

Mothers' and Fathers' Perceptions of Change and Continuity in Their Relationships With Young Adult Sons and Daughters

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Proulx, C. M. & Helms, H.M. (2008). Mothers' and fathers' perceptions of change and continuity in their relationships with young adult sons and daughters. *Journal of Family Issues*, 29(2), 234-261.

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Abstract:

Guided by contemporary feminist revisions of individual theories on adolescent development, interviews with 142 parent dyads were conducted to better understand the variation in mothers' and fathers' perceptions of changes and continuities in their relationships with their firstborn young adult sons and daughters. A between-families content analysis of parents' responses revealed that the most salient issues were firstborns' independence, contact and time spent together, and role patterns. Several gendered patterns emerged, suggesting that mothers and fathers might differentially relate to their daughters and sons. However, a within-family analysis of parental dyads' responses challenges previously held beliefs about gender differences and suggests few gendered differences emerge when considering responses from both parents within the same family. Implications for future research on parent—child relationships are discussed.

Keywords: parent-child relationships | young adulthood | gendered relationships | content analysis

Article:

With average life expectancy exceeding 75 years, the longest period of Parent-child relationships today takes place in the adult years for both generations. Research and theory on normative development and family relationships, however, concentrate on parent—child relationships when children are young, when they are in their teen years, or when adult children are caring for their elderly parents. The little that is known about parents' routine experiences with young adult children typically comes from reports of only one family member (most often, the mother or the young adult child) and so allows researchers to say little about continuities and changes in mothers' and fathers' relationships with young adult sons and daughters (Cooney, 2000; Sprey, 1991). To speak of parent—child relationships in adulthood without reference to gender masks the variability that exists in father—daughter, father—son, mother—daughter, and mother—son relationships and “oversimplifies family bonds that are heavily gendered” (Cooney, 2000, p. 56). Given the divergent roles that mothers and fathers hold in families, as well as the differential

gendered expectations for sons and daughters (Thornton, Orbuch, & Axinn, 1995), we argue that research questions and methods must be framed to take into account the gender of each parent and each child being studied (Cooney, 2000). To this end, the present study examines parents' subjective ideas about change and continuity in their relationships with their young adult sons and daughters by focusing on two contrasting perspectives: one, general patterns as a function of parent and child gender and, two, variation and similarity within families that arise from mothers' and fathers' experiences with their young adult sons and daughters.

Contemporary research that focuses on mothers' and fathers' relationships with their young adult sons and daughters draws heavily from quantitative approaches. The use of traditional survey questions has been criticized for gender bias and the failure to capture qualitative similarities and differences in mothers' versus fathers' relationships with their young adult children (Cooney, 2000; Mancini & Blieszner, 1989; Walker, 2000). For example, measures focused only on emotional support and intimacy may result in men's family relationships appearing deficient. Furthermore, parents' responses to survey items that assess the extent of change and continuity in the parent-child relationship across the transition to adulthood may fail to show significant differences for parents' experiences with sons versus daughters when actual qualitative differences across parent-child dyads do exist. For example, in a study on fathers' relationships with adult sons and daughters, Nydegger and Mitteness (1991) found that the extent of fathers' understanding of their children was linked to different correlates for daughters versus sons. The authors described these differences in father-son versus father-daughter relationships as being qualitative: "These differences are seldom matters of 'How much?' Typically, they appear as responses to 'In what way?'" (p. 253). Furthermore, although many dimensions of the parent-child relationship can be assessed using standardized quantitative measurement (e.g., intergenerational assistance and conflict), the areas most salient to parents who are experiencing this transition might differ by parent or child gender and might be quite different from those traditionally assessed via survey approaches (Mancini & Blieszner, 1989).

An additional limitation of previous work involves the lack of research examining the differential perceptions of mothers and fathers within the same family as they experience their firstborn's transition to adulthood. Few studies to date have collected data from mothers and fathers within the same families. Those that have included parental dyads report general patterns for mothers versus fathers across families rather than exploring similarities and differences in the parent-child relationship between paired mothers and fathers (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Although revealing important gendered patterns across families, between-families analysis might mask nuances in the relationship experiences of mothers and fathers in the same families that are best captured using within-family approaches (Cooney, 2000). A within-family approach allows exploration of how mothers and fathers in the same families might relate to their children in similar or different ways and how these relational patterns might reflect gendered relations or dyadic responses to the unique characteristics of the child. Thus, the second goal of the present study was to conduct a within-family analysis of parents' responses to provide a nuanced understanding of the similarities and differences within families, which may or may not support the patterns that exist between families.

To address limitations in previous research, we adopted an open-ended response format to identify those areas in which mothers and fathers are most likely to discuss continuities and

changes in their roles and relationships with their young adult children. To best address our research goals, we relied on two separate but complementary methodologies. To answer our first research goal, we utilized content analysis (Patton, 2002) of participants' responses to identify and define themes relevant to the parents of young adult children in this study. We then described the patterns of responses between families based on both parent and child gender. To address our second goal, describing the similarities and differences between parents within the same family, we relied on an adaptation of constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) in which each unit of text from a respondent is matched with each unit of text from his or her spouse. Similarities and differences that emerged within parental dyads were noted, and through an iterative process of constant comparison, within-family themes were refined. Although we were unable to find any family studies literature to date that has analyzed a set of dyadic responses qualitatively, we believed that this method best matched our goals of identifying patterns that exist within parental dyads.

Continuity and Discontinuity in Parent–Child Relations

A common theoretical position in the transition-to-adulthood literature is the separation–individuation perspective. Traditional separation–individuation perspectives view parent–child relationships in terms of their implications for adolescents' individual development, with the discontinuity of parent–child ties (psychological separation) being a key prerequisite to identity formation (Hoffman, 1984). Contemporary individuation theories, as well as feminist and life course revisions of individual theories of adolescent development, shift the focus from adolescent-driven development and relational separation to the context of ongoing relationships with parents, thereby capturing the transformations and renegotiations that are likely to occur (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor, 1994; Cooney, 2000; Elder, 1984; Lye, 1996). In so doing, these theories emphasize both discontinuities and continuities that might exist in parent–child bonds across this pivotal transition. These contemporary approaches suggest that increasing independence from parents and decreasing daily caregiving demands on parents are likely to occur at this stage but that the emotional qualities of the relationship are likely to endure (Mancini & Blieszner, 1989; O'Connor, Allen, Bell, & Hauser, 1996). However, few studies to date have examined these hypothesized changes and continuities from parents' perspectives.

Furthermore, feminist interpretations focus on gendered nuances in parent–child relationships and draw attention to differences in accepted and expected levels of independence and interdependence for sons versus daughters, as well as differences in mothers' and fathers' caregiving roles and behaviors. Because the quality of parent–child relationships in young adulthood is associated with children's willingness to provide care and support to parents in later life (Aquilino, 1997; Fingerman, 2001; Noack & Buhl, 2004), the extent to which parents and their emerging adult children successfully negotiate new roles and maintain mutually satisfying relationships can have significant implications for the parent generation.

Importance of Parent and Child Gender

In the past decade, studies of intergenerational bonds have begun to emphasize the need to focus on differences that might be based on parent or child gender (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Theorists

suggest that girls are socialized to cultivate and value emotional ties with family members and that this pattern is unlikely to change as they transition into young adulthood (Chodorow, 1978; Lefkowitz & Fingerman, 2003). Thus, family members might value, cultivate, and expect a continuation of high levels of connectedness and relatedness for daughters and mothers more so than for fathers and sons. Growing evidence from the literature examining young adults' experiences with the transition to young adulthood suggests that although daughters report that parents foster age-appropriate independence, they also report remaining affectively close to both their mothers and their fathers during the transition to young adulthood (Kenny & Donaldson, 1992), thus evidencing a pattern of continuity and change. Women of both generations are more likely than men to maintain intergenerational relationships across adulthood (Fingerman, 2001; Hagestad, 1986; Spitze & Logan, 1990), and young adult daughters report more frequent contact and communication with their parents than do sons (Campbell, Adams, & Dobson, 1984; Frank, Avery, & Laman, 1988; White, Speisman, & Costos, 1983). The importance of women's intergenerational ties to family relationships is evidenced by the finding that families with young adult daughters experience higher levels of family cohesion than do families with young adult sons, with relationship cohesion appearing highest for the mother–daughter dyad when compared to other dyads (Scabini & Galimberti, 1995). Adult children report feeling closer to their mothers than to their fathers, with the mother–daughter tie appearing to be the strongest (Lye, 1996), and some studies suggest that cross-sex dyadic relations are the most strained and conflictual (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998; Knoester, 2003). Alternatively, other work supports Chodorow's (1978) hypothesis that daughters' difficulties in emotionally separating from the family in young adulthood cause strain in the very relationships they seek to maintain, thereby suggesting that although daughters report closer relationships with both parents than do sons, they also report more conflict in these relationships (Frank et al., 1988; Lye, 1996).

Theorists suggest that whereas early gendered socialization emphasizes relational connectedness for girls, boys are encouraged from an early age to obtain independence from their parents. Thus, parents, especially fathers, might value shifts to greater independence more highly in their sons than in their daughters. Concordant with the gendered socialization perspective, young adult sons have consistently reported higher levels of functional, emotional, and attitudinal independence from their parents than have daughters (Kenny & Donaldson, 1992; Lapsley, Rice, & Shadid, 1989; Lopez, Campbell, & Watkins, 1986, 1989), thus suggesting potential gender differences in what might constitute continuities in parent–child relationships. Despite conflicting evidence that cross-sex dyads experience the greatest relational strains, the mother–son bond appears stronger than the father–son tie, with young adult sons disclosing more to their mothers than to their fathers (Barnett, Marshall, & Pleck, 1992). Possibly because of the intensity of the mother–daughter relationship, daughters and sons appear most dissimilar when reporting on emotional closeness and communication with and independence from mothers; reports of these relationship dimensions with fathers are more similar (Frank et al., 1988).

Previous research suggests that parents' largest transfers of practical and financial help come during their offspring's young adult years (Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1992; Eggebeen & Hogan, 1990), when children might require assistance with finding a job, paying college tuition, setting up a household, financing a wedding, or baby-sitting new arrivals in the family. However, studies of adult daughters and sons suggest that they perceive that emotional help and support are the most common and salient exchanges of mutual assistance between generations during these

transitional years (Cooney & Uhlenberg, 1992; Lye, 1996), therefore suggesting potential differences in how parents and young adult children perceive patterns of intergenerational assistance.

Although the studies reviewed here offer important glimpses into the relationship patterns of young adults and their mothers and fathers, the bulk of them rely on young adults' reports and do not examine whether these differential patterns are continuations of the parent–child relationship or changes brought about during the transition to young adulthood. Thus, it is unknown whether these patterns of relating and gender differences will emerge when we examine mothers' and fathers' open-ended responses about the changes and continuities that they are experiencing in their relationships with their young adult children. Furthermore, none of these studies offers an analysis of both parents' experiences with continuity and change from a within-family approach; thus, it remains unknown whether the gender differences found in previous work will emerge within families or if similarities are more likely to emerge as parents respond to the unique characteristics of their child.

In sum, we argue that continuity and discontinuity are not mutually exclusive categories within relational contexts; thus, parent–child relationships during this transition are likely marked by patterns of stability and change. However, previous quantitative work in this area has relied heavily on young adult reports regarding patterns of relating with mothers versus fathers and has failed to capture the dynamic nature of these relationships from the perspective of both parents within the same family. In the present study, we interviewed parents to better understand their perceptions of general patterns of change and continuity in the parent–child relationship, and we examined how these perceptions varied as a function of parent and child gender. Last, we conducted an in-depth analysis of parental dyads' responses in order to examine variations within families and inform a better understanding of the similarities and differences that might exist between mothers and fathers in the same families. Using an adaptation of the constant comparative method, we explored whether the patterns that emerged in the between-family analysis emerged when participants' responses were examined from a within-family perspective.

Method

Participants

Participating families were part of a larger longitudinal study exploring family relationships and adolescent development. At the onset of this larger study, 197 families had firstborn children in 8th, 9th, or 10th grades, with siblings approximately 2 years younger. Families were recruited via letters sent home to parents in 13 school districts in a northeastern state. The letter explained the purpose of the research effort in general terms, and parents were asked to return postcards if they were interested in participating. Eligibility criteria included that families were nondivorced dual earners with a firstborn adolescent. Given school district concerns about confidentiality, it was not possible to calculate an overall participation rate. However, the participation rate was 95% for eligible families who expressed an interest in the study. Subsequent comparisons of our sample with U.S. Census data on families from the same geographic areas suggested that the parents in this sample were slightly older and considerably better educated than their dual-earner counterparts from the same counties.

The first three phases of the study were conducted at yearly intervals; Phase 4, an abbreviated follow-up interview conducted with parents only, occurred approximately 3 years later. By Year 3 of data collection, 3 families had declined participation, resulting in 194 participating families. Of the 194 couples in these families, 142 completed interviews in Phase 4. Seventeen couples were lost because of attrition; despite multiple attempts, 9 couples were not reachable by phone, and 8 were no longer interested in participating. Thirty-five couples were excluded from the current analyses because 8 had firstborn children under the age of 18, 2 had extenuating circumstances with the firstborn child that inhibited their participation (i.e., mental health and legal issues), and 25 had incomplete interview data. ANOVAs were conducted with Phase 3 data to determine whether the nonparticipating and excluded parents systematically differed from the 142 parental dyads included in the current study. Of the demographic characteristics examined (family income, parents' and offspring's education, offspring's age, parent's length of marriage, and parental depression), only one significant difference emerged: Couples in the current study sample had been married longer ($M = 23.09$ years) than those who were excluded ($M = 21.18$ years), $F(1, 191) = 13.56, p < .001$.

At Phase 4, the average age for firstborn children was 19.47 years ($SD = 0.96$, range = 18.47-22.84); for mothers, 45.97 years ($SD = 4.07$); and for fathers, 47.78 years ($SD = 4.30$). On average, mothers in this study earned \$24,006 a year ($SD = \$15,629$) and had completed some college education ($M = 14.26, SD = 2.27$). Fathers earned \$39,885 on average ($SD = \$13,793$) and also had completed some college ($M = 14.42, SD = 2.31$). Ninety firstborn children were living away from their parents' home and attending college at least part-time; 28 were attending college while living with their parents; 12 were living at home and working at least part-time; 9 were living away from home and were employed; 2 were serving in the military; and 1 was a stay-at-home mother living away from her parents.

Procedure

Approximately 3 years after the last phase of data collection for the larger study, letters were sent to parents informing them of plans to contact them via telephone for a short follow-up interview. A team of trained undergraduate and graduate research assistants conducted short telephone interviews (20-30 min per parent) with each parent who agreed to participate. Each telephone call was audio-recorded and later transcribed. Telephone interviews included a series of questions aimed at capturing changes in household membership, marital status, work history, educational history, and living arrangement for each family member. In addition, we used an open-ended approach to studying intergenerational relationships developed by Fingerman (1997) to assess parents' ideas about continuity and discontinuity in their relationships with their young adult sons and daughters. Through a protocol shown to build rapport with adult participants and engage them in the research process, each parent was asked to think about his or her relationship with his or her firstborn child over the past couple of years (from the time that the child turned 18 until the time of the interview) and to respond to each of the following three questions:

1. "Please describe the ways in which your relationship with your child has changed in recent years."

2. “More specifically, please tell me more about how your own role in your relationship with your child has changed.”
3. “Please describe the ways in which your role with your child has stayed the same.”

Analysis

To capture general patterns of change and continuity (our first research goal), the first author and a research assistant used a content analysis approach (Patton, 2002) to identify themes and subthemes emerging in mothers’ versus fathers’ responses. Content analysis is one form of qualitative data reduction in which core consistencies and meanings are identified (Patton, 2002). These core consistencies, labeled *themes*, are not mutually exclusive; thus, an individual’s response may be coded under as many themes or subthemes as is appropriate (an important goal for the present study given that we asked parents to speak of continuities and changes in their relationships). Through this strategy, mothers’ and fathers’ responses were reviewed and coded separately, resulting in a core set of general themes that could then be examined by both parent and child gender and compared to previous between-families quantitative studies utilizing young adult samples. The final coding scheme was based on the frequency and consistency of participants’ responses, and subthemes were retained for discussion in the present study if at least 10% of the sample discussed changes or continuities in that topic area. After the first author and the research assistant reached agreement on a final coding scheme, the data were coded for a final time. NUD*IST 4.0 (QSR International, Cambridge, MA) was used to assist in storage and maintenance of coded text. Across 877 coded units of text, coders disagreed 56 times, resulting in a 94% agreement rate. Disagreements were resolved during project meetings with the second author, in which the coders reviewed the text units, discussed their coding rationale, and reached an agreement about the coding of the particular text units in question.

To address our second research goal (exploring within-family variation arising from mothers’ and fathers’ experiences with their young adult children), the first author conducted a modified constant comparative analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) of all parental dyads’ responses. Memos were written for each parental dyad summarizing the couples’ experiences with change and continuity in their relationships with their firstborn young adult children. The ways in which the views expressed by within-family mothers and fathers differed or were similar were then identified, and through an iterative process of constant comparison, within-family themes were refined. Additionally, all memos, coded data, and full response sets were reread to search for themes that might not have emerged in the original analysis.

Results

Our results are presented in several sections corresponding to our research goals. To address our first research goal, the general themes and subthemes discussed by parents in the study were identified, and patterns of continuity and change were addressed at the thematic level to determine the extent to which mothers and fathers in our sample discussed continuity and change

in their relationships with their firstborn children. As a second step in this analysis, responses were examined by parent gender to uncover potential variation in mothers' versus fathers' reports of change and continuity in specific areas (subthemes) of the relationship. As a final step, we examined continuities and discontinuities in specific relational areas by both parent and child gender. Addressing our second research goal are the results of the within-family analysis.

The final coding scheme from the content analysis resulted in three primary themes, each with its own subthemes: instrumental issues (e.g., financial assistance and levels of independence/maturity), relationship quality (e.g., closeness or openness, communication/time spent together, and emotional support), and role patterns (e.g., parenting role, like peers, and parent-mentor). Figure 1 shows the percentages of fathers and mothers in the sample who discussed continuity and change within each theme. Overall, discontinuities appeared more salient to parents in the study than did continuities, as evidenced by the more frequent discussions and larger proportions of parents who reported changes (as opposed to continuities) in their relationships with their young adult child. Similar patterns emerged for fathers' and mothers' changes and continuities in instrumental issues and changes in relationship quality and role patterns. Close to half of all fathers and mothers in our sample reported changes in the realm of instrumental issues; nearly a quarter of all mothers and fathers reported continuities in this area as well. Over a third of the mothers and fathers reported changes in the quality of their relationships with their young adult child, and over half of all fathers and mothers reported that changes occurred in role patterns between themselves and their young adult child. In terms of discrepancies between mothers and fathers, the most notable occurred for continuities in relationship quality and role patterns. More than twice as many mothers as fathers in the sample described continuities in relationship quality. In addition, 51% of mothers and 38% of fathers described continuities in role patterns across their children's transition to adulthood.

[Figure 1 Omitted]

[Table 1 Omitted]

Table 1 illustrates the proportions of mothers' and fathers' responses that fell under each subtheme when asked about the ways in which the relationship had changed and how it had stayed the same. Because parents could discuss change as occurring in either direction, the terms *increased* and *decreased* were used to describe the data on relationship discontinuity.

Discontinuities by Parent Gender

With one exception, fathers and mothers in the study reported similar changes in the parent-child relationship during their child's movement into young adulthood. As can be seen in Table 1, it appears that the most salient dimensions for discontinuity in the parent-child relationship were independence/maturity of the child, closeness/openness in the relationship, contact/time spent together, and changes in role patterns (like peers and parent-mentor). Under the theme of instrumental issues, over a third of fathers (39%) and mothers (44%) in our sample described changes in their child's independence or maturity. A mother of a 19-year-old daughter who was attending college while living with her parents said, "I just love the independency. It's fun, she's so independent now and so far has been widely independent. . . . I'm seeing maturity." Although all parents who spoke of changes in their child's independence discussed increases, several

parents expressed disappointment that their child was still not as mature or independent as they would have liked: “Sometimes I feel like I don’t even know him anymore. . . . He’s maturing, but not as quickly as I think he should” (mother of a 20-year-old attending college away from home).

In terms of relationship quality, although fathers and mothers in the study were somewhat discrepant in their reports of decreasing levels of contact or the amount of time spent with their young adult child (21% of fathers and 13% of mothers), identical proportions (13%) of mothers and fathers in the study reported shifts toward a more open or close relationship with their child: “We’ve gotten closer. . . . She decided to move back home and go to school and she’s back living with us now. I think we’re a lot closer” (mother whose daughter is 19). Said one father whose 20-year-old son was attending college away from home, “Well, I think we have gotten closer. I think we have grown closer than we ever were, and it is neat, because he is past that teen stage, but he is an individual still keeping his ties with his parents.” Although less than 10% of mothers and fathers in our sample commented on conflict in their relationship (data not shown), it should not go unnoticed that for some parents, the transition was marked by frustration, disappointment, and conflict:

I would say [that the relationship is] very volatile. When he turned 18, he decided he was an adult and didn’t have to answer to us. When he turned 18 and refused to help around the house, we said, “If you’re not gonna help, then you’re gonna have to move.” So he moved out. (mother of a 19-year-old son employed full-time)

As can be seen in Table 1, few parents in the study reported changes in emotional support provided to young adult children.

Regarding role patterns, nearly identical proportions of fathers (26%) and mothers (27%) in our sample reported relating more like peers with their young adult child than in prior years. Said one father whose 19-year-old daughter was attending college away from home, “We talk more like grown-up to grown-up compared to when she was younger. . . . It’s not like talking to my daughter. It’s like talking to one of my peers—my own age.” Parents also spoke of the transition to more peerlike relationships by explaining that interactions with their child had become more adultlike: “I guess the way it’s changed is, it’s more adult to adult than mother to daughter, you know. We talk about adult subjects, like rent money and sex” (mother of a 20-year-old daughter attending college away from home). Twenty-six percent of fathers and 27% of mothers in the study saw their role shifting to more of a mentor—someone who offers guidance and advice but no longer dictates behavior or establishes rules. Said one father whose 21-year-old son was employed full-time away from home, “It’s going from an active parenting basis to more of a consultant type thing. Lots of times he asks for my input or I give it to him, but either way it’s understood that he is making his own decisions.” Said another father whose 19-year-old son was attending college away from home,

I guess, I don’t know, when he was young, you parented, you tried to help him make decisions. Now you stand back and give him advice, and at the same time you’re hoping he takes your advice, that he makes good choices and he’s a responsible person. But you

know, graduating from high school and going to college, you're a parent only in name; he has his own life now.

Although identical proportions of parents in the study discussed shifts toward becoming mentors or peers with their firstborn child, the majority of these parents (82%) discussed their relationships in terms of one category or the other.

Continuity by Parent Gender

Although fathers and mothers in our sample appeared quite similar in their reports of discontinuities in the parent-child relationship, fewer fathers than mothers reported relationship continuities. The domains in which fathers and mothers were most similar in their reports of continuity included financial assistance and continuing to be a mentor to their young adult child. Seventeen percent of mothers and 14% of fathers mentioned that they continued to provide their child with financial assistance: "Probably it has stayed the same financially. He still depends on us for his upkeep. He has a part-time job, but we cover most of what he does still" (father of an 18-year-old living at home while attending college). Although over a quarter of the parents in our study spoke of becoming a mentor to their child as a change in role patterns, nearly a fifth of mothers and fathers spoke of it as a continuity, thereby suggesting that parents might begin to adopt mentoring roles before their child's transition to young adulthood: "I still give her my thoughts and advice . . . even the small things I will still comment on" (mother with a 19-year-old daughter living at home while attending college).

Thirty-two percent of fathers and 44% of mothers mentioned that they had retained some component of their role as a parent (e.g., a nurturer, instrumental caregiver, disciplinarian). As one father said about his 20-year-old daughter, who was employed full-time and living at home. "She still comes for me when she needs a dad. She still calls me if she is going to be late. She still comes to me if she is having car trouble." Ten percent of mothers and 15% of fathers discussed how they continued to perceive their relationships with their child as close or open: "We were always close. He normally talks to me about everything, he always has, and at 21 he still tells me everything. Some things he tells me I really don't want to know. . . . I am his mother!" (21-year-old son attending college away from home). In addition, 13% of mothers and 6% of fathers in the study reported continuing to provide emotional support to their children. One mother whose 19-year-old daughter was away at college said,

I think she still counts on me to help her with her problems. She needs doses of loving and hugs and being told that we think she is wonderful and terrific. . . .She's still my Claudia. I've called her that ever since she was born.

Continuity and Discontinuity as a Function of Parent and Child Gender

In addition to comparing fathers' and mothers' relationship experiences in general, we examined how fathers' and mothers' reports might differ when based on the gender of their young adult children (see Table 2). One general pattern that emerged was that fathers of sons volunteered more information than did fathers with daughters—a pattern that did not emerge among mothers' reports. Regarding instrumental issues, the most notable comparison was that 52% of mothers

versus 40% of fathers in the study commented on their sons' increasing maturity and independence: I know that he is becoming a young man, an adult who has his own identity, who has been able to make his mark in his own way. . . . I think it's great to see his mind expand and his world open. And independence is fun, he doesn't have to tell his mother everything he does, right? (mother of a 19-year-old attending college away from home)

The proportions of fathers of sons and fathers of daughters who commented on their child's increasing maturity and independence were almost identical (40% and 39%, respectively). Mothers' reports were more discrepant, however, with 52% of mothers of sons and 32% of mothers of daughters discussing their child's increasing independence.

[Table 2 Omitted]

Similar proportions of all parents in the study reported increased levels of emotional closeness or openness—a dimension of relationship quality. Worth noting is that fathers of sons were the only parents sampled who reported any lessening of emotional closeness or openness, although the proportion is still quite small (4%). More fathers (19%) than mothers (8%) reported decreasing levels of contact and time spent with their daughters: “Well, I’m a dad now and the daughter is away from home. My time with her is much more limited than ever before” (20-year-old daughter attending college away from home). It should be noted, however, that fathers' reports of decreased contact with their daughters were similar to mothers' and fathers' reports of contact with sons. Here, it appears that the mother–daughter dyad was unique in that it did not reveal decreased contact as frequently as the other parent–child dyads did.

With regard to role patterns, a similar gendered pattern emerged for mothers' and fathers' perceptions of the extent to which they retained some component of their parental role regardless of whether they had a daughter (46% for mothers, 32% for fathers) or a son (42% for mothers, 30% for fathers): “I guess when it comes down to the bottom line, I’m still mom! I still worry, ‘Are you safe? Are you locking your door at night?’ . . . that kind of thing. So I think some of that is still the same” (mother of a 19-year-old daughter attending college away from home). In addition, 23% of mothers of sons and 32% of mothers of daughters reported a shift to peerlike roles; fathers' responses followed this same pattern. Within child gender, mothers and fathers in our sample appeared similar when discussing changes and continuities in their role as a mentor; however, across child gender, 31% of fathers of sons and 19% of fathers of daughters reported taking on a parent–mentor role with their children. A similar pattern emerged for mothers in that 34% of mothers of sons mentioned adopting a parent–mentor role, as did 19% of mothers of daughters.

Within-Family Similarities and Differences

The within-family analysis suggests that mothers and fathers in the same families in our study rarely reported divergent experiences with their young adult sons and daughters, thus challenging previously held beliefs about mother–father differences across this transition. Overwhelmingly, the dyadic examination of mothers' and fathers' responses revealed similarities in mothers' and fathers' experiences as parents to their young adult child. For example, the following couple reported similar continuities in their parental role to their young adult son. When asked how their roles as parents had stayed the same, the mother replied, “We still try to get on him a little if his

grades fall, or if he, if we think he's getting himself into something that he shouldn't." Her husband responded, "We still give him the routes." Many parent dyads in the study reported remarkably similar interpretations of their experience with changes during their child's transition to young adulthood. For example, some mothers and fathers within the same family expressed pride as well as learning to let go of their sons and daughters as their independence and maturity increased. The mother in one family said,

Well, you have to let go a little. We still try to give him some of our values and hope he honors them and takes on some of them himself. We don't try to direct him in any way, but we support him. We admire a lot of his choices and support them.

Her husband had a similar response: "I would definitely say that I have let him have his wings. He needed his space to grow. I've been very proud of his accomplishments and decision making."

It was not uncommon for both parents within the same family to discuss their child's increasing maturity, independence, and adultlike status. However, other subthemes identified in the content analysis did not follow as consistent a pattern. It was not so much the case that one parent discussed becoming closer with their young adult child whereas the other discussed becoming less close—this pattern was rarely seen within parents' responses. However, for a small group of families, some level of discrepancy did exist. For the following family, the mother expressed having difficulties with her young adult son, whereas the father made no mention of conflict or difficulty. When asked how the relationship had changed, the mother stated, "We've had more conflict. It's been a conflicting year. He's pulled away a good bit." Her husband responded, "I'd say Jack has matured, and it's become more of a mature relationship." These sorts of differences within families were rare, and when they did occur, perceptions regarding conflict with one of the parents were most often the source of discrepancy between the parents. However, these discrepancies did not appear specific to child gender.

What occurred more consistently within families in our study was parents' reporting relatively similar experiences but emphasizing different aspects of the relationship. For example, when asked how her relationship had changed with her firstborn son, who was working full-time while living at his parents' house, the mother in one family responded, "He's more mature, and he's got more responsibilities. He's got a job now, and he knows what it's like to have to make money." When asked the same question, her husband responded, "We are not as close, because he found a girlfriend a couple of years ago. He is always off with her doing stuff." Although both parents alluded to their son's increased independence and obligations outside the family, the mother in this family never mentioned her son's girlfriend but emphasized that her son was working, in comparison to her husband, who emphasized his son's dating relationship. In another family, both parents expressed difficulty with their daughter's newfound independence; however, they discussed different aspects of the relationship when voicing these concerns. When asked how his relationship with his daughter had changed since she turned 18, the father responded,

We seem to butt heads a lot. . . . I think the fact that she has a boyfriend now and she's pretty serious. . . . Sometimes she's going down to [the local university] and spending

weekends with him, and it kinda bothers me, them not being married and stuff. It makes for a tougher relationship when she brings him here.

His wife was less specific in her description and did not directly express discomfort with her daughter's dating relationship, but she did acknowledge discomfort with similar behaviors: "Well, it's sorta tough because she wants her independence, yet we want her to follow the rules of the house. There was issues on curfew times and that type of thing." Similarly, both parents in another family alluded to their son's staying out late as a difficulty in the relationship. When asked how things have stayed the same in her role as a parent, the mother responded, "He still acts the same when he comes home. If he goes out late, he still calls me. He still respects all the rules we had when he was here full-time." Her husband also mentioned their son's staying out late, but his response differed from hers in that he focused on his disapproval of the behavior and the discipline that his son might experience: "He knows, for instance, if he stays out all hours of the night while he is here, he is going to hear about it. Certain rules still apply."

In the between-families content analysis, we found that parents often discussed retaining some aspect of their parental role and/or giving advice or guidance more frequently than they used to. The content analysis of Table 1 reveals that mothers and fathers were remarkably similar in terms of the changes in role patterns that they discussed. In the within-family analysis, mothers and fathers often discussed their changing roles similarly but, again, emphasized different aspects of the parent-child relationship when discussing the change in role patterns—a nuance that is lost when conducting a between-family analysis of gendered patterns. For example, both parents in one family discussed that their son had more freedom and that their influence on him had changed. The mother responded,

He's been given a lot more freedom to do what he pleases as far as, you know, in the evening and things like that. He's allowed to pretty much go; we're trying to get him to accept more responsibility than what he has, which has not been as good as we would like but he's getting there.

Her husband responded, "Well, he's an adult now, so I can't boss him around, but I do suggest things and . . . let him take it on his own. If he doesn't reach the conclusion I think he should, I try to keep explaining." The difference here is a subtle one but one that emerged fairly consistently for other parent dyads in the study. It was common for one parent to state that he or she was no longer "the boss" and that he or she had lost the ability or the right to control the son or daughter, whereas the other parent would discuss the freedom that he or she had granted the son or daughter and the increasing ability of him or her to take care of one's own daily tasks and schedules.

In short, the examination of mothers and fathers within the same family revealed important nuances in role patterns for parents. Although it was relatively common for parents to report that they had become more like peers or friends with their young adult child, our within-family analysis showed that it was rare for both parents in the same family to report this shift in roles. One mother responded, "He's probably more like a friend now. I don't have to correct him as much, and I trust him a lot more to make his own decisions." Her husband, however, focused more on the shifting adult status of his son: "It's become an adult to a semi-adult relationship. I

don't consider him an adult yet—not until he fends for himself. But I do more coaching than I do demanding now.” It is important to note that these patterns did not appear to be specific to parent or child gender but rather idiosyncratic to the parent and/or young adult child.

Examining the within-family quotes lends a thorough understanding of the larger family context in which parents' relationships occur. For example, examining the following responses of two parents in one family sheds light on why the mother felt as though her daughter recently pulled away. When asked how the relationship had changed in recent years, the mother responded, “I would say she's more distant, and she's obviously becoming more independent. And I guess that's harder for me to let go. . . . Overall, I don't want to say that the bond isn't as close, but . . . it's less contact I guess.” Her husband, however, was experiencing the transition in a slightly different way:

We've become closer. I think that a lot of the problems that she has had with college, class work, boys . . . she has chosen to speak with me rather than her mother. She says I'm more understanding. . . . We've become quite a bit closer.

Discussion

Guided by contemporary feminist revisions of individual theories of adolescent development, the current study explored mothers' and fathers' descriptions of the changes and continuities in their roles and relationships with their firstborn young adult sons and daughters between and within families. A between-families content analysis of mothers' and fathers' responses revealed that the most frequently discussed areas of change and continuity fell under three broad themes: instrumental issues, relationship quality, and role patterns. Across families, mothers and fathers appeared quite similar in their reports of changes in the parent–child relationship, but fewer fathers than mothers reported continuities in the relationship. Regarding changes in the relationship, increases in firstborn's independence and maturity, as well as changes in role patterns, were the most salient aspects for mothers and fathers in the study. Regarding continuities, financial assistance, continuing to be a mentor, and retaining aspects of the parental role appeared most salient. Notable differences between parent–child dyads emerged when the gender of both the child and the parent was considered in a between-families analysis; furthermore, a within-family analysis shed light on important nuances between mothers' and fathers' perceptions of this transitional time, thereby challenging some of the conclusions drawn from the analysis of parents' responses in the between-families content analysis.

Changes and Continuities in the Parent–Child Relationship

When comparing the results of the present study to previous research, the present study provides partial evidence that parents and young adult children emphasize similar domains of change and continuity in the parent–child relationship during the transition to adulthood. Similar to previous research on the young adult child's perspective, which has revealed that young adults emphasize their emerging independence from parents (Kenny & Donaldson, 1992; Lapsley et al., 1989; Lopez et al., 1986, 1989), parents in this study spoke about their young adult child's increasing independence and maturity. Our findings also support results from studies assessing the young adult child's perspective that suggest that daughters and sons look more discrepant when

reporting on their mothers than when doing so on their fathers (Frank et al., 1988): It appears that mothers' reports are more discrepant than fathers' when child gender is considered. One finding that did not emerge in this study that has emerged consistently in studies examining the young adult child's perspective is that of increases in conflict over the transition to young adulthood. Few parents in the present study discussed changes or continuities in levels of conflict; that is, discussions regarding conflict between parent and child were minimal. This finding suggests that conflict during this transition might be a more salient theme to young adults than it is for their parents. Previous work in this area suggests that whereas young adult children might emphasize conflict with parents as a means of establishing autonomy, parents might deemphasize conflict with the younger generation as a means of portraying a strong intergenerational tie in which much is at stake for their young adult children's future well-being (Acock & Bengtson, 1980). Alternatively, because many previous studies have used standard measures of parent-child relationships, many of which contain scales or subscales about levels of conflict, this discrepant finding might be an artifact of method rather than one of reporter.

The between-families analyses generally support previous work suggesting differences by parent and child gender. The within-family analysis, however, suggests that mothers and fathers in the same families in our study rarely reported divergent experiences with their young adult sons and daughters, thus challenging previously held beliefs regarding mother-father differences across this transition. Overwhelmingly, the dyadic examination revealed similarities in mothers' and fathers' experiences as parents to their young adult children. For example, in the between-families analysis, marked differences emerged for parents' reports of contact. These findings for contact and communication partially support other evidence that women might be more involved than men in maintaining intergenerational bonds (Hagestad, 1986; Spitze & Logan, 1990). However, the within-family analyses offered a more nuanced look at the findings regarding parents' reports of contact, thereby suggesting few differences between mothers and fathers in the same family. When differences did exist, the within-family findings illustrated that one parent's reports are situated in a broader family context that helps to further explain the results.

One area in which the between-families and within-family analyses partially converged regarded changes and continuities in role patterns. Although similar proportions of mothers and fathers in our sample reported changes in their role patterns with their young adult child, thus suggesting that they were adopting more peer- and mentorlike roles with their child, parents were likely to mention that they had retained some component of their parenting role, a component of the relationship rarely captured in traditional quantitative surveys of either generation's perspective. Many mothers and fathers within the same families reported similar continuities in their parental roles, although they often emphasized qualitatively different components of the relationship when discussing these continuations.

Regarding changes in role patterns, it was most often the case that the changes described were different for within-family parents when both discussed changes occurring. Intriguing and somewhat unexpected patterns emerged when examining the between-families findings via the gender of the young adult child. Whereas mothers of daughters and mothers of sons in this sample were similar in their reports of maintaining their parental role, more mothers of daughters than mothers of sons took on peerlike roles. Furthermore, fewer mothers of daughters than mothers of sons were likely to act as a mentor. Fathers' responses followed the same between-

families pattern. Given the theoretical emphasis on relational interdependence for women, we were not surprised to find that mothers and fathers of daughters were likely to report that they had developed peerlike relationships with their firstborns. However, the finding that more mothers and fathers of sons than parents of daughters discussed having a mentor role was somewhat unexpected. If a gendered perspective is accurate in that sons are expected to be more independent than daughters, we might anticipate parents giving less advice and support to sons than to daughters. Alternatively, because most parents of sons who mentioned becoming a mentor saw it as a change in their relationship, mothers and fathers might view giving advice as stepping back and allowing more independence in that they no longer dictate rules or make final decisions. The way in which parents discussed their changing roles with sons and daughters sheds light on the distinction between relating as a peer and having a mentor role. The majority of mothers and fathers in the study who said that they had shifted to a more peerlike role with their daughters discussed their ability to treat their daughters more as adults, in the form of communicating adult to adult or viewing them as equals. The majority of parents who discussed having a mentor role with their adult sons, however, either discussed the ways in which their sons actively sought out their advice or spoke in terms of giving advice and recognizing that it might not be taken. Thus, the results of this study suggest that parents of daughters might emphasize relational connectedness with their firstborns, whereas parents of sons might emphasize the more instrumental components of parent–child relationships.

The results of this study suggest that what might at first appear as a general pattern pointing at gendered differences between mothers and fathers might be better explained by examining the responses of mothers and fathers within the same families. Indeed, the patterns that emerged in the within family analysis were more about nuances in how mothers and fathers in the same families spoke about themes of changes and continuities rather than whether they discussed the same themes at all. As previous research has suggested (Nydegger & Mitteness, 1991), it might be more appropriate to explore potential differences and similarities between mothers and fathers by asking questions about process rather than frequency. In addition, it appears theoretically important to link change and continuity in the parent–child relationship during this transition to a family climate of relatedness.

Study Limitations and Conclusions

The current study has several strengths, including the use of an open-ended response format and the inclusion of both members of the parental dyad. Although helpful when handling a large volume of data and when examining common themes to be explored in future research, using a content analysis approach is limited in that not all parents' experiences are adequately captured. The majority of the parents in our study spoke positively or neutrally about the changes and continuities in their relationships with their firstborn children, a finding consistent with recent research suggesting that parents, especially mothers, tend to report more favorably on parent–child relationships than do children (Aquilino, 1997; Fingerman, 2001; Noack & Buhl, 2004). However, some parents had markedly different experiences:

It's been hard, 'cause he, when he turned 18, he did just kinda go, he pushed us away, pushed his girlfriend away, pushed church away. . . . It's a lot different, you know? I don't really like it, but I don't have control over that"

(mother of a 20-year-old son living away from home while attending college). Thus, it is important to consider the diversity of parents' experiences as their children transition into young adulthood. Although it appears that most parents enjoy this transition, even speaking of it fondly, further qualitative research could help illuminate variation in parents' experiences.

The sample used in this study is limited in that all families were White and predominately working and middle class, with the majority of firstborns in college full- or part-time. Few studies have explored differences and similarities between and within ethnic groups during this transition, but initial findings point to potential differences in relationship quality, patterns of assistance, and frequency of communication (for a review, see Lye, 1996). It also appears that the financial resources of middle-class families lead to greater exchanges of financial support between parents and young adult children than those found in lower- or working-class families (Steelman & Powell, 1989). Thus, we might have seen more variability in parents' responses had we had more demographic variability in our sample.

The parents in our study all had at least one more child approximately 2 years younger than the target child. Thus, these parents would have another child approaching young adulthood, which might influence the way that they perceive their relationship with their firstborn. However, the homogeneity of this sample is also a strength. All parent dyads interviewed were reporting on their firstborn children; thus, these families were experiencing this transition for the first time. We captured parents at the early stages of this transition, and few firstborns had married and/or had children, factors that have been found to influence the parent-child relationship as well as the levels of assistance and support given to children in adulthood (Aquilino, 1997; Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 1998; Roberts & Bengtson, 1993). As young adult children continue to experience other transitions associated with adulthood, such as marriage and starting a family or a career, we would expect parents to report increasing mutuality, changes in affectional closeness, and increases in relational conflict (Aquilino, 1997).

The parenting role is a complex and evolving one, with components that might wax and wane over different transitions in parents' and children's lives. Previous research and theorizing that drew on reports from young adult children have suggested that parent-child relationships in young adulthood are marked by continuities in communication and contact, especially for mother-daughter dyads, but by discontinuities in parental care. The results of our study support much of this previous work but suggest that many parents emphasize their ongoing investment in their roles as parents to their young adult children. One mother whose 21-year-old son was away at college summarized it this way:

You know, you think when they're 18 or 21, they're going to go off and live their own life, and you get to live your life because we got them to 21. But I'm now beginning to realize that you get a new view; there's a window you didn't really expect there to be. There's more closeness and less closeness than you thought. . . . There's a duality of feeling, and I can get a window into the fact that I'll still be involved in his life. It's neat going through all this.

As children age, direct caretaking and influence diminish, and children often are seen as peers with whom parents have continuing relationships. In this study, we found that parents in part talk

about their relationships with their young adult children in a way that young adults and other theorists have suggested. Furthermore, continuity and change overlap such that parents might simultaneously engage in an active parenting role while letting go, in that they give their children increased decision-making power and independence. Although our between-families results suggest that these patterns of change and continuity differ by parent and child gender, our within-family analyses suggest important similarities among mothers and fathers within the same families. Our results suggest that gender should remain a central construct in future quantitative and qualitative research but that researchers should further consider studying this transition using a within-family approach with greater attention to process. Last, the results from this study should be used to inform future quantitative measurement because many of the most commonly assessed aspects of the parent-child relationship (conflict, intergenerational assistance; Mancini & Blieszner, 1989) were not necessarily the most frequently emphasized themes from the parents' perspective in this study. Longitudinal studies emphasizing the intersection of parent and child gender as well as family process are needed to further explore prospectively the patterns of change and continuity in both generations' perspectives of this important relationship.

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