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Intergenerational Continuity and Discontinuity in Harsh Parenting

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SYNOPSIS

The Family Transitions Project began in 1989 to see how rural families in Iowa were coping with the severe economic downturn in agriculture at that time. In this report we show that cohort members who were treated harshly by their parents tended to emulate these behaviors with their children. However, if they co-parented with a partner who demonstrated a warm and supportive parenting style, intergenerational continuity was disrupted.

INTRODUCTION

Both scientists and nonscientists often propose that the way parents rear their children results to a significant degree from the types of childrearing they experienced when they were growing up. There is increasing evidence consistent with this proposition. Indeed, it has been shown that intergenerational continuities in parenting behavior occur across many different mammalian species including rats, rhesus monkeys, and human beings and that these continuities are accounted for only in part by shared genes (see Conger, Belsky & Capaldi, 2009; Jensen & Champagne, 2012). This general finding leads naturally to a series of additional questions about the degree of continuity in different types of parenting, mechanisms that explain such continuities, and conditions that disrupt continuity.

THE IOWA STUDY OF PARENTING ACROSS GENERATIONS

During the 1980s, rural and adjacent urban areas in the upper Midwest experienced an economic decline in agriculture that closed thousands of businesses, including farms and farm-related enterprises (Conger & Elder, 1994). The situation was especially grave in Iowa, where the economy was almost entirely based on agriculture. To gain greater understanding of the effects of this downturn on families and children, we launched the Iowa Youth and Families Project (IYFP) in 1989. The IYFP began with a total of 451 families located in rural areas of Iowa. We recruited families that included the two biological parents of a 7th grade child (focal or target child, *M* age = 12.7 years) and a sibling within 4 years of the focal child's age. The selection of a 7th grade cohort allowed the study of transitional stress involved in the passage from childhood to adolescence as well as research on the broader socioeconomic stress created by the extremely negative financial conditions. Because at that time minority families in rural Iowa represented only about 1% of the population, all families in the study were of European heritage.

The IYFP began as a 5-year panel study with annual assessments that lasted from 1989 to 1993, the period from 7th to 11th grade for the focal children. To diversify the sample, in 1991 we added a cohort of 107 matched 9th graders, a close-aged sibling, and parents from single-parent, mother-headed homes in Iowa (the Single Parent Project, SPP; Simons and Associates, 1996), creating a total cohort of 558 focal adolescents and their families. Assessment strategies and timing of assessments were equivalent across the IYFP and SPP. As part of the research strategy, we gathered information from multiple sources including each of the four family members participating in the study, trained observers who rated videotapes of family discussions in their homes, teachers of the focal children, and school records. This multi-informant measurement strategy helped to reduce biases endemic to single-informant studies (see Conger & Elder, 1994, for details regarding methods).

Particularly noteworthy is the use of observational ratings in our measurement approach. Although a great deal of contemporary research on families relies exclusively on reports from family members, this approach to assessment includes many problems when a researcher is interested in the actual behaviors exchanged between family members. To begin with, self-reports can be distorted by an individual's interest in painting a socially desirable portrait of family life. For example, parents may not wish to disclose their use of harsh punishment or may attempt to provide a picture of greater affection toward children than they actually display. In addition, we tend to be very poor observers of our own behavior. Especially important, family member reports of own or others' behaviors may reflect a positive or negative emotional bias based on the current mood of the reporter. To a significant degree, observer ratings of family interactions overcome these biases and provide a reasonably veridical account of the quality of behavior exchange between family members, at least in a limited set of experimental settings.

A particularly important aspect of this program of study has been its prospective, longitudinal research design. A difficulty in many earlier studies of parenting across generations has been the use of retrospective measurement which is fraught with biases of many kinds such as failures in memory and re-interpretation of past events in light of current life circumstances (see Conger, Neppl, Kim, & Scaramella, 2003). The early years of the IYFP and SPP set the stage for ongoing research on how these families changed and the parents and children developed over time. In 1994 the IYFP and SPP studies of adolescents were combined to create the Family Transitions Project (FTP), a continuing investigation of how the original adolescent cohort is dealing with the transition to adulthood and the assumption of adult responsibilities, including the role of parent. Today cohort members average 35 years of age, and we have assessed them to one degree or another every year for the past 22 years. Our primary focus has moved from the families in which they were reared to the emerging nuclear families they are creating. Indeed, over 80% of cohort members are either married or cohabiting and have children. A small number of them are in second or third marriages. We continue to use a longitudinal and multi-informant research strategy involving the original target youth, their romantic partners, and children. As before, interactions in these close relationships are videotaped for scoring by trained observers. Ninety percent or more of the original cohort members continue to participate in the yearly assessments. Thus, this ongoing study provides an ideal platform for investigating the correspondence in parenting behaviors between the focal youth grown to adulthood (G2) and their parents (G1).

RESEARCH ON MEDIATORS OF INTERGENERATIONAL CONTINUITY

Two important questions involve whether there are similar continuities in both positive and negative aspects of parenting and also what types of processes or mechanisms might account for this association. Neppl, Conger, Scaramella, and Ontai (2009), using data from the FTP

cohort (G2), evaluated their style of parenting with their children (G3). With regard to the first question, these researchers demonstrated that there were continuities between G1 and G2 harsh parenting (angry, hostile, and uncaring behaviors) and between G1 and G2 positive parenting (behaviors demonstrating interest, concern, and clear communication), with these behaviors evaluated using observer reports of parent-child interactions in the home. Moreover, harsh parenting in the first generation did not predict positive parenting in the second generation when G1 positive parenting was also in the prediction equation. Similarly, G1 positive parenting did not predict G2 harsh parenting after controlling for harsh parenting in the first generation. These findings, along with those from other reports in the same special section of *Developmental Psychology* (Conger et al., 2009), provide strong support for the proposition that specific styles of parenting will demonstrate continuity across generations.

Neppl and her colleagues (2009) also considered specific mediating pathways that might explain intergenerational continuities in both styles of parenting. These investigators showed that G1 harsh parenting predicted G2 externalizing or antisocial behaviors which then led to G2 harsh parenting. That is, the findings demonstrated that when G2 youth experienced harsh parenting as adolescents, they were more likely to engage in antisocial behaviors during late adolescence and early adulthood and these antisocial tendencies were directly related to their harsh parenting behaviors with their children. These findings are consistent with earlier research demonstrating that negative parenting behaviors in one generation are related to the same behaviors in a second generation through the more general conduct problems of G2 parents (e.g., Caspi & Elder, 1988).

Neppl and her colleagues proposed that positive or constructive parenting by G1 would be related to the same type of parenting in the next generation through the competencies that positive parenting promotes during childhood and adolescence. Their analyses supported the hypothesis in that G2 academic attainment mediated the relation between G1 and G2 positive parenting. Other studies have reported that intergenerational continuity in positive parenting was explained by the social or personal competencies promoted by this style of childrearing (see Conger et al., 2009). Neppl et al. (2009) also demonstrated that externalizing behaviors did not mediate continuity in positive parenting and academic attainment did not mediate continuity in harsh parenting. That is, it appears that these continuities are explained by processes or mechanisms specific to the type of parenting being considered.

MODERATORS AND INTERGENERATIONAL DISCONTINUITY

There has been a significant amount of research on mediation, but there has been very little research on moderation, including using data from the FTP. Especially important is research that examines the ways in which continuity in positive parenting is promoted and continuity in harsh parenting is disrupted. Scaramella and Conger (2003) reported that reactive infant temperament appears to foster continuity in harsh parenting, but these findings tell us little about the means by which such continuities might be discouraged. Currently, we are engaged in a program of work to try to identify both individual and relationship characteristics that disrupt continuities in harsh parenting and foster continuities in constructive or positive parenting. One pathway through which intergenerational continuity in harsh parenting might be discouraged involves the childrearing style of the co-parent. We have shown that parents tend to emulate one another's behaviors toward children (Schofield et al., 2009): When mothers are warm and supportive toward their children, fathers are more likely to be the same and vice versa. Indeed, the findings indicate that spouses tend to foster change in one another's parenting over time. These findings suggest that if a parent who was reared in a harsh or hostile fashion has a romantic partner who provides a model for

parenting that is warm and supportive, then the history of harshness may have a less dramatic influence on current parenting. Thus, our first hypothesis for the following analysis is that warm and supportive parenting by a romantic partner will directly and negatively affect harsh parenting by G2, a statistical main effect. Our second hypothesis is that partner's parenting will moderate G1 harsh parenting such that the association between G1 and G2 harsh parenting will significantly decline when the co-parent is warm and supportive toward G3, a statistical interaction effect.

Of course, it may be that young adults pick mates who were reared similarly to themselves through a process of interactional continuity; nevertheless, these selection processes are unlikely to be 100% determinant in the choice of a spouse or romantic partner. Thus, we would expect that G1 harsh parenting will be negatively related to choosing a co-parent who has a warm and supportive parenting style, although we expect the magnitude of this association to be relatively modest. In this process, partner's behavior will also mediate the relation between G1 and G2 harsh parenting (hypothesis 3). In the following section we provide some preliminary findings regarding these hypotheses and then turn to more general questions regarding the nature of parenting, how our research relates to intervention and social policy, and future research directions.

METHOD

Participants

Beginning in 1997, the oldest biological child (G3) of the G2 target adolescent from the FTP was recruited for study. To be eligible for participation, the child had to be at least 18 months of age and the G2 target parent must have been in regular contact with the G3 child. The current report focuses on the 290 G2 targets (120 males, 170 females) who had a G3 child eligible for participation by 2005. The present analyses use data from the G2 targets' adolescent years, prior to their becoming parents, as well as data from the first annual assessment of each G3 child. A total of 90% of the G2 target parents with eligible children agreed to participate. The G2 targets averaged 25.6 years of age, and the G3 child averaged 2.31 years of age at the first assessment during which G3 entered the study. Almost 81% of the G2 targets were living with the other biological parent of the G3 child at T1. There were 157 G3 boys and 133 G3 girls.

Procedure

G2 targets and their G1 parent(s) were recruited from public and private schools in rural areas of Iowa during G2's adolescent years (see Conger & Elder, 1994, for details regarding recruitment and research methods). During each annual assessment during G2's adolescence, professional interviewers made home visits to each family for approximately 2 hours on two occasions. Included in the data collected was a problem-solving task during the senior year of high school (1994) which was designed to evaluate the degree of negativity in parent-child interactions. The task consisted of family members (mother, father, and the target adolescent) discussing and trying to resolve issues and disagreements they had cited as most problematic in a questionnaire they completed earlier in the visit. As over 25% of the targets were part of single-mother families, the current analyses use data from the mother-target interactions. Because they were not living in the home, fathers from the SPP did not participate in the interaction tasks. Beginning as early as 1997 the G2 target and G3 child were visited at home once each year by trained interviewers. Data were collected from G2 targets and their G3 children as well as from the romantic partners (married or cohabiting) of the G2 targets (when they had one), following procedures similar to those described for G2's family of origin. During the annual visits, the G2 parents and G3 child engaged in a videotaped *puzzle task*, which lasted 5 min. This task was also completed

separately with G2's partner and G3 when applicable. In the puzzle completion task, G2 and G3 were presented with a puzzle that was too difficult for children to complete alone. G2 parents were instructed that children should complete the puzzle alone, but parents could provide assistance if absolutely necessary. Puzzles varied by age group so that the puzzle slightly exceeded the child's skill level. This interaction task created a stressful environment for both parent and child and the resulting behaviors indicated how well the parent handled the stress and how adaptive the child was to an environmental challenge. Trained observers coded the quality of the behaviors between participants using the Iowa Family Interaction Rating Scales (Melby & Conger, 2001). Each interaction task (G1 with G2, G2 with G3, G2's partner with G3) was coded by a randomly selected, independent observer.

Measures

G1 harsh parenting—Trained observers rated the G1 mother on the degree to which she demonstrated hostility (angry or rejecting behavior), angry coercion (demanding, stubborn, coercive), and antisocial behavior (self-centered, immature, insensitive) toward the G2 target. Each rating scale was used as a separate indicator for a latent construct for harsh parenting. Internal consistency reliability was acceptable across the three scales ($\alpha = .91$). Standardized factor loadings ranged from .79 (angry/coercion) to .98 (hostile).

G2 harsh parenting—Trained observers rated G2 targets on the degree to which they demonstrated hostility (angry or rejecting behavior), angry coercion (demanding, stubborn, coercive), and antisocial behavior (self-centered, immature, insensitive) toward the G3 child. Each rating scale was used as a separate indicator for a latent construct for harsh parenting. Internal consistency reliability was acceptable across the three scales ($\alpha = .96$).

Relationship quality between G2's spouse or cohabiting partner and the G3 child—Trained observers rated the romantic partners of the G2 targets on the degree to which they showed positive relationship quality, positive mood, and enjoyment of the interaction task with the G3 child. Each rating scale was used as a separate indicator for a latent construct for relationship quality. These behaviors indicated the degree to which the spouse was warm, supportive, and low in hostility toward G3 during the interaction task. Internal consistency reliability was acceptable ($\alpha = .88$).

Socioeconomic Status (SES)—As control variables, we included both per-capita income and education as separate measures of G2 SES in the current study. G2 educational attainment was assessed using the G2 target's self-report of years of schooling completed at the time of G3's first assessment. G2 per-capita income (total family income divided by family size) was calculated using G2 target's report of income at the same time.

RESULTS

Correlations among Study Variables

Consistent with theoretical expectations, G1 harsh parenting was positively associated with later G2 harsh parenting ($r = .31$). G1 harsh parenting also was significantly correlated with G2 spouse's relationship quality with the G3 child ($r = -.16$). The pattern of associations was generally as expected and justified the formal model testing that follows. G2 education and per-capita income were only moderately correlated, so structural equation models (SEMs) were run using both as separate markers of SES.

Testing the Intergenerational Model

We used Mplus Version 6 (Muthén & Muthén, 2006) to estimate the structural equation models (SEMs) designed to test study hypotheses. Prior to model testing, we evaluated whether there were G2 gender differences in the measures or the results of the analyses. These analyses indicated that there were no gender differences; therefore, we used the combined sample of G2 males and females in the final analyses. Figure 1 provides the results for the SEM analysis with G2 spouse's relationship quality with the G3 child included as both a mediator and moderator of the relation between G1 and G2 harsh parenting, consistent with study hypotheses. As shown in the figure, the model demonstrated good fit with the data (RMSEA = .035 and TLI = .989; see Browne & Cudeck, 1993; Tucker & Lewis, 1973). As expected, G1 harshness predicted G2 spouse's relationship quality with G3 ($\beta = -.17$, $SE = .08$), suggesting that G2 parents with a history of harsh parenting are less likely to select into co-parenting relationships with partners who demonstrate good relationship quality with their oldest child. Also as expected, G2 spouse's relationship quality with G3 both directly predicted G2 harshness ($\beta = -.26$, $SE = .08$) and also moderated the association between G1 harshness and G2 harshness ($\beta = -.20$, $SE = .09$). Partner's relationship quality with G3 did not completely mediate the association between G1 and G2 harsh parenting, however, as indicated by the still significant association between these two variables. As shown in Figure 2, the association between G1 and G2 harsh parenting is minimal (.07) and not statistically significant when G2's co-parent has a warm and supportive relationship with G3 (i.e., +1 *SD* or higher above the mean on relationship quality), but the association is quite substantial (.46) and statistically significant when the partner has a poor relationship with G3 (−1 *SD* below the mean or lower).

DISCONTINUITY

The results of these analyses provide important new information regarding at least one avenue through which continuity in harsh parenting across generations may be diminished. Consistent with our expectations, when parents who were reared in a harsh or hostile fashion have a co-parent who provides a different model for parenting, they are less likely to emulate the childrearing practices they experienced as adolescents. This alternative model for positive parenting seems to influence intergenerational continuity in harshness in two ways. First, a co-parent who has a positive and supportive relationship with a child tends to diminish the likelihood that the second parent will behave in a hostile manner toward the child, a statistical main effect. The positive, co-parent model also disrupts intergenerational continuity in the sense that continuity in G1 and G2 harshness is reduced to nonsignificance when the co-parent has a highly supportive relationship with the child. And although the experience of being reared by a harsh parent reduces the likelihood of mating with a partner who demonstrates warm and supportive parenting behaviors, the magnitude of this association is relatively modest.

There are at least two compelling alternative explanations for these findings, however. First, the continuities in parenting behaviors and spouse selection may simply represent the influence of shared genes between G1 and G2. However, McGuire (2012) found only modest evidence of a genetic influence on parenting measured by observer ratings. Thus, there is good reason to believe that G2 parenting resulted from social rather than genetic influences. Second, it may be that the quality of G2 and the co-parent's behaviors toward G3 represent a child effect; that is, G3 dispositional characteristics may be accounting for the childrearing styles of G2 and his or her romantic partner. In a study of these same families, however, Nepl et al. (2009) demonstrated that intergenerational continuities in either harsh or positive parenting could not be accounted for by child behaviors. For these reasons we believe these findings provide relatively robust support for the study hypotheses. They also

suggest that appropriate mate selection or parent training of both partners may help to reduce continuity in harsh and hostile parenting across generations.

CONCLUSIONS

What is Optimal Parenting?

Parenting behaviors are generally subdivided into actions that express either emotion or control (Conger, 2009). For example, parents may be affectionate or angry in terms of emotional expression or they may be demanding or lenient with regard to managing a child's behavior. These broad categories, however, omit a great deal that certainly is important in terms of a parent being an effective agent of socialization for a child. For example, effective parents must be sensitive to a child's needs, developmental stage, temperament, personality, and cultural or community expectations regarding competent functioning by a child. Moreover, parenting behaviors that either promote or inhibit competent development seem to cluster together rather than occurring in isolation. Our research indicates that parents who are affectionate and caring also tend to be more effective in terms of child management; such as setting standards for child behavior, monitoring their actions, and providing appropriate consequences for the child's behavior. Parents who are hostile and rejecting are less likely to be appropriately involved in managing the child's daily life and activities. The primary point is that parents who demonstrate positive affect toward their children also tend to be more effective in the control strategies they employ with their children.

In our research we have found that a constellation of positive parenting attributes, which we call nurturing and involved parenting, seems to foster competent child functioning and reduce risk for emotional and behavioral problems. Negative parenting behaviors, which we call harsh and inconsistent, tend to exacerbate emotional and behavioral problems and inhibit the development of social, emotional, and academic competence. These syndromes of positive or negative parenting appear to operate similarly across ethnic groups including rural European American families (Conger, Cui, Bryant, & Elder, 2000), Mexican American families (Conger et al., 2012), and African American families (Conger et al., 2002). In addition to these parenting styles, we have also shown that parental time and material investments in children's lives appear to promote healthy development (Schofield et al., 2011).

Practice and Policy

Too often parenting programs ignore the fact that most children are reared in two-parent families. They fail to recognize that what one parent does likely will influence the behaviors of the other parent. We believe the findings reported here underscore the need for parenting programs that touch the lives of both parents and the ways in which they influence one another's parenting styles.

Future Directions in the Study of Intergenerational Continuity in Parenting

Future research on intergenerational continuity will need to elaborate on the work conducted thus far on mediating mechanisms that help explain how it is that parenting in one generation affects childrearing practices in the next. For example, here we demonstrated that part of the reason that children emulate the harsh parenting style of their parents is that they are less likely to co-parent with a person who has a positive relationship with their child. Thus, mate selection plays a role in intergenerational continuity. We discussed other research that demonstrates that there seem to be specific behavioral mediating mechanisms for both positive and negative dimensions of parenting practices. Future research needs to widen the search for potential mediators. For example, little research has been done that

examines potential cognitive or emotional mediators of intergenerational continuity in parenting. Also important will be consideration of biological processes such as gene expression or neural development that may play a key role in linking parenting styles across generations (Conger et al., 2009).

As noted earlier, little is known about moderating mechanisms that either amplify or reduce the degree of continuity in parenting from one generation to the next. Conger et al. (2009) proposed a number of demographic variables, social characteristics, and personal dispositions that may function as moderators of intergenerational continuities in parenting. For example, in addition to the parenting style of the co-parent as examined here, will the quality of the relationship between parents affect intergenerational continuity or discontinuity? Finally, a particularly promising area for future research on moderation involves *gene by environment interactions*. Current theory and research suggest that some genetic variants increase susceptibility either to positive experiences, such as a history of nurturing and involved parenting, or to negative experiences such as a history of harsh and inconsistent parenting. In our future research on intergenerational continuities, we will examine all of these possibilities using data from our long-term study of three generations of Iowa families.

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Figure 1.

G2 spouse's warmth toward G3 as a mediator and moderator of G1 to G2 harshness; standardized regression coefficients; standard errors in parentheses; * $p < .05$.

Figure 2.
Zero-order associations between G1 and G2 harshness when spouse and child relationship quality is either low or high.