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Psychological Adjustment in Young Korean American Adolescents and Parental Warmth

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Abstract

Problem: The relation between parental warmth and psychological adjustment is not known for young Korean American adolescents.

Methods: 103 adolescents' perceived parental warmth and psychological adjustment were assessed using, respectively, the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire and the Child Personality Assessment Questionnaire.

Findings: Low perceived maternal and paternal warmth were positively related to adolescents' overall poor psychological adjustment and almost all of its attributes. When maternal and paternal warmth were entered simultaneously into the regression equation, only low maternal warmth was related to adolescents' poor psychological adjustment.

Conclusion: Perceived parental warmth is important in predicting young adolescents' psychological adjustment as suggested in the parental acceptance-rejection theory.

Keywords

Korean Americans; parental warmth; early adolescence; psychological adjustment

Many socially related health problems such as substance use begin in early adolescence, and are associated with adolescents' poor psychological adjustment (Eccles et al., 1996). Thus Healthy People 2010 sets socially focused goals for adolescents including increasing healthy interpersonal relationships, decreasing violent and abusive behaviors, decreasing use of alcohol and other drugs, and preventing teenage pregnancies (DHHS, 2006).

Parental warmth has been consistently identified as being significantly related to psychological adjustment of children and adolescents (Rohner, Khaleque, & Cournoyer, 2007). Specifically, a meta-analysis of 43 studies worldwide showed that regardless of culture, ethnicity, or geographic location, approximately 26% of the variability in youths' psychological adjustment is accounted for by perceived parental warmth (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002). This relation, however, is not known for young Korean American adolescents even though their number has increased more than 300% during the last 20 years (I. P. Kim, 2004; US Census Bureau, 1980, 2000).

Korean Americans compose one of the largest Asian American populations in the United States (H. Kim, Do, & Park, 2005); however, relatively little is known about this population. In general, Korean Americans are voluntary migrants who came to the United States hoping for more political and social security and better opportunities for their children's education

(K. Kim, 1998). The typical traditional Korean family system is patrilineal and patriarchal (Oak & Martin, 2000). The father is expected to be the breadwinner, leader, and the authority figure in the household, whereas the mother is expected to be the housewife, primary caregiver of children, emotional provider, and healer (K. Kim & Kim, 1995). These traditional paternal and maternal roles are well expressed in a popular Korean phrase, *om bu ja mo*, “strict father, benevolent mother” (Rohner & Pettengill, 1985) p. 525).

The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between young Korean American adolescents' perception of maternal and paternal warmth and their psychological adjustment using the parental acceptance-rejection theory (R. Rohner et al., 2007). Further, this study examined whose warmth, mothers or fathers, was more critical to psychological adjustment of these adolescents.

Theoretical Framework

Parental warmth has been considered an important dimension of parenting (Baumrind, 1991; Rohner, 1991). According to the parental acceptance-rejection theory (R. Rohner et al., 2007), parental warmth refers to the quality of the affectional tie between parents and their children. Parental warmth is considered as a continuum ranging from parental acceptance to rejection. Acceptance is affection, care, or love that parents can feel and express toward their children. Parental affection can be expressed physically through kissing, hugging, and caressing, or verbally through praising, complimenting, or making positive comments to or about one's child. In contrast, rejection is the absence or significant withdrawal of these feelings and behaviors, and the presence of a variety of physically and psychosocially hurtful behaviors and affects. Rejection is observed by hostility and aggression, indifference and neglect, or undifferentiated rejection (R. Rohner et al.).

If psychological adjustment is defined as an individual's affective, cognitive, perceptual, and motivational dispositions to respond and actual observable behaviors of responding in various life conditions, parental acceptance or rejection, as perceived by the child, has been shown to have consistent effects on the child's psychological adjustment (Rohner, 1991). Especially, when children perceived their parents as low in warmth (i.e., rejecting), they tended to develop poor psychological adjustment. Psychological adjustment in this context includes attributes of dependence, hostility/aggression, negative self-esteem, negative self-adequacy, emotional unresponsiveness, emotional instability, and negative worldview. Rohner has claimed that this characterization of parenting and its effects upon children's overall psychological adjustment and its attributes could be applied reliably regardless of differences in family culture or language.

Parental Warmth and Adolescents' Psychological Adjustment

The relation between parental warmth and psychological adjustment of adolescents has been examined in many different ethnic groups and cultures. Most of these studies examined overall psychological adjustment, rather than separate attributes. These studies were conducted with European American and African American youth (Veneziano & Rohner, 1998), youth in St. Kitts, West Indies (Rohner, Kean, & Cournoyer, 1991), a meta-analysis of 43 studies worldwide (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002), European American and Mexican American children (Ruiz, Roosa, & Gonzales, 2002), European, Black, Asian, and Mexican (Rubin et al., 2004), and Dutch (Hale, Van Der Valk, Engels, & Meeus, 2005).

Korean American Parenting

Few empirical studies have indicated that Korean American parents are warm and sensitive (E. Kim & Hong, 2007; Shrake, 1996). Especially, mothers sensitively interact with their child by reading and responding to his subtle cues (Choi, 1995; E. Kim & Hong, 2007).

Prior research has shown that middle class Korean American youths perceived their mothers significantly warmer than youth from working class families (Rohner, Hahn, & Rohner, 1980). Adolescent Korean American boys and girls perceived their mothers to be more warm than their fathers; girls perceived their mothers and fathers as more warm than did boys (K. Kim, 1998). Among young Korean adolescents in Korea, both boys and girls perceived no difference between maternal and paternal warmth (S. Kim, 1997). When young adolescents perceived their parents as less warm, they tended to be more hostile, more emotionally unresponsive and unstable. Low perceived parental warmth was not related to young adolescents' dependence. Korean American adolescents' perceived parental warmth was positively related to adolescents' academic achievement (K. Kim & Rohner, 2002) and negatively related to depressive symptoms (E. Kim & Cain, in review) and problem behaviors (Shrake, 1996).

Research Questions

The current study has two research questions. The first study question was, "what was the relation between Korean American maternal and paternal warmth and young adolescents' psychological adjustment?" The second study question was, "whose warmth, maternal or paternal, was more critical to adolescents' psychological adjustment?" This study focused on early adolescence, since parenting of young adolescents (age 11-14) has been shown to be more challenging and stressful due to the rapid developmental and social context changes that occur during this period (Steinberg & Silk, 2002). These changes may alter the parent-child relationship by increased irritability and negative emotionality of young adolescents.

Methods

Sample

The sample consisted of 103 Korean American young adolescents ($n = 46$ boys; $n = 57$ girls), recruited from Korean American churches and language schools in the Midwest United States. Inclusion criteria were: (1) the adolescents were between the ages of 11 and 14; (2) both parents were first generation Korean Americans; and (3) the family lived in the United States at the time of the study. A power analysis, using an alpha of 0.5 and a conservative estimate of effect size (.09), indicated that a sample size of 100 would provide sufficient power to test for relation between the parental warmth and the young adolescents' psychosocial functioning.

Adolescents in this study had a mean age of 12.40 ($SD = 1.11$) and lived in the United States for 10.63 years ($SD = 3.68$), regardless of birthplace. Seventy-five percent ($n = 77$) of adolescents were born in the United States and 25% ($n = 26$) were born in Korea. In terms of their ethnic identity, 74.8% ($n=77$) considered themselves Korean American, followed by 16.5% ($n=17$) Korean, 5.8% ($n=6$) American, and 2.9% ($n = 3$) missing data. Their mothers' mean age was 42.17 ($SD = 3.96$) years and fathers' mean age was 45.01 ($SD = 4.61$) years. Mothers had an average of 14.68 ($SD = 2.93$) years of education, and fathers, an average of 16.39 ($SD = 3.88$) years of education. Mean length of stay in America was 15.13 ($SD = 7.03$) years for mothers and 16.90 ($SD = 7.17$) years for fathers. Mothers worked on average 26.85 ($SD = 21.24$) hours per week and fathers worked 48.00 ($SD = 14.29$) hours per week. Half of the families had an annual family income of over \$60,000.

Measures

Parental warmth was assessed using the Parental Acceptance-Rejection Questionnaire (PARQ; R. Rohner, 1991). The PARQ consists of 60 statements on parental warmth/affection, hostility/aggression, indifference/neglect, and undifferentiated rejection and the

total score represents the warmth dimension of parenting. Adolescents responded on a 4-point Likert-type scale, from “almost always true” to “almost never true.”

Psychological adjustment was assessed using the Child Personality Assessment Questionnaire (PAQ; R. Rohner, 1991). The Child PAQ is a 42 item self-report instrument that assesses youths' perceptions of themselves in seven areas of psychological adjustment. The seven subscales include hostility/aggression, dependence, self-esteem, self-adequacy, emotional responsiveness, emotional stability, and worldview. Youths responded on a 4-point Likert-type scale, from “almost always true” to “almost never true.” The PAQ total score range from 42 to 168, with higher scores indicating poorer adjustment. A score higher than 105 represents poor psychological adjustment. The Parent PARQ and PAQ were originally developed in English, and have been translated into Korean (Rohner, 2007b). Several studies using both versions of each questionnaire have shown them to be culturally appropriate (K. Kim & Rohner, 2002; S. Kim, 1997; Rohner, Hahn, & Koehn, 1992).

Procedure

The researcher visited Korean churches and language schools in the Midwest to explain the study and to distribute the at-home questionnaires. When the researcher was not able to visit a community, the leader of the community was asked to get permission from eligible families for the researcher to contact those families by mail and phone. The instruments were mailed directly to home. The instrument package included both Korean and English versions so participants could use their preferred language. When there was more than one adolescent in a household, the instruments were administered to the oldest child in the target age range to represent the family's first experience with adolescent transition. Completed instruments were then placed into self-addressed stamped envelopes and returned to the investigator. Among 352 recruited families, 120 adolescents (28.39%) completed and returned the questionnaire. Among the 120 adolescents, data for 17 adolescents were further excluded due to missing data. The researcher's Institutional Human Subjects Review Committee approved the study. Informed written consent giving permission for their adolescents to participate in the study was obtained from parents and assent was obtained from adolescents before participation.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, correlations, and multiple regression. Descriptive statistics were used to calculate mean, standard deviation, range, and distribution of the study variables. Family socioeconomic status was measured using both parents' education level and family income as indicators. Neither of these variables was correlated with overall psychological adjustment or its attributes. Older adolescents tended to be more hostile ($r = .26, p < .05$), have more negative worldview ($r = .26, p < .01$), and have overall poorer psychological adjustment ($r = .24, p < .05$). Adolescents who had lived in the United States longer ($r = .20, p < .05$) also tended to have poorer overall psychological adjustment. Therefore, child age and length of residence in the United States were controlled in further analyses. The first research question, examining the relation between maternal and paternal warmth and adolescents' psychological adjustment, was tested using simple correlations as well as partial correlations after controlling for the covariates (e.g., adolescent age and length of residence in the United States). The second research question, whether mothers' or fathers' warmth was more critical for adolescents' psychological adjustment, was examined using multiple regression. The demographic covariates were controlled in Step 1. Then, maternal and paternal warmth were simultaneously entered in Step 2. The dependent variable was adolescents' psychological adjustment.

Findings

The mean score for adolescents' perceived maternal PARQ was 105.57 (SD = 27.26) and paternal PARQ was 106.87 (SD = 24.57). Adolescents perceived approximately 9% (n = 9) of mothers and 5% (n = 5) of fathers as severely rejecting (score ≥ 150). The mean score for adolescents' psychological adjustment was 91.62 (SD = 12.75). Approximately, 16% (n = 17) of the adolescents had poor overall psychological adjustment (score > 105). There was no significant difference between boys and girls on overall psychological adjustment (score > 105), $F(1, 102) = .00$, $p = ns$, and its seven attributes using Oneway ANOVA. Boys and girls also did not report any difference in maternal PARQ, $F(1, 102) = .13$, $p = ns$, or paternal PARQ, $F(1, 102) = .55$, $p = ns$. Therefore, no separate analysis was conducted based on gender.

Relation between Maternal and Paternal Warmth and Adolescents' Psychological Adjustment

Both maternal and paternal high PARQ scores (i.e., low warmth) were positively correlated with adolescents' poorer overall psychological adjustment and all the attributes except for dependence using simple correlations (For detailed data analysis contact author via email address). In partial correlations after controlling for covariates (i.e., adolescents' age and length of residence in the United States), both maternal and paternal PARQ were positively correlated with adolescents' overall poor psychological adjustment and its attributes except for dependence and emotional instability.

Maternal and/or Paternal Warmth and Adolescents' Psychological Adjustment

When maternal and paternal PARQ were entered simultaneously after controlling for the covariates, the model was significant and explained additional 30% of the variance in adolescents' psychological adjustment, $F(2, 98) = 24.18$, $p < .001$. However, only maternal PARQ was a significant predictor of adolescents' psychological adjustment, $B = .21$, $p < .001$.

Discussion

The goal of this study was to examine the relation between perceived maternal and paternal warmth and psychological adjustment in young Korean American adolescents. Overall, this sample of young Korean American adolescents perceived both their mothers and fathers as warm and loving, which is consistent with K. Kim and Rohner's (2002) finding. The mean score for these young Korean American adolescents' psychological adjustment indicated that they were reasonably well adjusted, with some psychological problems not uncommon to adolescents (Rohner, personal communication, 2-19-06). The mean score for psychological adjustment of these Korean American adolescents was slightly poorer than that of European American and African American youths (ages 8-18) (Veneziano & Rohner, 1998), yet slightly healthier than that of the youths in the West Indies (ages 9-16) (R. Rohner et al., 1991). Sixteen percent of Korean American adolescents in the present study had poor psychological adjustment, which was same as higher end of psychological adjustment reported for European-American and African-American youth (8% -16%) (Rohner, Bourque, & Elordi, 1996; Veneziano & Rohner, 1998) and lower than West Indian youth rate of 22.8% (R. Rohner et al.).

Results indicate that young Korean American adolescents' self-reported lower maternal and paternal warmth were positively correlated with poorer overall psychological adjustment and almost all of the attributes including hostility, negative self-esteem, negative self-adequacy, emotional unresponsiveness, emotional instability, and negative worldview.

These findings support the proposition of parental acceptance-rejection theory (R. Rohner et al., 2007). Adolescents' perception of a warm and accepting quality in the relationship with their parents is remarkably important to maintaining their healthy psychological adjustment because their security and other emotional and psychosocial states are dependent on it. When adolescents perceive their parents as low in warmth, adolescents' emotional need for positive responses from the people most important to them (i.e., parents) are not met and this results in poorer psychological adjustment (R. Rohner et al.).

Neither low maternal warmth nor low paternal warmth was correlated with adolescents' dependence. The dependence in the parental acceptance-rejection theory refers to both psychological wish and actual behaviors for emotional support (Rohner, 2007a). Adolescents may seek reassurance or approval from parents, especially when they are in times of distress. According to the theory, many children who perceive their parents as low in warmth feel the need for constant reassurance and emotional support (R. Rohner et al., 2007). Therefore, finding no relation between young Korean American adolescents' perceived low parental warmth and their dependence is contrary to the theory.

This may be due to different childrearing styles between European American and Korean American families. In the United States, parents view their children as independent being and try to nurture their children to be independent (Choi, 1995). Therefore, parental warmth is related to independence of children (R. Rohner et al., 2007). In contrast, when children do not perceive enough parental warmth, they are likely to feel anxious and insecure asking for more reassurance and emotional support, resulting in higher dependence (R. Rohner et al., 2007). In Korean culture, however, parents view their children as dependent being and try to foster interdependence (Choi, 1995). Therefore, theoretically, when parents are warm, their children are more likely to be interdependent. This result is consistent with S. Kim's (1997) finding that low parental warmth was not related to young adolescents' dependence. For Korean American adolescents who live in these two cultures simultaneously (i.e., American culture at school and Korean culture at home), this issue of dependence can be confusing, resulting in no relation between low parental warmth and dependence. This study finding also must be viewed with caution due to the low internal reliability (Cronbach's $\alpha = .57$) of the dependence subscale on the PAQ.

When maternal and paternal warmth were simultaneously entered into the multiple regression to examine which parent's warmth was more critical to adolescents' adjustment, maternal warmth was the only significant factor. This finding may be related to Korean traditional parental role of mothers as a primary child caregiver and emotional provider, whereas fathers function as a breadwinner and leader (K. Kim & Kim, 1995; Rohner & Pettengill, 1985). Approximately 30% of the variance in adolescents' overall poor psychological adjustment was explained by adolescents' self-reported low maternal and paternal warmth. These relations and proportions of the explained variance are congruent with previous research findings, that 26-46% of children's psychological adjustment was explained by perceived parental rejection (i.e., low warmth) in other ethnic and cultural settings (Khaleque & Rohner, 2002; Rohner et al., 1996; Veneziano & Rohner, 1998).

Several limitations were noted. First, this study used the adolescents' self-reported questionnaires to assess both study variables, which could have induced a false correlation between the self-reported measures (Duggal, Carlson, Sroufe, & Egeland, 2001). Second, the adolescents may have poor psychological adjustment due to reasons other than low parental warmth. For example, peer victimization at school is related to adolescents' psychological adjustment (Felix & McMahon, 2006). Third, the findings of this correlational study does not show whether or not low parental warmth actually leads to differences in adolescents' psychological adjustment, nor rules out the possibility that adolescents who

have poor psychological adjustment may simply view their parents as lower in warmth than they really are. Finally, Cronbach's alpha internal reliability coefficient was low for several subscales of the Child Personality Assessment Questionnaire (e.g., .68 for hostility, .57 for dependence, .66 for emotional unresponsiveness, and .31 for emotional instability).

Conclusions

This study supports the previous finding that adolescents' perceived low maternal and paternal warmth is related to poorer psychological adjustment and almost all of its attributes. Nurses who work with Korean American adolescents may use the findings in the following ways to promote adolescent psychological adjustment. First, nurses, such as school nurses or pediatric nurse practitioners, need to assess perceived parental warmth of adolescents with poor psychological adjustment. Second, if parents score low in warmth, it would be important to offer parents an education focused on how to increase their warmth. Nurses can collaborate with local Korean American communities to provide this information.

Future research using a longitudinal research design and a larger sample is necessary in order to observe the stability and change in associations between the study variables as adolescents mature, and must be done in order to increase the generalizability of this study's findings. Furthermore, a family intervention program needs to be developed, which aims to assist adolescent psychological adjustment by promoting parental warmth. For example, it would be helpful to teach parents how to express their warmth to their adolescents through verbal and nonverbal communications (E. Kim, in press). Developing this intervention is important as researchers found that Korean American adolescents' perceived low parental warmth was also related to adolescents' problem-behaviors (Shrake, 1996), poor academic achievement (K. Kim & Rohner, 2002), and elevated depressive symptoms (E. Kim & Cain, in review).

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