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Labovitz School of Business & Economics, University of Minnesota Duluth, 11 E. Superior Street, Suite 210, Duluth, MN 55802

Intergenerational Study on the Effects of Attachment Style on Eating Behaviors

Aida Faber, McGill University, Canada

Laurette Dube, McGill University, Canada

Sophie Belanger, L'Oreal Canada, Canada

Families face many challenges with regard to healthy diets and patterns of exercise. This research combines recent psychology research on self-regulation with that of attachment style to examine from an intergenerational perspective the effect of attachment styles on eating behavior in a sample of child-parent dyads. Results showed more secure attachment in parents and children alike to be linked with knowing more fruits and vegetables and having healthier diets. Furthermore, we found that attachment had a positive impact on males' food knowledge and diets. Lastly, the mediating role of parents' attachment on their children's diets is discussed.

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patterns. Four metropolitan cities, Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, and Taipei, were selected due to their economic and political representative status. In January and February 2006, 2075 respondents, 511 to 527 in each city, at the age of 45 to 65 were face-to-face surveyed via a demographic quota sampling procedure.

Other than demographic and consumption items, the questionnaire includes 133 Likert-type 6-point items on values and lifestyles. These items were designed for eight categories of values and concepts: concern about health, financial attitudes, gender issues, career and retirement plans, social relationships, attitude toward aging, consumption values, and other life perspectives. The result of factor analysis extracted 25 important factors. Under the control of age, gender, and work status, the 25 value and lifestyle factors of respondents among the four cities were compared by general linear models. The main findings are:

- 1) *Health concern and financial attitude*: In the industrial city Guangzhou, prior mature consumers care about their own health condition less and retain fewer traditional Chinese values, such as “limiting expenses within the income boundary and avoiding borrowing money.” They are also more willing to invest through professional financial assistance than consumers in other cities.
- 2) *Consumption value*: In the most internationalized city, Shanghai, consumers prefer products endorsed by celebrities and enjoy the “taste of life” most.
- 3) *Career and retirement*: In a city where the economy is booming, such as Shanghai and Beijing, prior mature consumers worry about retirement less; while in a city with a slight recession, such as Taipei, prior mature consumers sense that “retiring means not having money” and tend to keep working after age 65.
- 4) *Social relationships*: Living in the political center, consumers in Beijing, unsurprisingly, care about all kinds of social issues most.
- 5) *Attitude toward aging*: prior mature consumers in Taipei are more accepting of aging. It can be explained by the traditional Confucian value of respecting the elderly that people in Taipei hold.

In general, family values, respect for seniors, and compliance with authority in traditional Confucianism are still obvious in the value systems of Chinese prior mature consumers. The results suggest these values are more enduring than others. On the other hand, traditional Chinese values regarding gender issues, conservative consumption rules, and desirable social behavior are influenced by western values more. Also, reflecting the economic prospects, in a city where consumers enjoy economic growth, future mature consumers tend to focus on enjoying the western-style life more and rapidly moving toward individualism. Our results suggest that marketers may emphasize the better and more enjoyable life provided by western imported brands; meanwhile, they should also emphasize how the product can contribute to the whole family or is acceptable to the society when targeting these prior mature consumers at present or in the future.

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Aida Faber, McGill University, Canada
 Laurette Dube, McGill University, Canada
 Sophie Belanger, L’Oreal Canada, Canada

The family as a collective enterprise is central to consumer behavior, in particular in domains that pertain to lifestyle choice¹. In today’s world of plenty, individuals within families face many challenges and find it hard at times to maintain healthy diets and exercise patterns^{2,3} as indicated by soaring obesity rates due to over-consumption and lack of exercise⁴. Yet, little research has attempted to combine the most recent theoretical developments in health and consumer psychology with others from family and parental processes. Such a combination would allow for a more sophisticated understanding of lifestyle decisions that may guide parents and children toward a better balance between health and the many other factors that drive choice and behavior. In this paper, we combine recent psychology research on self-regulation with that of attachment style to examine from an intergenerational perspective the effect of attachment styles on eating behavior in a large sample of child-parent dyads.

Research background

Attachment deals with regulatory functions and consequences of maintaining proximity to others⁵. According to attachment theory, children are born with a “repertoire of behaviors (attachment behaviors) aimed at seeking and maintaining proximity to supportive others (attachment figures)”⁵. In the face of threat or when inner resources are depleted, cognitive representations of attachment figures are automatically activated, thus increasing the person’s confidence that there is protection available and facilitating self-regulation^{5,6}. There are individual differences in attachment styles. When significant others are available in times of need, a sense of secure attachment is developed. On the other hand, when significant others are unavailable or unresponsive to one’s needs, distress and a sense of insecurity are omnipresent.

Secure attachment styles are linked with effective coping skills, constructive ways of dealing with stress and conflict, and healthier interpersonal relationships^{7,8}. On the other hand, insecure attachment styles are linked with eating disorders, trouble sleeping, and feeling of ineffectiveness and helplessness^{7,9}. Interestingly, these differences in coping styles between securely and insecurely attached individuals can be linked to differences in self-regulation focuses that have recently received robust evidence in health and consumer

psychology research. Self-regulation refers to the ability of setting and striving for goals in the face of ongoing challenges^{2,10} and is widely applied to healthy lifestyles behaviors² because people seem to give in to temptation and not follow through with their long-term goals^{11,12}.

Hence, attachment security can be said to be associated with healthier lifestyles, i.e., engaging in health promotion behaviors and avoiding risky behaviors, and attachment insecurity with unhealthier lifestyles, i.e., engaging in risky behaviors and avoiding health promotion behaviors⁷. As a result, the objective of this paper is to study attachment styles and their link to food knowledge and consumption. Thus, in this study, we hypothesize that more secure attachment styles in parents and children will be linked with knowing more fruits and vegetables (F&V, hereafter) and having healthier diets. Because there are reliable gender differences in dealing with distress, with males coping in a non-rational manner by trying to distract themselves^{13,14}, we furthermore hypothesize that attachment security will have a beneficial role for them in that securely attached males will know more F&V and have better diets. Finally, the mediation effects of parental attachment on their children's food knowledge and consumption will be tested.

Method

Design and procedures

To test the above hypotheses, only the pre-intervention questionnaires of a web nutrition intervention aiming to increase children's F&V consumption were analyzed. In total 238 children (157 girls and 79 boys; $M_{\text{age}}=10.15$ years; $M_{\text{BMI}}=21.42$) and 210 parents (37 males and 183 females; $M_{\text{age}}=41.05$ years; $M_{\text{BMI}}=25.48$) completed the questionnaire. Although the 12-step parent/child web intervention took place at home, children between 8 and 12 years old were recruited from 28 French primary schools in a major Canadian city.

Measures

Attachment was measured using an adapted scale from Bowlby¹⁵ from insecurely to securely attached (Cronbach's alpha parents=.890, children=.855). F&V knowledge was assessed by asking participants whether or not they knew 31 fruits (fruit knowledge) and 39 vegetables (vegetable knowledge). F&V consumption was assessed by calculating the average fruit, vegetable and F&V intake of all the previously known F&Vs. High caloric food and snack (HCF and HCS, hereafter) consumption was calculated as the average number of times participants ate respectively eight specific HCFs, i.e., hot dogs, and six specific HCSs, i.e., cookies, during a day.

Results

For children, results showed that more securely attached children knew more fruits. There were also two significant interaction effects, in that vegetable and F&V knowledge was the same for girls regardless of their level of attachment whereas it was higher for more vs. less securely attached boys. Furthermore, there was an interaction effect for vegetable consumption in children, in that average vegetable consumption for girls remained the same regardless of their level of attachment whereas for boys, the more secure the attachment the higher the vegetable consumption. Attachment levels did not significantly predict fruit and fruit and vegetable consumption. Lastly, the more securely attached the children, the less HCF and HCS they consumed.

For parents, results showed that more securely attached parents, as measured in relation to their own parents, knew more vegetables and F&V. For fruits and vegetables separately, consumption was the same for women regardless of their attachment levels but was higher for more vs. less securely attached men. For F&V, HCF and HCS consumption, a more secure attachment was linked to higher F&V consumption and lower HCF and HCS consumption.

Mediation analyses showed that parents' attachment mediated the children's relationship between attachment and fruit, vegetable, and F&V knowledge, and HCS consumption but only partially mediated HCF consumption.

Conclusion and Discussion

In conclusion, this study shows that attachment, a variable closely linked with self-regulation focus, is an important predictor of healthy eating habits, not only for children but also for parents. Most importantly, through their own attachment styles, parents influence the role of their children's attachment in predicting healthy eating, which further confirms the pervasive influence of attachment in the every day consumption choices of two generations.

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