

"You Are Such a Disappointment!": Negative Emotions and Parents' Perceptions of Adult Children's Lack of Success

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Objectives. Parents' perceptions of their adult children's successes (or lack thereof) may be associated in different ways with discrete negative emotions (e.g., guilt, anger, disappointment, and worry). Furthermore, mothers and fathers may vary in their reactions to children's success in different domains.

Method. Participants included 158 mothers and fathers from the same families ($N = 316$) and their adult child. Mothers and fathers evaluated their adult children's successes in (a) career and (b) relationship domains. Mothers and fathers also reported on several negative emotions in the parent–child tie: guilt, anger, disappointment, and worry.

Results. For fathers, perceptions of children's poorer career success were associated with disappointment, anger, and guilt. Mothers' perceptions of children's lack of career success were associated with disappointment and worry. Mothers' perceptions of children's poorer success in relationships were associated with each of the negative emotions, with the exception of anger.

Discussion. Parents experience emotions associated with unmet goals and future concerns in relationships with less successful children. Mothers may respond emotionally to career and relationship success, whereas fathers may respond emotionally primarily to their child's career success. Findings underscore the importance of considering the context of parents' negative emotional experiences in ties to adult children.

Key Words: Achievements—Negative emotions—Parent–adult child relationships—Success.

PARENTHOOD is associated with numerous costs and rewards (Nelson, Kushlev, English, Dunn, & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003). In later life, however, studies suggest that the rewards of parenthood begin to outweigh the costs; parents of successfully launched adult children experience parental fulfillment and pride (Ryff, Schmutte, & Less, 1996). Compared with parents of young children, midlife and older adult parents report higher levels of well-being (Margolis & Myrskylä, 2011).

The benefits to emotional well-being found in adult families, however, may not be experienced equally by all middle-aged and older adults. Parents report strained relationships with children who have failed to achieve adult statuses (Fingerman, Chen, Hay, Cichy, & Lefkowitz, 2006; Pillemer, Sutor, Mueller-Johnson, Sechrist, & Heidorn, 2006), who are less successful (Birditt, Fingerman, & Zarit, 2010), and who demand high, unreciprocated levels of support (Pillemer et al., 2006). Researchers speculate that unsuccessful adult children drain parents' resources, evoke parental empathy, and represent a parent's failure in the parental role (Fingerman, Cheng, Birditt, & Zarit, 2012; Pillemer et al., 2006). Less is known, however, about the experience of discrete negative emotions, such as guilt

or anger, when parents perceive their adult children to be unsuccessful. Different negative emotions may hold distinct implications for interpersonal relationships (Van Kleef, De Dreu, & Manstead, 2006) and well-being (Consedine & Moskowitz, 2007). Therefore, identifying associations between parents' perceptions of children's lack of success and parents' distinct negative emotions may help to shed light on why less successful adult children are problematic for parents.

Discrete Negative Emotions

Theorists have argued that people experience different emotions in reaction to their interpretations of external events (Lazarus, 1991, 2006). According to the discrete emotions approach, each emotion has distinctive antecedents and specific effects on the individual and on others (Lazarus, 2006). Lazarus (2006) suggests that certain emotions serve as barometers of how well or how poorly one is advancing toward a goal. When individuals cannot attain a goal, they experience "goal incongruent emotions." Accordingly, *guilt* occurs when there is a failure to adhere to standards, rules, or goals; guilt is accompanied by feelings of responsibility and the belief that one should have thought, felt, or acted differently (Consedine & Moskowitz, 2007). *Anger* arises

when a goal is thwarted and when events are attributed as being caused by others (Consedine & Moskowitz, 2007; Lazarus, 1991). *Disappointment* is different from anger and occurs when progress toward a goal is below expectations (Lazarus, 1991).

Parents are likely to experience such emotions because they have goals for their children's successes. These goals include the child finding fulfilling relationships and achieving educational and economic success (Ryff et al., 1996). When parents perceive those goals as thwarted or unrealized, parents are likely to experience negative emotions.

Other negative emotions are not linked as clearly to progress toward a goal so much as the consequences of failure. *Worry* is indicative of anxiety or fear and includes the experience of negative feelings and intrusive thoughts about future events (Brooks & Schweitzer, 2011; Lazarus, 1991; Scott, Eng, & Heimberg, 2002). Parents may experience worries related to grown children's lack of success due to their investment in their children's futures.

Parent Gender, Perceptions of Grown Children's Lack of Successes, and Negative Emotions

Parents in general may respond with negative emotions when they believe their children are unsuccessful. Moreover, mothers and fathers may respond with different negative emotions. Drawing on perspectives from research on gender, parenthood, and emotional experiences, this study explores differences in the associations between mothers' and fathers' discrete negative emotions and their perceptions of children's lack of success in careers (i.e., education and employment) and relationships (i.e., romantic relationships and family life).

According to the *parental role perspective*, when children reach adulthood, mothers' and fathers' roles converge, and the emotional and psychological effects of parenthood become similar for mothers and fathers (Evenson & Simon, 2005; Pudrovska, 2008). The parental role perspective primarily considers the links between parental status and global indicators of well-being, however, without considering specific experiences, such as evaluations of adult children's success (or lack thereof).

Gender differences exist in the experience of discrete negative emotions (Brody & Hall, 2008) that are attributed to socialization experiences, positions in the social hierarchy, and investment in social goals (Shields, Garner, Di Leone, & Hadley, 2006; Simon & Nath, 2004).

Compared with men, women typically report more internalized emotions, such as sadness and disappointment (Fischer, Rodriguez Mosquera, van Vianen, & Manstead, 2004; Simon & Nath, 2004). Men may express more externalized emotions, such as anger (Fischer et al., 2004; Hess, Adams, & Kleck, 2004) although some research reveals gender similarities in anger (Else-Quest, Hyde, Goldsmith, & Van Hulle, 2006; Simon & Nath, 2004). There is less

evidence for gender differences in feelings of guilt (Brody & Hall, 2008). Finally, research reveals both gender differences (Robichaud, Dugas, & Conway, 2003) and similarities in worry (Tallis, Davey, & Bond, 1994). These equivocal findings may be reconciled by considering that the experience of discrete negative emotions depends on the context and interpretation of events (Else-Quest, Higgins, Allison, & Morton, 2012). In some situations, mothers and fathers may experience similar emotions, but in other situations, their emotions may differ.

Worry and disappointment.—In parent-child relationships, both parents may experience disappointment and worry when they perceive their children as less successful. Mothers and fathers have expectations and goals regarding their children's educational attainment and economic success (Davis-Kean, 2005; Ryff et al., 1996), and parents are invested in their children as a legacy for their future (Giarrusso, Feng, & Bengston, 2005). Successful children are more likely to assist parents with their own needs (Fingerman, Miller, Birditt, & Zarit, 2009); thus, parents may worry that unsuccessful children will be unable to provide care in the future. Nonnormative transitions, such as job loss, violate parents' expectations for their children (Pillemer, Sechrist, Steinhour, & Sutor, 2007). Mothers and fathers worry about multiple aspects of their adult children's lives (Hay, Fingerman, & Lefkowitz, 2008), and parents who view their children as unsuccessful may worry that their children do not have the foundation for success and happiness in the future. For these reasons, mothers and fathers alike may incur disappointment over children's failure to meet their expectations or experience worry regarding children they perceive as less successful due to concerns about their children's future and their own.

Nonetheless, mothers and fathers may also experience different negative emotions associated with their perceptions of children's lack of career or relationship success. Prior studies suggest that mothers are concerned about their children's relationships (Nelson et al., 2007; Ryff et al., 1996), whereas fathers are often more concerned about occupational success (Townsend, 2002). Gender differences in emotional experience and family roles may be reflected in unique associations between mothers' and fathers' perceptions of their children's lack of career and relationship success and parents' guilt and anger.

Guilt.—In the same way parents interpret their children's accomplishments as markers of their own fulfillment of the parental role (Ryff et al., 1996), parents may also come to view their adult children's failures as their own failures. Self-blame for their children's failures may translate into feelings of guilt. Arguably, mothers and fathers may accept responsibility for different aspects of their adult children's lives. In general, women report more guilt related to family roles, whereas men report more guilt about not fulfilling their

role as financial provider (Brody & Hall, 2008). Mothers tend to attach more importance to having children who are well-adjusted in relationships (Nelson et al., 2007; Ryff et al., 1996), and mothers may blame themselves and feel guilty about their children's poor relationship success.

Traditionally, men are expected to provide for the family through paid employment and tangible investments in their children's education and future career (Christiansen & Palkovitz, 2001). Therefore, fathers may view their children's lack of success as an extension of their own failure (Patterson, Sutfin, & Fulcher, 2004). Taken together, these findings suggest that mothers' feelings of guilt will be associated with their perceptions of children's poorer relationship success, whereas fathers' guilt will be associated with their perceptions of children's poorer career success.

Anger.—Finally, mothers and fathers may differ in their experiences of anger toward grown children. Research reveals more strained relationships between fathers and children when the child has less career success (Birditt et al., 2010). Perceived lack of career success may provoke feelings of anger or resentment due to the financial resources parents, traditionally fathers, provided for schooling (Padilla-Walker, Nelson, & Carroll, 2012), and the sense that those resources were squandered. Further, gender differences in the expression of anger may be evident in this tie. Fathers may express more anger in their relationship with their adult children (Fischer et al., 2004; Hess et al., 2004), particularly when they perceive their children as less successful in the career domain.

Variations by Adult Child Gender

Finally, research suggests that parents may have different goals or expectations for daughters and sons (Epstein & Ward, 2011). For example, mothers send messages to their daughters encouraging them to focus their energies on building romantic relationships (Epstein & Ward, 2011), such that they may be particularly disappointed when their daughters fall short of their expectations. Parents also distinguish between the resources they provide to daughters and sons (McHale, Crouter, & Whiteman, 2003). Fathers may be more likely to stress the importance of careers or occupational success for their sons and experience more negative emotions when their sons do not meet their expectations for career success. Therefore, we also explore child gender as a potential moderator of the associations between parents' perceptions of children's successes and parents' negative emotions.

In summary, this study examines four negative emotions associated with distinct interpretations of unmet goals and future concerns: guilt, anger, disappointment, and worry. We explore differences in the associations between mothers' and fathers' negative emotions and their perceptions of their grown children's lack of success in two life domains

by testing the following hypotheses: Hypothesis 1: Fathers' perceptions of children's poorer success in careers will be associated with each of the negative emotions, whereas mothers' perceptions of children's lack of career success will only be associated with disappointment and worry. Hypothesis 2: Mothers' perceptions of children's poorer success in relationships will be associated with guilt, disappointment, and worry, whereas fathers' perceptions of children's lack of relationship success will be associated with disappointment and worry. In addition, we explore the extent to which child gender moderates these associations.

METHOD

Participants

Participants included 158 families from the Adult Family Study ($N = 474$), with an adult daughter or son (daughters: $M = 35.3$, $SD = 7.5$; sons: $M = 35.0$, $SD = 7.0$), their mother, and their father (mothers: $M = 60.8$, $SD = 8.0$; fathers: $M = 62.6$, $SD = 8.6$) from African American ($n = 52$) and European American ($n = 106$) families. A stratified sampling technique assured that the sample included comparable numbers of daughters ($n = 82$) and sons ($n = 76$) well distributed by age and ethnicity. We recruited participants from five counties in the greater Philadelphia Metropolitan Statistical area, and the majority of participants (85%) were recruited through either the offspring or the parents via purchased telephone lists. We recruited the remaining participants through convenience sampling (e.g. church and community center bulletins, 7%) and snowball sampling (8%) techniques. Recruitment techniques were evenly distributed by offspring's age, gender, and ethnicity. For more detailed information about the sample and participant recruitment, see Cichy, Lefkowitz, and Fingerman (2012).

Table 1 describes the demographic characteristics of the sample separately for mothers, fathers, daughters, and sons. The employment status and income of our sample were comparable to the 2000 Census data although our respondents were better educated and more likely to be married compared with the general population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000).

Mothers, fathers, and adult children participated in separate telephone interviews and completed paper and pencil questionnaires. In this study, we focus only on the parents' reports.

Measures

Perceptions of success.—Parents rated four items indicating how successful their children were compared with their children's same-aged peers on a scale from 1 (*less successful*) to 5 (*more successful*; Birditt et al., 2010; Fingerman et al., 2012). Example item: *In comparison to other people your child's age, how would you rate his or*

Table 1. Sample Characteristics

Variables	Mothers (n = 158)	Fathers (n = 158)	Daughters (n = 82)	Sons (n = 76)
Background characteristics				
Age	60.8 (8.0)	62.6 (8.6)	35.3 (7.5)	35.0 (7.0)
Years of education	14.0 (2.7)	14.1 (2.8)	15.1 (2.1)	15.0 (1.9)
Married	0.88	0.90	0.63	0.64
Working for pay	0.53	0.55	0.76	0.92
Ratings of success ^a				
Relationship domain	3.50 (1.25)	3.65 (1.14)	—	—
Career domain	3.87 (0.92)	3.91 (0.89)	—	—
Negative emotions				
Guilt ^b	1.72 (0.85)	1.59 (0.73)	—	—
Disappointment ^b	1.85 (0.79)	1.82 (0.72)	—	—
Anger ^b	1.95 (0.69)	1.85 (0.72)	—	—
Worry ^b	2.79 (0.99)	2.60 (1.07)	—	—

Notes. ^aAverage of two items rated 1 = *less successful*, 2 = *somewhat less successful*, 3 = *about the same*, 4 = *somewhat more successful*, and 5 = *more successful*.

^bNegative emotion toward child rated 1 = *never*, 2 = *rarely*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *often*, and 5 = *always*.

her achievements in education? We averaged the following two items: (a) educational achievement and (b) work and career accomplishment to create a composite measure labeled “career success” ($\alpha = .78$ for fathers and .74 for mothers). We averaged the following remaining two items: (a) romantic relationships and (b) family life to create a composite measure labeled “relationship success” ($\alpha = .78$ for fathers and .75 for mothers).

Discrete negative emotions.—During the telephone interviews, parents reported on how often they felt four negative emotions toward their child during the last 12 months using a scale from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). Four emotions were selected from existing measures of discrete emotions (Izard, Libero, Putnam, & Haynes, 1993; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988): guilt, anger, disappointment, and worry.

Covariates.—Participants indicated their age, ethnicity (1 = African American, 0 = European American), years of education, marital status (1 = married, 0 = separated/divorced/widowed/never married), and household income (1 = less than \$10,000, 2 = \$10,001–\$25,000, 3 = \$25,001–\$40,000, 4 = \$40,001–\$75,000, 5 = \$75,001–\$100,000, and 6 = more than \$100,000). Parents’ self-rated physical health was assessed on a scale of 1 (*excellent*) to 5 (*poor*; Idler & Kasl, 1991); these scores were reverse coded, so higher scores indicate better health. In addition to parents’ demographic characteristics, we also included the adult child’s gender (0 = *daughter*, 1 = *son*) and age as covariates in the model.

Analytic Strategy

As a first step, we examined gender differences in mothers’ and fathers’ reports of discrete emotions in their relationships with their grown children using paired *t* tests. Then we tested the research questions regarding associations between parents’ negative emotions and ratings of

their adult children’s successes. We employed an approach to multilevel modeling that has not been widely used in the gerontology literature, namely multivariate multilevel models (McLeod, 2001). This type of modeling is particularly well suited for our research questions regarding mothers and fathers because we can simultaneously estimate separate models for mothers and fathers while controlling for the correlation between mothers’ and fathers’ ratings of negative emotions (i.e., for guilt: $r = .04$, $p > .05$; for anger: $r = .30$, $p < .001$; for disappointment: $r = .27$, $p < .001$; and for worry: $r = .19$, $p < .01$).

We estimated four separate multivariate multilevel models (one for each discrete emotion) using PROC MIXED in SAS (Littell, Milliken, Stroup, & Wolfinger, 1996). These models simultaneously estimate a regression with mothers’ negative emotion as one dependent variable and a regression with fathers’ negative emotion as the second dependent variable while taking into consideration the nested nature of the data, where mothers and fathers are nested within the same family. In these models, we specified an unstructured error covariance matrix. Each model included fixed effects for each parent’s perceptions of their children’s career and relationship success and the following covariates: parents’ age, years of education, ethnicity, household income, self-rated health, and marital status. We also included offspring age and gender as covariates and examined the interactions between parents’ perceptions and child gender in order to explore whether associations vary for families with daughters versus sons.

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics and Paired *t* Tests

Means for ratings of the child’s success and for each negative emotion are found in Table 1. Although the mean rating for child’s success was above average for the entire sample, parents rated a substantial proportion of children as

less successful than their peers, ~21% for career and ~47% for relationships. The results of paired *t* tests also revealed no significant differences between mothers' and fathers' perceptions of their child's career ($t(156) = 0.48, p > .05$) and relationship success ($t(147) = 1.78, p > .05$).

Paired *t* tests also revealed no statistically significant differences between mothers' and fathers' ratings of guilt ($t(157) = -1.45, p > .05$), anger ($t(157) = -1.43, p > .05$), disappointment ($t(157) = -0.44, p > .05$), or worry ($t(157) = -1.82, p > .05$).

Finally, we examined correlations between the four discrete emotions separately for mothers and fathers. The correlations ranged from $r = .23$ (for mothers' guilt and worry) to $r = .56$ (for fathers' anger and disappointment). In general, the bivariate results revealed moderate correlations, suggesting that each of these emotions represent related yet still distinct negative emotions. Thus, we examined each negative emotion in a separate model to ascertain whether patterns of association differed for each emotion.

Parent Gender, Perceptions of Grown Children's Lack of Successes, and Negative Emotions

To test our hypotheses, we examined associations between parents' perceptions of their adult children's success and parents' reports of each of the four negative emotions in a series of four multivariate multilevel models. Father models are presented in Table 2 and mother models in Table 3.

Perceptions of career success.—We hypothesized that fathers' perceptions of children's lack of career success would be associated with each of the negative emotions, whereas we expected mothers' perceptions of children's lack of career success would only be associated

with mothers' disappointment and worry (Hypothesis 1). Consistent with our hypothesis, fathers, but not mothers, who perceived their children as less successful in careers reported more feelings of guilt and anger (Table 2). Also as expected, both fathers and mothers who perceived their children as less successful in careers reported more disappointment (Tables 2 and 3). Contrary to our expectations, only mothers who perceived their children as less successful in careers reported more worry (Table 3).

Perceptions of relationship success.—We hypothesized that mothers' perceptions of children's lack of relationship success would be associated with mothers' guilt, disappointment, and worry, whereas fathers' perceptions of children's lack of relationship success would be associated with fathers' disappointment and worry (Hypothesis 2). As anticipated, mothers, but not fathers, who perceived their children as less successful in relationships reported more guilt, disappointment, and worry (Table 3). Fathers' perceptions of children's lack of relationship success were not significantly associated with their negative emotions.

Variation by Adult Child's Gender

In general, the associations were similar for families with daughters and families with sons with the exception of guilt. To follow-up this significant effect, we re-estimated the models separately for families with daughters and families with sons. Follow-up tests indicated that the association between mothers' perceptions of children's lack of relationship success and guilt was only significant for mothers with daughters ($p < .05$) not for mothers with sons ($p > .05$).

In summary, for fathers, perceptions of children's poorer career success were associated with more disappointment,

Table 2. Multivariate Multilevel Models Predicting Fathers' Negative Emotions by Fathers' Perceptions of Adult Children's Career and Relationship Successes

Predictor	Model 1: Guilt		Model 2: Anger		Model 3: Disappointment		Model 4: Worry	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE_B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE_B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE_B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE_B</i>
Intercept	2.25***	0.67	3.45***	0.61	2.64***	0.60	4.38***	0.93
Perception of career success	-0.15*	0.07	-0.17**	0.07	-0.19**	0.07	-0.04	0.10
Perceptions of relationship success	-0.01	0.06	-0.09	0.05	-0.08	0.05	-0.02	0.08
Control variables								
Age	-0.01	0.01	-0.01*	0.01	-0.00	0.01	-0.01	0.02
Years of education	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.03	0.02	-0.03	0.04
Ethnicity ^a	0.07	0.16	0.07	0.14	0.30**	0.14	0.32	0.22
Income ^b	0.00	0.06	-0.05	0.05	-0.07	0.05	-0.03	0.08
Self-rated physical health ^c	-0.08	0.07	0.01	0.07	0.01	0.06	0.05	0.10
Marital status ^d	0.02	0.06	-0.10	0.05	-0.10*	0.05	-0.14	0.08
Offspring gender ^e	-0.02	0.13	-0.08	0.12	0.01	0.12	0.03	0.18
Offspring age	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.01	0.02	0.01	-0.01	0.02

Notes. ^a0 = European American and 1 = African American.

^b1 = less than \$10,000, 2 = \$10,001–\$25,000, 3 = \$25,001–\$40,000, 4 = \$40,001–\$75,000, 5 = \$75,001–\$100,000, and 6 = more than \$100,000.

^c1 = poor, 2 = fair, 3 = good, 4 = very good, and 5 = excellent.

^d0 = separated/divorced/widowed/never married and 1 = married.

^e0 = daughter and 1 = son.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Multivariate Multilevel Models Predicting Mothers' Negative Emotions by Mothers' Perceptions of Adult Children's Career and Relationship Successes

Predictor	Model 1: Guilt		Model 2: Anger		Model 3: Disappointment		Model 4: Worry	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE_B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE_B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE_B</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE_B</i>
Intercept	1.68*	0.73	3.58***	0.59	2.42***	0.64	4.42***	0.85
Perception of career success	−0.09	0.08	−0.10	0.06	−0.21**	0.07	−0.18*	0.09
Perceptions of relationship success	−0.13*	0.06	−0.07	0.05	−0.13**	0.05	−0.18**	0.07
Control variables								
Age	0.01	0.01	−0.01	0.01	−0.00	0.01	−0.01	0.01
Years of education	0.02	0.03	0.01	0.02	0.05	0.02	0.02	0.03
Ethnicity ^a	−0.16	0.15	0.01	0.12	−0.06	0.13	−0.21	0.18
Income ^b	0.10	0.06	−0.05	0.05	0.09	0.05	−0.01	0.07
Self-rated physical health ^c	−0.09	0.07	−0.04	0.06	−0.03	0.06	−0.02	0.08
Marital status ^d	0.03	0.06	−0.05	0.05	0.00	0.06	0.10	0.07
Offspring gender ^e	−0.33*	0.14	−0.11	0.12	0.10	0.12	−0.09	0.16
Offspring age	−0.01	0.02	−0.01	0.01	0.00	0.01	−0.00	0.02

Notes. ^a0 = European American and 1 = African American.

^b1 = less than \$10,000, 2 = \$10,001–\$25,000, 3 = \$25,001–\$40,000, 4 = \$40,001–\$75,000, 5 = \$75,001–\$100,000, and 6 = more than \$100,000.

^c1 = poor, 2 = fair, 3 = good, 4 = very good, and 5 = excellent.

^d0 = separated/divorced/widowed/never married and 1 = married.

^e0 = daughter and 1 = son.

p* < .05. *p* < .01. ****p* < .001.

anger, and guilt. In comparison, for mothers, their perceptions of children's lack of career success were only associated with their feelings of disappointment and worry, not anger or guilt. Mothers' perceptions of children's poorer success in relationships were associated with each of the negative emotions, with the exception of anger. Fathers' negative emotions were not associated with evaluations of children's relationship success. Fathers' worry was not associated with fathers' comparison of their children's achievements in either domain.

DISCUSSION

This study examined associations between parents' negative emotions and their perceptions of their grown children's career and relationship successes. Mothers' and fathers' perceptions of their children's career success were generally associated with negative emotions such as disappointment, suggesting that mothers and fathers may be similarly invested in their children's career success. In contrast, poorer perceived relationship success was only associated with mothers', not fathers', negative emotions, including guilt, disappointment, and worry. Overall, our findings highlight the importance of considering parents' negative emotions in context in order to understand the links between emotions, gender, and parental evaluations of grown children.

Parent Gender, Perceptions of Grown Children's Lack of Successes, and Negative Emotions

Both mothers and fathers tended to feel more disappointment if they perceived their children as having poorer career success. Perceptions of children's career success were associated with guilt and anger for fathers and disappointment

and worry for mothers. Parents' perceptions of their children's failure to succeed in their careers may provoke negative feelings such as disappointment for both mothers and fathers because it violates both parents' goals and expectations for their children to achieve educational and economic success (Davis-Kean, 2005; Ryff et al., 1996).

In contrast to findings for perceptions of career success, perceptions of children's relationship success were only associated with mothers' negative emotions. These findings are consistent with prior emotion research that women experience guilt related to family roles, whereas men report more guilt about not fulfilling their expected role as a financial provider (Brody & Hall, 2008). In the context of the parent–adult child relationship, mothers may internalize and thus assume some responsibility for their adult children's, particularly their daughters', unsuccessful relationships (Kalmijn & De Graaf, 2012), whereas both parents may internalize their children's failures in the career domain. Parents may view their adult children's failures as their own failures in the parental role, similarly to how parents interpret their children's accomplishments as markers of their own successful fulfillment of the parental role (Ryff et al., 1996).

Taken together, these findings suggest that unsuccessful children violate both parents' expectations for their children; however, mothers and fathers may emphasize different aspects of their children's lives when evaluating their children's accomplishments. Although career success appears to matter to mothers and fathers, relationship success seems to only matter to mothers.

Fathers may assume more responsibility for children's career preparation and focus less on children's success in relationships because they view romantic relationships and family life as more within the mother's domain. Indeed,

mothers tend to be the ones who hold families together by engaging in kinkeeping activities (Fingerman, 2001; Troll, 1994). Mothers often accept more responsibility for and attribute more importance than fathers do to having children who are well adjusted in their relationships (Nelson et al., 2007; Ryff et al., 1996). As the kinkeepers, mothers may be particularly invested in their children finding and maintaining fulfilling relationships.

Mothers' feelings of guilt, disappointment, and worry could stem from issues in the parent-child relationship itself or from mothers' unmet expectations that their adult children succeed in their romantic ties or family life. In addition, mothers' worry about their less successful children may be related to concerns for their children's future as well their own (Fingerman et al., 2009; Sutor, Pillemer, & Sechrist, 2006). Children who are less successful demand more financial support from parents, have fewer alternative sources of support (Birditt et al., 2010; Pillemer et al., 2006), and may not be able to offer support to their parents as they age (Fingerman et al., 2009). Worries over their children's ability to provide assistance may be particularly salient for mothers, who are likely to outlive their spouses and to rely more on their adult children for support as they age (Roth, Haley, Wadley, Clay, & Howard, 2007).

Implications of This Study

Emotion theorists also emphasize the interpersonal function of emotions, where emotions convey information and influence not only one's own behavior but also the behavior of others (Van Kleef et al., 2006). Although the emotions we examined are negative, the behavioral consequences of these emotions may not always be harmful to relationships. Feelings of vicarious guilt may promote motivation to repair the situation by making reparations to others (Lickel, Schmader, Curtis, Scarnier, & Ames, 2005). Conceivably, parents' guilt may motivate parents' to seek opportunities to compensate for their child's lack of success. For example, parents may provide more financial resources to their unsuccessful adult children both because these children need the additional support (Fingerman et al., 2009) and because parents feel responsible for their children's circumstances. If adult children are aware of parents' feelings, parents' anger and disappointment may lead less successful adult children to try to change their circumstances or to make concessions to their parents (Van Kleef et al., 2006).

Alternatively, parents' negative emotions could also lead to emotional reciprocity, where the adult children feel the same emotions as their parents, evoking feelings of anger and disappointment (Keltner & Haidt, 1999). Studies of the relational implications of discrete negative emotions often rely on experimental paradigms (Keltner & Haidt, 1999; Van Kleef et al., 2006). The current study represents a first step toward situating the study of discrete negative emotions within the context of an existing social relationship,

the parent-adult child tie. Additional research is needed, however, to elucidate the relational and behavioral implications of parents' negative emotions, particularly in their ties with less successful adult children.

It is important to note that there were no parental gender differences in the mean ratings of children's success, suggesting mothers and fathers share similar views of their children's successes. The differences lie instead in how parents' interpret their children's lack of successes. Further, this study found gender similarities in parents' reports of discrete negative emotions in the parent-adult child tie, adding to the literature revealing gender similarities in the experience of discrete negative emotions (Else-Quest et al., 2006; Simon & Nath, 2004; Tallis et al., 1994).

Study Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the contributions of this study, it is not without limitations. First, parents were asked about their children's success in comparison to others, rather than about absolute success. It is possible that parents assess their children's success in this way without being concerned about the level of success. Future work should consider assessments of absolute success or the importance that parents place on such success. Second, the cross-sectional design does not allow us to interpret the direction of our effects. It is possible that parents who experience more negative emotions in the parent-adult child tie perceive their children as less successful rather than less successful children eliciting more negative emotions.

It is also important to note that the pattern of results revealed few differences in the associations between parents' negative emotions and parents' perceptions of their sons' versus daughters' lack of success. This lack of difference is consistent with prior work that reveals similarities in parents' relationships with their adult sons and daughters (Pillemer & Sutor, 2002) and suggests that parents view daughters' and sons' lack of success in similar ways. Parental gender differences were also relatively small. This study is exploratory in nature, and therefore, parental gender differences should be interpreted with caution.

Arguably, the developmental stage of the adult child is also important to consider in future studies. Parents' perceptions of their children's lack of success during young adulthood may be disappointing or worrisome to parents; however, these feelings may be short lived. Young adult children still have ample opportunities to attain success in the future. In comparison, parents may view middle-aged children's status as more permanent and may not expect these children to change their life structure in the future. The relatively small sample of children from a wide age range (22–49 years) limited our ability to fully explore this issue. Future longitudinal studies should explore how parents' negative feelings about less successful grown children change over the family life course.

CONCLUSION

Our findings suggest that parents' perceptions of their children's lack of success in careers and relationships are associated with parents' negative emotions. Mothers emphasized both career and relationship success, whereas fathers primarily emphasized their children's career success. Taken together, the results highlight the importance of considering parents' negative emotional experiences in context and provide support for gender differences in family and social goals as a possible explanation for differences in mothers' and fathers' emotional experiences with children whom they perceive as less successful.

FUNDING

This work was supported by grants from the National Institute on Aging at the National Institutes of Health (R01 AG17916, R01 AG027769), National Institute of Mental Health (5 T32 MH018904 to K. E. Cichy) and the National Institutes on Aging at the National Institutes of Health (5 T32 AG000048 to K. E. Cichy).

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