ORIGIANAL PAPER

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Perceived parental behaviour, self-esteem and happiness

Accepted: 22 June 2000

Abstract Background: This study set out to determine to what extent recalled parental rearing styles (authoritarian, authoritativeness, permissiveness), personality (extraversion, neuroticism, psychoticism, lie), and self-esteem predicted self-rated happiness in a normal, non-clinical, population of young people in their late teens and early 20s. Methods: Each participant completed a few questionnaires: the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire (revised), the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the Parental Authority Questionnaire and the Oxford Happiness Inventory. It was predicted that sex, extraversion, neuroticism, self-esteem and both maternal and paternal authoritativeness would be significant predictors of happiness. Results: Regressional and path analysis showed self-esteem to be the most dominant and powerful predictor of happiness. The effect of sex on happiness was moderated by neuroticism, which related to self-esteem, which directly influenced happiness. Stability, extraversion and maternal authoritativeness were significant predictors of self-esteem accounting for one-third of the variance. Conclusion: The results are considered in terms of the distinct literature on the relation between personality and happiness and on the relation between parental styles and self-esteem. Self-esteem was both a direct and a moderator variable for young people’s self-reported happiness. Extraversion had both direct and indirect predictive power of happiness, whereas neuroticism predicted happiness mediating through self-esteem. Maternal authoritativeness was the only direct predictor of happiness when paternal and maternal rearing styles were examined together, suggesting that a reasonable discipline exercised by mothers towards their children was particularly beneficial in enhancing the offsprings’ self-esteem.

Introduction

A vast quantity of research has concentrated on the effects of actual parenting and perceived parenting (that which is recalled by an individual) on self-esteem (Buri 1989) and self-criticism (Brewin et al. 1992, 1996). Some studies have concentrated on the links between parenting styles and depression (Burbach and Bouduin 1986; Gerlsma 1990). Others have examined the consequences of different parental styles (Becker 1964; Eiser et al. 1991; Ferrari and Olivetti 1993; Jackson et al. 1994; Klein et al. 1996; Lewis 1981; Parette and Staturn 1984; Parker 1979, 1993; Schwartz and Getter 1980; Wright 1982). This study set out to examine the relationship between specific parental styles and personality traits on the self-esteem and the self-reported happiness of adolescents. Whereas there have been various previous studies on personality and happiness (Furnham and Brewin 1990; Furnham and Cheng 1997, 1999), few have considered the effects of parental style on happiness, with self-esteem as a possible mediating variable. There seems to be quite distinct literature on personality and demographic correlates of happiness on the one hand and demographic and parental style correlates of self-esteem on the other. This study attempts to “marry” this literature, focusing on self-reported happiness as the major outcome variable. It contrasts with the fairly extensive literature on the more negative consequences of parenting style.

Parenting style

Various studies have looked at parental rearing styles and their correlates among adolescents. Hunt (1974) found that, in a population of over five hundred undergraduates, perceived laissez-faire parent-child relations led to high marijuana usage, while autocratic (authoritarian) relations led to medium usage. Low usage was associated with democratic (authoritative)
relations. In their more recent study of minor psychiatric morbidity, Kitamura and Suzuki (1993) found that the total score on the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ) was higher among those people recording high maternal protection than among those with low maternal protection (using the Parental Bonding Instrument); however, only anxiety and insomnia subscales retained this relationship with perceived rearing experiences.

Two dimensions of parental rearing styles emerge consistently from the various methods employed to study parenting patterns: the first separates parents that are controlling and demanding from those that are not demanding; the second differentiates between parents that are child-centred, accepting and responsive and those that are parent-centred, rejecting and unresponsive (Parker et al. 1979). Baumrind (1968, 1971, 1982; Baumrind and Brown 1967) carried out a large scale study on the different patterns of parental authority employed in raising children. She conducted extensive analyses of these dimensions, and revealed three types of parenting (authoritative, authoritarian and permissive) behaviours that have empirically been associated with different outcomes for the children. Authoritative parents are viewed as ideal for child development, as they combine control and acceptance with child-centred involvement. They are strict and expect appropriate levels of discipline and behaviour, but are willing to explain the reasons behind rules and punishments, and will often value the child’s point of view. These parents are perceived by their children as warm and nurturant. The children in turn tend to be: independent, assertive, cooperative with adults, friendly with peers, intellectually successful; enjoy life and possess a strong motivation to achieve.

Authoritarian parents are typically more dictatorial in their dealings with their children. They have an absolute set of standards, to which children must conform. They are perceived to be not particularly warm or affectionate. This style of parenting supposedly tends to produce children low on self-reliance, responsibility and achievement motivation. Permissive parenting is characterised by accepting, responsive, child-centred, non-punitive parents, who place few demands on their children, leaving them to exercise as much control as possible over their own activities. Children of this parenting style tend to be very positive in their moods and possess more vitality than those of authoritarian parents. Their behaviour, however, is less mature due to low impulse control, responsibility and self-reliance. Having defined these characteristic parenting patterns, one should note that most parents use a combination of all three styles, calling on a particular style as and when it is appropriate.

Baumrind (1971) suggested that permissive parents tended to make fewer demands on their children than do other parents, allowing them to regulate their own activities as much as possible. Thus, permissive parents are generally less controlling, and tend to use a minimum of punishment with their children. Authoritarian parents tend to be highly directive with their children, and expect unquestioning obedience in their exercise of authority over their children. She argues that authoritarian parents discourage verbal give-and-take with their children, favouring instead punitive measures to control their children’s behaviour. Baumrind saw parental style as a spectrum, with permissive and authoritarian parents at either end, and authoritative parents falling somewhere in between these extremes. She saw authoritative parents as providing clear and firm direction for their children, but also warmth, reason and verbal exchange.

Buri (1991) developed the Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ) to measure Baumrind’s (1971) parental authority prototypes. Buri et al. (1988) hypothesized and demonstrated that a parental authoritarian style would be negatively correlated with self-esteem, whereas the relationship would be positive for parental authoritativeness. They argue that “the healthy exercise of authority within the home may be of greater significance in the development of self-esteem in daughters than in sons” (p 281). Other studies have related the PAQ to self-esteem. Using psychoanalytic ideas, Watson et al. (1992) found perceived parental authoritativeness was associated with less narcissistic tendencies; permissiveness was associated with immature grandiosity; and an authoritarian style with inadequate idealization.

This study not only re-examines the relationship between parental style and self-esteem, but considers how personality traits and demographic variables affect this relationship, and how all four factors – demography, personality, perceived parental rearing style and self-esteem – predict happiness.

Parental authority has been linked to levels of self-esteem in the child, yet investigations into this area have yielded contradictory results. Sears (1970) and later Backman (1982) found that strong disciplinary practices by parents have a deleterious effect upon self-esteem in boys. However, Coopersmith (1967) reported higher levels of self-esteem in boys where parental discipline is firm and demanding, with clear set limits of behaviour. While Baumrind (1971, 1982), herself, reported authoritative parenting as more likely to result in self-reliant, independent, achievement-oriented and self-controlled children than either permissive parenting or authoritarian parenting, she went further, to suggest that authoritarian parenting was deleterious to the development of personality and behavioural correlates of self-esteem. Buri et al. (1988) concluded that parental authority may have either a negative or a positive effect upon self-esteem, depending upon the type of authority exercised. They found a strong positive relationship between parental authoritativeness and adolescent self-esteem, and a strong inverse relationship between parental authoritarianism and adolescent self-esteem. No significant relationship was found between parental permissive-