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Associations between Parenting Behaviors and Adolescent Romantic Relationships

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Abstract

We examined associations between parenting behaviors and romantic relationship qualities in 102 adolescent girls (14–21 years) who lived with their parent/parental figure and had current boyfriends. Adolescent girls' perceptions that parents were accepting/involved and provided appropriate strictness and supervision were significantly related to adolescent girls' perceptions of mutuality (i.e., bidirectional movement of thoughts, feelings, and activities between persons) [1] within their own romantic relationships which in turn was related to their romantic relationship satisfaction. No parenting variables were related to non-exclusivity.

INTRODUCTION

During adolescence, individuals begin to engage in romantic relationships. Understanding the role parents play in this experience could be beneficial to fostering the development of healthy romantic relationships. Both longitudinal/prospective and retrospective research has shown that the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship in terms of warmth and caring is related to the quality of the young adult relationship [2–4]. In fact, one study found that the interactions between a young adult and his/her romantic partner mirrored that seen in the young adult's earlier interactions with his/her parents, which was in turn related to satisfaction and commitment of the young adult's romantic relationship [3]. In addition to the quality of the parent-adolescent relationship, parenting behaviors also have been shown to influence sexual behaviors of adolescents. When parents are warm and accepting, set firm rules, and supervise their adolescents appropriately (i.e., have what is referred to as an authoritative parenting style), adolescents are less likely than adolescents without parents with such characteristics to engage in sexually risky behaviors [5, 6]. However, little is

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known about how parenting behaviors might be related to other qualities of the “adolescent” romantic relationship, such as mutuality (i.e., “bidirectional movement of feelings, thoughts and activity between persons in relationships” that promotes psychological growth) [1], satisfaction, and exclusivity (i.e., monogamy).

Thus, we sought to examine the relationship between adolescent girls’ perceptions of their parents’ parenting behaviors and adolescent girls’ perceptions of mutuality, satisfaction, and non-exclusivity in their own romantic relationships. We hypothesized that adolescent girls who perceived their parents to display greater levels of authoritative parenting behaviors (e.g., acceptance, supervision) would also perceive higher levels of mutuality and satisfaction in their own romantic relationships and would be less likely to describe their own romantic relationship as non-exclusive. Given Conger et al.’s findings [3], we expected that adolescent girls’ perceptions of mutuality in the romantic relationship would mediate the relationship between adolescent girls’ perceptions of parenting behaviors and adolescent girls’ perceptions of their own romantic relationship satisfaction.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Recruitment

Adolescent girls ($n = 208$), ages 14 to 21 years, were recruited from local colleges and a school-based clinic and by participant referral to participate in a microbicide acceptability study. All the girls who participated were sexually experienced. At the interview, girls were asked whether or not they had a boyfriend and with whom they lived. For purposes of the current analyses, we only included girls who lived with a parent/parent figure and had a current boyfriend ($n = 102$). Compared to the 106 girls not included in the analyses, the 102 girls included had a younger mean age (17.7, $sd = 1.8$ versus 18.6, $sd = 1.9$, $p < .01$) and had a greater percentage of Hispanic girls (40% versus 21%) and lower percentage of white girls (16% versus 36%, $p < .01$). There were the same percentages of African-Americans in both samples. The Institutional Review Board at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston approved all recruitment and study procedures. Participants were given \$30 for the interview.

Measures

Demographics and Relationship History—Girls identified their age and race/ethnicity and with whom they lived. They also stated the length of their relationship with their boyfriend and whether they had vaginal intercourse with him.

Main Outcomes: Romantic Relationship Variables—Girls completed the Mutual Psychological Development Scale (MPDQ) which assesses their perceptions of mutuality in the romantic relationship which in terms of characteristics, such as empathy (e.g., pick up on my partner’s feelings) and authenticity (e.g., share similar experiences) [7]. Half of the 22-item scale assessed a girl’s perceived responsiveness to her partners’ needs and the other half assessed her perceptions of her partners’ responsiveness to her needs. Average scores were created from the ratings of items on a 6-point Likert scale. Higher scores were indicative of greater mutuality.

Girls reported their level of satisfaction with their romantic relationship using a 4-point Likert scale (i.e., *not at all satisfied*, *somewhat satisfied*, *satisfied*, and *very satisfied*). Due to skewness of this variable, it was recoded to: somewhat satisfied/satisfied versus very satisfied. One girl reported *not at all satisfied* and therefore was dropped from the analysis predicting satisfaction.

Non-exclusivity was measured via two questions: Have you ever seen anyone else at the same time, when you weren't broken up? (Yes/no) and Do you think your partner has ever seen anyone else at the same time when you weren't broken up (Yes/No/Not Sure). Those responding *no* to both questions were classified as exclusive and those responding *yes* or *not sure* to either question were classified as non-exclusive. Girls who responded yes to having seen someone else outside the relationship were also asked whether or not they had engaged in sexual activity (i.e., kissing, touching, oral sex) with the other person and whether they had sexual intercourse with the person.

Parenting Variables—The Authoritative Parenting Scale (APS) assessed young women's perceptions of their parents' parenting behaviors [8]. The Acceptance/Involvement subscale has 9 items measuring the degree to which adolescents perceive their parents as loving and active in their life. The Psychological/Autonomy-Granting subscale has 9 items assessing adolescents' perceptions that their parents promote their individuality and use democratic discipline. The Strictness/Supervision subscale has 8 items, measuring adolescents' perceptions of their parents' monitoring and limit setting. Items on the first two subscales are scored on a 4-point Likert scale. Some items on the third subscale are on a 6-point Likert scale and others on a 3-point Likert scale. A total score for each subscale was calculated with higher scores indicating greater degrees of the specified parenting behavior.

Statistical Methods

Data were imported into SAS 9.1 (Cary, NC) for analysis. Bivariate regressions were performed by pairing each demographic variable with each relationship outcome variable (e.g., mutuality) and each parenting behavior (e.g., parental involvement) with each relationship outcome variable. Linear regressions were conducted for continuous outcomes (i.e., mutuality) and logistic regressions were conducted for dichotomous outcomes (i.e., satisfaction, non-exclusivity). For any parenting variable that was related to more than one relationship quality, a structural equation model was estimated by the M-Plus program, Version 4.1. [9] to examine potential mediating effects. M-Plus allows for both continuous and categorical or dichotomous outcomes. An alpha level of 0.05 was used to judge significance.

RESULTS

See Table 1 for descriptive analyses on demographics, relationship variables, and parenting behaviors. Age, race/ethnicity, and length of the adolescent girl's romantic relationship were not related to any of the relationship outcomes. Parental Acceptance/Involvement and Parental Strictness/Supervision were positively related to mutuality within the relationship (See Table 2), but there was no relationship for Psychological/Autonomy Granting. Parental Acceptance/Involvement and Parental Strictness/Supervision were both significantly

positively related to relationship satisfaction. There was no relationship for Psychological/Autonomy Granting. None of the parenting variables were related to non-exclusivity.

Two structural equation models (See Figure 1) were tested to assess whether mutuality mediated the relationship between Parental Involvement/Acceptance and satisfaction and the relationship between Parental Strictness/Supervision and satisfaction. The results of the first structural equation model indicated that both the path between Parental Involvement/Acceptance and mutuality ($\beta = .04$, $p < .05$) and the path between mutuality and satisfaction (OR 2.60, CI 1.85, 3.64) were significant. The strength of the relationship between Parental Involvement/Acceptance and satisfaction (OR 1.03, CI .99, 1.07) reduced to non-significance after adding mutuality to the model, suggesting that mutuality mediated this relationship. In the second SEM, the path between Parental Strictness/Supervision and mutuality ($\beta = .04$, $p < .05$) and the path between mutuality and satisfaction (OR 2.60, CI 1.86, 3.62) were significant. The strength of the relationship between Parent Strictness/Supervision and satisfaction (OR 1.03, CI .97, 1.10) reduced to non-significance after adding mutuality to the model, suggesting that mutuality mediated this relationship as well.

DISCUSSION

Among these ethnically diverse adolescent girls, parenting characterized by acceptance, involvement, strictness, and supervision was associated with greater mutuality in the adolescent girls' romantic relationships which in turn led to greater romantic relationship satisfaction. These results are consistent with previous research, which has found that positive qualities of parent-child relationships are linked to positive qualities in later adult romantic relationships [2–4]. Further the results extend the benefits of authoritative parenting to not only preventing risky sexual behaviors in adolescent romantic relationships (e.g., early age of sexual initiation) [5, 6] but also to promoting positive qualities of adolescent romantic relationships. Consistent with Conger et al. [3], these results suggest that a socialization process could be at play; when parents use effective parenting strategies, individuals are more likely to develop interpersonal competencies (e.g., empathy toward a partner) which then allow them to attain satisfying relationships.

The present study was cross-sectional and not specifically designed to study the association between parent-child relationships and adolescent romantic relationships, limiting our ability to examine all relevant characteristics of the parent-child relationship and romantic relationship and to make causal inferences. A second limitation was that the results were based on girls' subjective report of parental behavior and her romantic relationship and did not include parent or partner report. However, a previous study found no significant differences between adolescents and parents' reports of parental monitoring and communication [10]. Also the sample consisted of sexually experienced adolescent girls willing to participate in a microbicide study and thus cannot be generalized to all adolescent girls. Despite these limitations, the results suggest that encouraging authoritative parenting may help foster the development of mutually, satisfying adolescent romantic relationships.

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* $p < .05$

Figure 1.

Structural Equation Models assessing association between adolescent girls' perceptions of Parental Acceptance/Involvement and girls' perceptions of mutuality and satisfaction within their own romantic relationships and association between adolescent girls' perceptions of Parental Strictness/Supervision and girls' perceptions of mutuality, and satisfaction within their own romantic relationship.

Table 1

Means, medians, and frequencies on sample descriptors, relationship outcomes, and parenting variables (N=102)

Variable	Mean	Median	n (%)
<i>Demographics and Relationship History</i>			
Age (n = 102)	17.7 ± 1.8		
14			4 (4)
15			18 (18)
16			16 (16)
17			21 (21)
18			16 (16)
19			15 (15)
20			7 (7)
21			5 (5)
Race/Ethnicity (n = 102)			
White			16 (16)
African-American			42 (41)
Hispanic			41 (40)
Other			3 (3)
Length of dating relationship in months ^b (n = 102)		17.7	
<i>Main Outcomes: Relationship Variables</i>			
Relationship satisfaction (n = 101)			
Somewhat satisfied to satisfied			52 (51)
Very satisfied			49 (48)
Mutual Psychological Development Scale (n = 102)	4.7 ± .6		
Girls' Non-exclusivity (n=102)			
No			68 (67)
Yes			34 (33)
No Sexual Activity (i.e., kissing, touching, oral sex)			5
Sexual Activity (i.e., kissing, touching, oral sex)			29
Sexual Activity and sexual intercourse			16
Boyfriends' Non-exclusivity (n = 102)			
No			59 (58)
Yes			22 (21)
Not Sure			21 (21)
Girl/Boyfriend Non-exclusivity Combined (n = 102)			
No			51 (50)
Yes/Not Sure			51 (50)
<i>Predictors: Parenting Variables – Authoritative Parenting Scale</i>			

Variable	Mean	Median	n (%)
Acceptance/Involvement ^a (n = 102)	29.4 ± 5.2		
Psychological Autonomy-Granting ^a (n = 102)	24.1 ± 5.0		
Strictness/Supervision ^a (n = 102)	12.3 ± 4.1		

^a Results are reported as mean ± standard deviation

^b Median (25th percentile, 75th percentile) reported for skewed variable

Table 2

Simple correlations or odds ratios (OR) with Confidence Intervals (CI) examining the relationship between parenting variables and romantic relationship outcomes – mutuality, satisfaction, and non-exclusivity

	Mutuality r	Satisfaction OR (95% CI)	Non-Exclusivity OR (95% CI)
Acceptance/Involvement	.31 **	1.11 (1.02, 1.22) *	1.06 (.98, 1.15)
Psychological/Autonomy Granting	.04	1.01 (.93, 1.09)	.94 (.86, 1.01)
Supervision/Strictness	.28 **	1.12 (1.01, 1.24) *	.99 (.91, 1.10)

**
p < .01

*
p < .05