Calling Home: The Relationship between Parental Attachment, Parental Contact, and Self-Esteem

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Abstract

Using 622 undergraduates, the current study found positive correlations among parental attachment, parental contact, and self-esteem. Links between attachment and contact were significantly stronger for females than males.

Introduction

Kenny (1990) stated that the parent-child relationship during the transition to college is analogous to Ainsworth’s (1979) ‘strange situation’ task. As children experience new freedoms, their parental attachment becomes a key factor in their adjustment and success in college.

Previous research has shown that securely attached students report high levels of adjustment to college (Schultheiss & Blustein, 1984). Specifically, low levels of parental attachment quality predicted low self-esteem (Fass & Tabum, 2002). A close emotional bond with parents is related to self-esteem (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987). Kenny (1990) found no significant gender differences in the quality of attachment, but females reported receiving more parental support than males. Consequently, non-need contact patterns may be ways in which parents and their adolescents connect and maintain attachment. Sorokou and Weissbrod found that there was no gender difference for need-based contact but females initiated and received need-based contact more than males (Sorokou & Weissbrod, 2005).

The current study aims to clarify gender differences in contact, extrapolate the relationships between self-esteem and parental contact, and reinforce previous small-scale studies on attachment style and college adjustment. Many researchers have noted that the college population has been chronically understudied, and that existing literature on parental relationships during emerging adulthood is limited and inconsistent.

Methods

Participants

609 (216 males, 393 females) undergraduate students at a small liberal arts residential college.

Class year (2010=26%, 2011=18%, 2012=27%, 2013=29%)

Measures

Parental Attachment and Parental Contact (Armsden & Greenberg, 1987), a previously validated 26 item questionnaire about quality of communication, trust, and level of anger and alienation.

Parental Contact

Correlation between Self-Esteem and Contact

GOAL 1

To investigate the relationship between parental attachment and parental contact.

Background

- There is a significant relationship between quality of attachment and level of non need based contact (Sorokou & Weissbrod, 2005).
- There was no gender difference for need based contact but females initiated and received need based contact more than males (Sorokou & Weissbrod, 2005).

Hypotheses

- Positive parental attachment predicts greater parental contact.
- Positive parental attachment predicts higher frequency of non-need parental contact among females.

Results

- Links between attachment and all forms of contact were stronger for females than males.
- Positive parental attachment is positively correlated with female student-initiated non-need contact r=.77.

GOAL 2

To investigate the relationship between parental attachment and self-esteem.

Background

- Adolescent separation from the family in conjunction with a moderate degree of adolescent-parent connectedness may aid in the development of self-esteem (Grotevant & Cooper, 1985).
- A close emotional bond with the parents is related to positive self-esteem (Schultheiss & Blustein, 1994).

Hypotheses

- More parental contact predicts higher self-esteem among females.
- Self-esteem is related to student-initiated non-need contact.

Results

- Student-initiated non-need contact is positively correlated with self-esteem for females but not for males.
- Females: r=.16
- Males: r=.06
- Self-esteem is not related to student-initiated need or parent-initiated non-need contact.

GOAL 3

To investigate the relationship between parental contact and self-esteem.

Background

- Parental attachment change had positive correlations among parental attachment, parental contact, and self-esteem. Links between attachment and contact were significantly stronger for females than males.

Hypotheses

- Positive parental attachment is positively correlated with high self-esteem r=.31

Discussion

The current study found significant relationships among parental attachment, parental contact, and self-esteem. Gender played a substantial role in these interactions. While there is no qualitative difference in parental attachment between males and females, the current study found stronger links between attachment and contact for females than for males.

Specifically, there is a strong positive correlation between student-initiated non-need contact and positive parental attachment among female students. These results replicate previous research on the links between parental attachment and parental contact on a larger scale (Sorokou & Weissbrod, 2005). The current study confirmed previous research that parental attachment is positively correlated with increased levels of self-esteem (Brand, Hancock, & Mattanah, 2004; Fass & Tabum, 2002). Females with higher levels of student-initiated non-need contact experienced higher self-esteem than their male counterparts. This corroborates previous research by Grotevant and Cooper (1985).

While the current study utilized a large sample, the participants were predominantly Caucasian and of higher socioeconomic status, which limits the external validity of our findings. As such, the results of the current study may apply to similar student populations, but may not generalize well to the greater collegiate community. Due to the self-report nature of our questionnaire, social desirability may have influenced the results. Additionally, the participants were predominantly female (female), and the sample was not equally distributed across class years (2010=26%, 2011=18%, 2012=27%, 2013=29%).

Further research should investigate distinctions in parental attachment, parental contact, and self-esteem across class years. An additional construct of interest is the parental perspective of attachment. While our findings clearly show distinctions among the variables, future research could continue to examine the mediating factors that explain the differential relationships sons and daughters have with their parents. Parents, counselors, and students can all benefit through a better understanding of the importance of the parent-child relationship throughout the college years.

References


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