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Parental perceptions of children's agency: Parental warmth, school achievement and adjustment

Sevtap Gurdal [PhD Student in psychology],

Centre for child and youth studies, University West, S – 461 86 Trollhättan, Sweden. Phone: + 46-520-22 37 82. Fax: + 46-520-22 30 99. sevtap.gurdal@hv.se

Jennifer E. Lansford, PhD [Research Professor], and

Center for Child and Family Policy, Duke University, Box 90545, Durham, NC 27708. Phone: 919-613-9303. Fax: 919-684-3731. lansford@duke.edu

Emma Sorbring [Associate Professor in psychology]

Centre for child and youth studies, University West, S-461 86 Trollhättan, Sweden. Phone: +46 520-22 37 12. Fax: + 46-520-22 30 99. emma.sorbring@hv.se

Abstract

Background—The present study examined Swedish mothers' and fathers' warmth towards their children in relation to their children's agency. It also examined the longitudinal relation between agency and children's externalizing, internalizing, and school achievement.

Methods—Swedish children's mothers and fathers ($N = 103$) were interviewed at three time points (when children were 8, 9, and 10 years old) about their warmth towards their children, children's agency, and children's externalizing and internalizing behaviors and school achievement.

Results—Parental warmth at Time 1 was significantly correlated with child agency at Time 2, which was significantly correlated with child externalizing and internalizing behaviors and academic achievement at Time 3. There were no differences between girls and boys.

Conclusions—Results from this study indicate that Swedish parents' warmth is directly related to subsequent perceptions of children's agency, which in turn are related to subsequently lower child externalizing and internalizing problems and higher academic achievement. These findings held in the context of a three-year longitudinal study and for both boys and girls, suggesting the importance of child agency in the link between parental warmth and children's adjustment.

Keywords

Personal agency; parental warmth; school achievement; children's adjustment; parenting

Introduction

Personal agency can be defined as knowing and predicting what kind of outcome a certain action will have (Zimmermann & Cleary, 2006) or behaving intentionally with the expectation of achieving a specific outcome (Bandura, 2001). Perceived agency involves not only getting things that one wants, but also feeling that one can “play a part in their self-development, adaption and self-renewel” (Bandura, 2001, p. 2). Previous studies of personal agency show how agency is positively linked to school achievement, health, or adjustment (Grob, Little, Wanner, Wearing, & EURONET, 1996; Stetsenko, Little, Oettingen, & Balteset, 1995). There are also studies that reveal how parenting relates to adolescents’ agency beliefs (Hoeltje, Zubrick, Silburn, & Garton, 1996; Juang & Silbereisen, 2002). In these studies, children have estimated their agency with respect to control beliefs and self-efficacy in relation to adjustment and school achievement. Previous studies also have shown that there is not only unidirectionality when it comes to parenting and child outcomes. Instead, a transactional family dynamics (Schermerhorn & Cummings, 2008) or a bidirectional approach may better characterize interactions between parenting and child outcomes (Kuczynski & DeMol, 2015). That is, parents not only influence children’s behavior, well-being, and school achievement (e.g., Baumrind, 1971; Chen, Wang, Chen & Liu, 2002; Kordi & Baharudin, 2010), children also affect their parents’ behavior. (e.g., Kerr & Stattin, 2003; Kuczynski & DeMol, 2015; Schermerhorn & Cummings, 2008). The present study examines mothers’ and fathers’ warmth in relation to children’s agency, externalizing problems, internalizing problems, and academic achievement in the context of a three-year longitudinal study in Sweden.

Personal agency has been conceptualized with different dimensions such as personal control (Grob, Little, Wanner, Wearing, & EURONET, 1996), control beliefs, and self-efficacy (Stetsenko, Little, Oettingen, & Balteset, 1995). Often in research about agency, different dimensions are used to operationalize perceptions of agency. Emirbayer (1998) claimed that “many theorists have failed to distinguish agency as an analytic category in its own right” (p. 962–963). This study comprises four components: self-esteem, purpose in life, internal locus of control and self-efficacy, as measured in the Multi-Measure Agentic Personality Scale (Côté, 1997). First, self-esteem can be defined as individuals’ descriptions of themselves (Lecompte, Moss, Cyr, & Pacsuzzo, 2014) and the belief of being worthy or competent. Second, purpose in life is a construct that describes individuals’ setting goals and striving to achieve their goals (Floyd, Mailick, Seltzer, Greenberg, & Song, 2013). Third, internal locus of control refers to individuals’ belief that they can control outcomes in contrast to external locus of control, which is the belief that things happen because of external factors like luck (April, Dharani, & Peters, 2012). Fourth, self-efficacy involves individuals’ belief in their capacity to achieve the goals they have set for themselves (Bandura, 1991).

Agency has been found to be predicted by several factors, including parenting. Parental affection is positively related to adolescents’ sense of agency (Hoeltje et al., 1996; Juang & Silbereisen, 2002). Likewise, parental rejection is related to worse self-esteem for adolescents (Ansari & Qureshi, 2013). Adolescents’ involvement in family communication, in particular, appears to increase their sense of personal agency (Jutengren, 2004). However,

family socioeconomic status is unrelated to agency; agency beliefs can be high whether the family is a low-income or high-income family (Côté, 1997).

Previous studies have demonstrated associations between agency and several aspects of children's and adolescents' adjustment. Adolescents' agency as reflected in the belief that they have the capacity to perform well in school is a good predictor of later school achievements (Juang & Silbereisen, 2002; Little, Oettingen, Stetsenko, & Balteset, 1995). Similarly, elementary school children with high agency beliefs have lower anxiety and more positive attitudes and self-esteem (Grob, Little, Wanner, Wearing, & EURONET, 1996; Lopez & Little, 1996).

A study in a Swedish preschool revealed that already by preschool, Swedish children show strategies that are deliberate and agentic (Markström & Halldén, 2008). For example, the children used a variety of strategies to try to influence teachers by different approaches like negotiating and trying to take control over the situation. They also sometimes chose to be silent and avoidant if they did not agree with the teachers. A similar result was found when Sorbring (2005) interviewed children about conflict situations with parents where the children expressed a wish to be treated as an adult. They actively confronted the parents, were goal-oriented, or chose not to confront the parent. All three strategies are in some way deliberate and reveal how the child chooses to act, to get a certain reaction or outcome.

The present study

The present study was conducted in Sweden, a country where children's rights have been emphasized for a long time. Swedish children's rights were already discussed in 1900 when Key (1900) supported schools for all children and advocated that children had the right to a childhood. Sweden was also the first country in the world to ban the use of physical punishment towards children (Durrant, 2003). The law was designed to change attitudes regarding physical punishment, but also to offer parents other parenting practices. Carlson and Earls (2001) describe Swedish parents as negotiating and discussing things with their children rather than dominating them. Swedish parents also emphasize children's rights in the family (Harkness, Super, Axia, Elias, Palacios, & Welles-Nyström, 2001). Thus, Sweden is a particularly interesting context in which to examine children's agency.

The present study addressed two primary research questions using a sample of Swedish parents followed longitudinally for three years. The first question was whether parents' warmth predicts children's agency or the other way around. On the basis of previous work showing that parents higher in warmth have adolescents with higher perceived agency and children with higher social competence (Kim, Han, & McCubbin, 2007) and self-esteem (Haque, 1988; Litovsky & Dusek, 1985), we hypothesized that parental warmth would be related to children's agency. We also tested the opposite direction of effects, with children's agency predicting subsequent parenting, on the basis of research from Stattin and Kerr (2003) suggesting that parenting is often a reaction to children's behaviors or characteristics. The second question was whether children's agency predicts their externalizing behavior, internalizing behavior, and academic achievement. On the basis of previous research demonstrating links between adolescents' perceived agency and better adjustment, we hypothesized that these links would hold during childhood as well.

Methods

Participants

Families were recruited through six schools serving a socioeconomically diverse population in the western part of Sweden. After receiving permission from the school principals, recruitment letters describing the study were sent to the families, who were then contacted by phone to follow up on the letters and assess interest in participation. In all, 103 families participated.

The participating families included children who were, on average, 8.76 years ($SD = .043$) at the time of recruitment (50 girls and 53 boys). At Time 1, 72.9% of the parents were married (51.4%) or cohabiting (21.5%), 15% of the parents were divorced (4.7%) or separated (10.3%). The remaining children lived in a single parent family. At Time 1, the mean age of the mothers was 39.14 ($SD = 4.83$) and for fathers 41.86 ($SD = 0.60$). The average level of education was 13.92 years ($SD = 2.48$) for mothers and 13.73 ($SD = 2.98$) for fathers. The majority of the target children, 86%, had at least one sibling.

Procedure

Surveys with parents were conducted in person or by mail and took about 1.5 hour when they were conducted in person. The surveys were completed at three annual time points, with the first one when children were on average 8 years old. Parents provided written informed consent for their participation. Children's schools were provided with modest gifts to thank the families for their participation. All procedures and measures received IRB approval.

Measures

Parents' Warmth and Acceptance—Mothers and fathers completed the short form of the Parental Acceptance-Rejection/Control Questionnaire (PARQ/Control-SF; Rohner, 2005). The analyses for the present study included mothers' and fathers' reports on eight items from the warmth and affection scale. Items such as "I make my child feel wanted and needed" and "I care about what my child thinks and encourage her/him to talk about it" were used. The original 4-point scale ("*almost always true*" to "*almost never true*") was modified in this study to refer to concrete time periods: 1 = *almost never*, 2 = *once a month*, 3 = *once a week*, 4 = *every day*. Items were averaged to create a scale reflecting mothers' and fathers' warmth ($\alpha = .73$).

Children's Agency—Mothers and fathers completed a short form of the Multi-Measure Agentic Personality Scale (Côté, 1997), which includes a total of 20 questions. The original questions were modified to be more suitable for parents with younger children. Questions assessed four aspects of parents' perceptions of their children's agency including *self-esteem* (e.g., "My child thinks he/she is a lot of fun to be with"), *purpose of life* (e.g., "My child thinks his/her life is fun and exciting"), *internal locus of control* (e.g., "My child thinks that when he/she studies, he/she gets better grades"), and *self-efficacy* (e.g., "My child enjoys difficult and challenging situations"). The original scale was changed to a three-point scale:

0 = *I do not agree*, 1 = *I agree*, 2 = *I agree a lot*. Mothers' and fathers' items were averaged to create a scale ($\alpha = .90$).

Children's Externalizing and Internalizing Behaviors—Mothers and fathers completed the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991) regarding their children's externalizing and internalizing problems. The externalizing scale included 33 items (e.g., "My child gets in many fights"); the internalizing scale included 31 items (e.g., "My child is too fearful or anxious"). Items were rated as 0 = *not true*, 1 = *somewhat true*, 2 = *sometimes true*. Items were averaged across mothers and fathers to create an externalizing scale ($\alpha = .85$) and an internalizing scale ($\alpha = .80$).

Academic Achievement—At Time 3, mothers rated their children's achievements in reading, math, social studies, and science using a four-point scale with 1 = *failing*, 2 = *below average*, 3 = *average*, and 4 = *above average*. Ratings were averaged across the four school subjects to create a scale reflecting academic achievement ($\alpha = .74$).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

Descriptive statistics and correlations among the key constructs are shown in Table 1. As shown, parental warmth at Time 1 was significantly correlated with perceived child agency at Time 2, which was significantly correlated with child externalizing and internalizing behaviors and academic achievement at Time 3. Time 1 parental warmth was not significantly correlated with Time 3 child externalizing, internalizing, or academic achievement. The correlation between child agency at Time 1 and parental warmth at Time 2 was not significant ($r = .21$, $p = .118$). Likewise, parental warmth at Time 2 was not significantly related to Time 3 externalizing ($r = .06$, $p = .538$), internalizing ($r = .01$, $p = .894$), or academic achievement ($r = .06$, $p = .542$). This pattern of correlations provided support for the directional hypothesis of parental warmth predicting subsequent child agency rather than child agency predicting subsequent parental warmth. Thus, the SEM analyses reflected the direction of effects demonstrated in the bivariate correlations.

Structural Equation Model Testing Hypothesized Relations

We conducted structural equation models using Amos 22 (Arbuckle, 2013) to test the models shown in Figure 1. Missing data were handled through full information maximum likelihood, which results in parameter estimates that are generally superior to those obtained with listwise deletion or other *ad hoc* methods (Schafer & Graham, 2002). We initially tested a multi-group model to examine possible gender differences in the hypothesized paths. The model in which structural paths were constrained to be equal for boys and girls did not fit significantly worse than the model in which all paths were free to vary by gender, $\chi^2(3) = 2.08$ for externalizing, $\chi^2(3) = 5.80$ for internalizing, and $\chi^2(3) = .85$ for academic achievement. Given the lack of evidence for gender differences, the results reported below include the entire sample.

The main model was fully saturated, precluding the calculation of fit statistics. As shown in Figure 1, parental warmth at Time 1 significantly predicted perceived child agency at Time 2. Perceived child agency at Time 2 significantly predicted child externalizing, child internalizing, and academic achievement (examined in separate models) at Time 3. There was no significant direct effect of Time 1 parental warmth on Time 3 child externalizing, internalizing, or academic achievement. However, the indirect effects of Time 1 parental warmth on Time 3 child externalizing, internalizing, and academic achievement through Time 2 child agency were significant using the bias-corrected percentile bootstrap method (standardized indirect effect = $-.07$, $-.06$, and $.13$, $p < .01$, for externalizing, internalizing, and academic achievement, respectively).

Discussion

The present study examined Swedish parents' warmth towards their children in relation to their children's subsequent agency and children's agency in relation to subsequent parenting. It also examined the longitudinal relation between agency and children's externalizing, internalizing, and school achievement.

The results show that parental warmth at Time 1 was significantly correlated with perceived child agency at Time 2, which was significantly correlated with child externalizing and internalizing behaviors and academic achievement at Time 3. Earlier studies have revealed links between parental warmth and perceived agency among adolescents (Hoeltje et al., 1996; Juang & Silbereisen, 2002). This study extends previous research by demonstrating links between parenting and younger children's agency. That is, parental warmth has a positive effect on child agency. Child agency was unrelated to subsequent parenting warmth. Thus, our findings support a parent effects rather than child effects perspective.

The results also revealed that parental warmth was not directly related to fewer externalizing or internalizing problems or higher school achievement. Instead, parental warmth had indirect effects on children's adjustment through children's agency. These links between agency and subsequent adjustment are consistent with earlier studies that have shown, for example, that the belief in the capacity to perform well in school is a good predictor of later school achievement (Juang & Silbereisen, 2002; Stetsenko, Little, Oettingen, & Balteset, 1995).

Links between agency and subsequent adjustment can be understood in the context of previous theory and research regarding whether intelligence is regarded as something that one is born with or something that develops in the individual. Dweck (1999) describes the theory about developmental intelligence as an incremental theory, with intelligence as something that the individual can influence by putting more time and effort into school work, leading to better results. An interesting result is that parental warmth did not have any direct link to child externalizing, internalizing, or school achievement but only indirect links through the mechanism of child agency. These findings could have important implications for teachers and parents: By helping children to believe in themselves and their own agency, children can develop the belief that they can affect how they behave and how they perform in school, which can result in improvements in behavior and academic achievement. A similar

result is revealed in a Swedish study by Korp (2011) which shows that social and cultural norms affect students' school achievement. If teachers have low expectations for students and respond to or treat them in that way, the students' beliefs in themselves decrease and they perform worse in school. With this in mind, children should be supported in believing in their own capacity to change and influence their own life.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The contributions of this study should be considered in the context of its limitations. Although this study extended the examination of agency into childhood when children were 8 to 10 years old, in contrast to previous studies of agency in adolescence, future studies will be needed to examine agency in even younger children. An additional direction for future research would be to ask the agency questions in another way, for example with vignettes or stories to get more of a qualitative perspective on agency. A further limitation is that the participants represent a small group of Swedish children and are not generalizable to the whole population of Sweden or other countries. It would be a good idea to include a diverse group of children in further studies. Nevertheless, Sweden is a particularly interesting country in which to study children's agency because of societal norms promoting equality between parents and children. Carlson and Earls (2001) describe Sweden as place that has "a highly developed view of the child based on democratic values, which gives respect for the child as a person in its own right and a belief in the child's inherent skills and potential" (p. 15). The present study had the strength of using mothers' and fathers' reports of their own warmth, children's agency, and children's externalizing and internalizing problems. Future research would benefit from including children's own perceptions of their agency.

Conclusions

Results from this study indicate that Swedish parents' warmth is directly related to subsequent perceptions of children's agency, which in turn are related to subsequently lower child externalizing and internalizing problems and higher academic achievement. These findings held in the context of a three-year longitudinal study and for both boys and girls, suggesting the importance of child agency in the link between parental warmth and children's adjustment.

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Figure 1. Standardized parameter estimates from structural equation models testing relations among parental warmth, child agency, and child externalizing/child internalizing/academic achievement. $*p < .05$. $**p < .01$. $***p < .001$.

Table 1

Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations Among Variables

	1	2	3	4	5
1. T1 warmth	--				
2. T2 agency	.23 [*]	--			
3. T3 externalizing	-.11	-.27 ^{**}	--		
4. T3 internalizing	-.07	-.24 [*]	.35 ^{***}	--	
5. T3 academic achievement	.15	.52 ^{***}	-.06	-.08	--
<i>N</i>	102	100	96	96	95
<i>M</i>	3.81	1.32	4.44	3.77	3.32
<i>SD</i>	.23	.27	3.76	3.36	.40

Note. T1 = Time 1. T2 = Time 2. T3 = Time 3.

^{*} $p < .05$.

^{**} $p < .01$.

^{***} $p < .001$.