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Parents' Perceptions as Adolescents Become Adults: Consistency Across Time and Generations

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Previous research has established the importance of parents' attitudes in influencing their adolescents' behaviors and self-perceptions of ability as they move through childhood and adolescence (e.g., Eccles, Jacobs, & Harold, 1990; Jacobs, Finken, Griffen, & Wright, 1998). Recently, Fletcher, Elder, and Mekos (2000) suggested that parents are likely to play an important socializing role in their children's lives as they enter young adulthood. Much less is known, however, about longitudinal patterns of parents' perceptions of their children as they become young adults. Using both quantitative and qualitative data, the current study explored the relationship between parents' beliefs about their children during adolescence and parents' current perceptions of their children as young adults. In addition, the study examined differences between mothers' and fathers' perceptions of the career and relationship choices made by their children during early adulthood.

Method. This study used data from a large, longitudinal investigation (Michigan Study of Adolescent Life Transitions; MSALT) of adolescents' and parents' beliefs during adolescence and young adulthood. The analyses reported here are based on items drawn from the surveys parents completed when their children were in grades 10 and 12, assessing their beliefs about their relationship with the adolescent, their perceptions of the adolescent's abilities, and their expectations for future education, career, and family choices. These responses were related to parents' beliefs about the choices their young adult children had actually made and were collected when the children were 27 - 28 years old.

Results and Discussion. Regression analyses revealed that for both mothers and fathers, pride in their adolescents' academic achievement during high school ($m: b = .23; p < .05$; $f: b = .40, p < .01$) was significantly related to feelings of pride about their young adult children; however only mothers optimism about the future for the adolescent was related to perceptions of pride when the adolescent became an adult ($b = .21; p < .05$). In addition, talking to adolescent children about the future was significantly related to general feelings of pride about young adults for mothers only ($b = .17; p < .01$). For fathers, however, talking about the future with their adolescent children was significantly related to believing that their children had pursued expected careers as adults ($b = .20; p < .10$). Child's gender was not significantly related to parents' perceptions in any of these analyses.

To better understand the beliefs parents hold about their children as they enter early adulthood, we also assessed parents' qualitative responses to open-ended questions about their young adult children. Interestingly, although some parents reported turmoil during adolescence, perceptions of their young adult children seemed to be positive. For instance, many parents said things such as, "He had a bad temper and was angry as a child and as a teenager. However, it has all worked out and he has made improvements in his attitude and relationships with family and friends." We also asked parents to describe the qualities that made them proud of their children as young adults. Mothers were significantly more likely to be proud of their children's personality qualities and family relations, and fathers were significantly more likely to be proud of their children for being successful in their careers.


The results of this study indicate a consistent relationship between parents' earlier beliefs about their adolescent children and current perceptions about their children as young adults. In addition, the analysis of qualitative data illustrates the ways parents' perceptions develop as their adolescent children become adults. Most parents report positive characteristics when describing their young adult children; however, fathers are more likely to focus on career and educational outcomes, while mothers describe their young adult children's personalities and relationships.

References

Eccles, J. S., Jacobs, J. E., & Harold, R. D. (1990). Gender role stereotypes, expectancy effects, and parents' socialization of gender differences. Journal of Social Issues, 46, 183-201.

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Parents' Perceptions as Adolescents Become Adults: Consistency Across Time and Generations

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Literature Review

Previous research has established the importance of parents' attitudes in influencing their adolescents' behaviors and self-perceptions of ability as they move through childhood and adolescence (e.g., Eccles, Jacobs, & Harold, 1990; Jacobs, Finken, Griffen, & Wright, 1998). Recently, Fletcher, Elder, and Mekos (2000) suggested that parents are likely to play an important socializing role in their children's lives as they enter young adulthood. Much less is known, however, about longitudinal patterns of parents' perceptions of their children as they become young adults.

Using both quantitative and qualitative data, the current study explored the relationship between parents' beliefs about their children during adolescence and parents' current perceptions of their children as young adults. In addition, the study examined differences between mothers' and fathers' perceptions of the career and relationship choices made by their children during early adulthood.

Research Questions:

- Do Mothers and Fathers differ in the types of qualities they are most proud of about their children as young adults?
 - Are parents' perceptions about their young adult children consistent with earlier behaviors and beliefs about their adolescent children?
- How do parents' perceptions of their children develop as their children become adults?
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Sample

Data reported here were collected from 728 parents (430 mothers, 298 fathers) as part of a large, longitudinal investigation (Michigan Study of Adolescent Life Transitions; MSALT) of adolescents' and parents' beliefs during adolescence and young adulthood. The adolescents in the original sample were members of 143 math classrooms located in 12 school districts in primarily White middle and working class suburbs outside of a large Midwestern city.

Procedures

The analyses are based on items from surveys parents completed when their children were in grades 10 and 12, assessing their beliefs about their relationships with their adolescents, their perceptions of the adolescents' abilities, and their expectations for future education, career, and family choices. These responses were related to parents' beliefs about the choices their young adult children had actually made and were collected when the children were 27 - 28 years old.

Measures

Construct	Reliability Mother (<i>a</i>)	Reliability Father (<i>a</i>)	# of Items	Child's Age Or Grade
Parents' Pride	.91	.89	7	27-28 yrs.
Parents' Optimism for Future	.82	.77	5	12 th grade
Parents' Academic Pride	.68	.72	2	10 th grade
Parents' Advice for Future	.80	.80	6	12 th grade
Child's Career Turned out as Expected	.71	.64	2	27-28 yrs

Measures continued

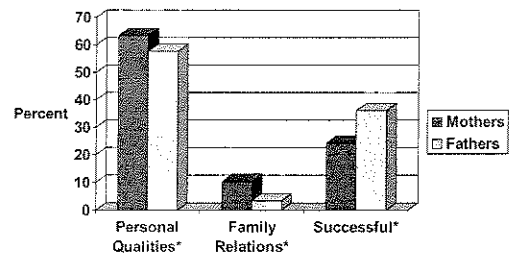
Open-Ended Questions	Inter-rater reliability
When you think about your child as an adult, what makes you feel most proud? (27-28 yrs)	Cohen's Kappa=.92
Please take five minutes to describe your son/daughter. (27-28 yrs)	Cohen's Kappa=.89

Results

First, chi-square analyses were computed to test differences in mothers' and fathers' responses about the qualities they are most proud of in their young adult children. A significant difference was found [$\chi^2 = 15.33$; $p < .01$]. See graph for categories and percentages.

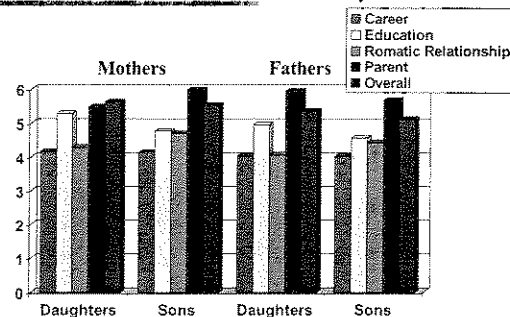
Second, paired t-tests were computed to test differences in mothers' and fathers' responses about whether or not their young adult children turned out as expected. The only significant difference between mothers and fathers of sons versus daughters is in the area of education, with parents of daughters saying that they were more likely to turn out as expected in that arena.

Reasons Mothers and Fathers Are Proud of their Children



* $p < .05$

Daughters and Sons Turned Out as Parents Expected



Results continued

Next, we were interested in the longitudinal relationship between parents' beliefs about their children during adolescence and parents' current perceptions of their children as young adults. To test these relationships, regression analyses were conducted separately for mothers and fathers.

Attitudinal Predictors of Parents' Feelings of Pride:
Beta Weights for Mothers & Fathers (Young Adult: age 27-28)

	MOM	DAD
Sex of Child	.16	.15
Parents' Academic Pride (10th grade)	.17*	.26**
Parents' Optimism for Child's Future (12th grade)	.17*	-.11
N	126	80
R ²	.15	.12

* p < .05; ** p < .01

Early Advice-giving Predicting Current Perceptions:
Beta Weights for Mothers & Fathers (Young Adult: age 27-38)

	Pride		Turned out as expected	
	MOM	DAD	MOM	DAD
Sex of Child	.00	-.10	.00	.00
Parents' Advice for Future (12th grade)	.14**	.06	-.10	.32*
N	215	125	209	121
R ²	.03	.01	.00	.04

* p < .05; ** p < .01

Parents' Descriptions of their Young Adult Children

Finally, to help us achieve a better understanding of the beliefs parents have about their children as they enter early adulthood, we examined parents' qualitative descriptions of their children. Some examples of the various types of answers we received are listed here.

Parents who were proud said things like:

- Because of love, marriage, and children she put off going to college full time. She finally went back and finished at the top of her class while still being exceptionally devoted to her children and her husband.
- He had many health problems and surgeries but still managed to finish college. He now wants to go for his masters and has two wonderful children. I am very proud of his perseverance and I know he will be successful at whatever he undertakes. I love him very much.

Parents who thought child turned around said things like:

He had a bad temper and was angry as a child and a teenager. However, it has all worked out and he has made many improvements in his attitude and relationships.

My daughter and I did not get along very well in her teens because we were too much alike. But, now that she is older we have a much better understanding of each other. We can talk and communicate better and even joke around.

Parents who expressed disappointments in choices their children made said:

When she was growing up she was really smart and never had to be reminded to do her homework. I don't know what happened, but with all she had going for her, she never finished college.

- I think his problem is that he never realized how bright he really is. Both in school and in his jobs he avoids challenges because he's afraid he will make mistakes. This creates a worrisome situation because he is either in a state of boredom or extreme stress at all times.

Conclusions

Mothers and fathers differ in the types of qualities they are most proud of about their children as young adults. Mothers are more proud of personal qualities and family relationships, whereas fathers are more proud of success in careers and education.

Parents' perceptions about their young adult children are consistent with earlier beliefs about their adolescent children. Mothers and fathers who were proud of their adolescent child's academic achievements are more likely to be proud about their young adult child.

Conclusions continued

Mothers who talked to their adolescent children about the future were significantly more likely to report feelings of pride about their young adult children. Fathers who talked to their adolescent children about the future were significantly more likely to report that their young adult children had pursued expected careers

The analysis of qualitative data illustrates the ways parents' perceptions change as their adolescent children become adults. Although most parents are proud of their young adult children, they are not unrealistically positive, and note the faults as well.