)
Content chosen response	M=1.96 (SD=.46)	M=2.08 (SD=.47)	M=1.8 (SD=.44)

Table 2

	Self-Critical Attributions	Number of Responses	Self-Efficacy Rating	Content of Chosen Response
Total PAQ Permissive				
Pearson Correlation	-.022	-.220	-.046	-.359 *
Total PAQ Authoritarian				
Pearson Correlation	.237	-.126	-.161	.012
Total PAQ Authoritative				
Pearson Correlation	.352 *	-.062	.125	.415 *