

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 430 676

PS 027 589

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 TITLE Divergent Perceptions: Parental Acceptance and Adolescents' Psychosocial Adjustment.
 PUB DATE 1999-04-00
 NOTE 9p.; Poster presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development (Albuquerque, NM, April 15-18, 1999).
 PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS *Adolescent Attitudes; Adolescent Development; Emotional Adjustment; *Parent Attitudes; *Parent Child Relationship; Predictor Variables; *Social Adjustment
 IDENTIFIERS *Acceptance; Psychosocial Adaptation

ABSTRACT

This study examined whether divergent parent-adolescent perceptions regarding parental acceptance predicted adolescent adjustment when the level of parental acceptance (as perceived by the adolescent) was held constant, a methodological and theoretical issue largely ignored by previous research. Subjects were 192 intact, primarily dual-earner families consisting of mothers, fathers, and two adolescent siblings (firstborn children were in 8th, 9th, or 10th grade and had siblings 1 to 4 years younger). The families completed home and telephone interviews regarding adolescent and family functioning. Results of hierarchical regression analyses of their responses suggested that divergent parent-adolescent perceptions of parental acceptance did not predict adolescent adjustment over and above the level of acceptance. The findings suggested that previous research needs to be examined more critically, for they seriously question the interpretability of divergent perceptions when level of acceptance is ignored. (Contains 13 references.) (Author/KB)

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DIVERGENT PERCEPTIONS:

PARENTAL ACCEPTANCE AND ADOLESCENTS' PSYCHOSOCIAL ADJUSTMENT

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Poster presented at the biannual meeting of the Society for Research in Child
Development, Albuquerque, NM, April, 1999.

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Abstract

The present study examined whether divergent parent-adolescent perceptions regarding parental acceptance predicted adolescent adjustment when the level of parental acceptance (as perceived by the adolescent) was held constant--a methodological and theoretical issue largely ignored by previous research. One hundred ninety-two intact, primarily dual-earner families consisting of mothers, fathers, and two adolescent siblings (firstborn children were in 8th, 9th, or 10th grade and had siblings 1-4 years younger) completed home and telephone interviews regarding adolescent and family functioning. Results of hierarchical regression analyses suggested that divergent parent-adolescent perceptions of parental acceptance did not predict adolescent adjustment over and above level of acceptance. The present findings give us cause to examine previous research more critically, for they seriously question the interpretability of divergent perceptions when level is ignored.

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DIVERGENT PERCEPTIONS:

PARENTAL ACCEPTANCE AND ADOLESCENTS' PSYCHOSOCIAL ADJUSTMENT

The current literature suggests that greater divergence in parents' and adolescents' perceptions regarding the quality of parental acceptance is typically related to more negative adjustment outcomes for adolescents. That is, in families where parents and adolescents perceive parental acceptance more differently (e.g., a parent reports seeing him/herself as more accepting than the adolescent does, or vice-versa), adolescents tend to be more anxious and depressed (Ohannessian, Lerner, Lerner, & von Eye, 1995), have lower self-esteem (Carlson, Cooper, & Spradling, 1991), and report increased dieting behavior (females only) (Paikoff, Carlton-Ford, & Brooks-Gunn, 1993) and higher conflict with their parents (Almeida & Galambos, 1993).

Other research suggests that greater parental acceptance is consistently associated with better adolescent adjustment (Baumrind, 1991; Forehand & Nousiainen, 1993; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Divergence is likely to have different effects, however, at various levels (e.g., low, moderate, or high) of acceptance and in different family contexts (i.e., at diverse levels of parental involvement)--issues that have been largely ignored in previous studies (one exception is Paikoff et al., 1993). *The present study addressed the critical question of whether divergence in perceptions of parental acceptance predicted adolescent adjustment when the level of parental acceptance (as perceived by the adolescent) was held constant.*

Method

Participants:

- 192 intact, primarily dual-earner families consisting of mothers, fathers, and two adolescent siblings (firstborn children were in 8th, 9th, or 10th grade and had siblings 1-4 years younger)
- total sample was approximately equally divided on sibling gender constellation (45 girl-girl pairs, 44 girl-boy pairs, 49 boy-girl pairs, and 54 boy-boy pairs)
- 98% White
- primarily working- to middle-class

Procedures:

- family members completed home and telephone interviews regarding adolescent and family functioning

Measures:

- Parental Acceptance Scale - subscale of the Children's Report of Parental Behavior Inventory (CRPBI) (Schaefer, 1965) completed by parents and the two target siblings to assess perceptions of parental acceptance for each of the four dyads (i.e., mother-older sibling, father-older sibling, mother-younger sibling, and father-younger sibling)

* *Raw difference scores* (parents' report minus adolescents' report of acceptance) were used to operationalize divergent perceptions (see Table 1 for descriptive statistics).

- Parental Involvement - based on information gathered during telephone interviews, used adolescents' report of each parent's absolute level of involvement (in terms of duration) with each sibling (calculated separately for the four dyads)

- various "outcome" measures of adolescent and family psychosocial functioning (see Table 1)

Results

Pearson correlations examining the links between divergent perceptions regarding acceptance and absolute levels of acceptance indicated that parental acceptance (as reported by the adolescent) was strongly (and negatively) related to divergent perceptions for all four parent-adolescent dyads (see Table 2). That is, when adolescents described feeling more accepted by their parents, there tended to be less discrepancy in perceptions of acceptance between parents and adolescents.

A series of twenty hierarchical regression analyses was performed to examine the implications of divergent perceptions for adolescent adjustment. Factors were entered according to the order indicated by preliminary results and previous literature. That is, adolescent gender (older or younger sibling), level of acceptance (as reported by the adolescent), and level of parental involvement (maternal or paternal) were entered as the *first step*, followed by divergent perceptions as the *second step*, and the interactions between adolescent gender and divergent perceptions and between level of parental involvement and divergent perceptions as the *third and last step*. (All factors were specific to the particular dyad included in that analysis.) Parental involvement was included as a predictor variable in order to explore whether divergent perceptions had differential meanings or implications in different family contexts.

Results revealed a consistent pattern for all four dyads across the five indices of psychosocial functioning (i.e., self-esteem, depression, school performance, problem behavior, and parent-adolescent conflict). Controlling for adolescent gender and level of parental involvement, level of acceptance consistently predicted adolescent adjustment. In contrast, the variables of central concern, namely divergent perceptions and two related interaction terms, never contributed uniquely to adjustment, over and above the variables entered in the first step. (See Table 3 for one example of a

hierarchical regression analysis--for mothers and older siblings and frequency of conflict.)

Discussion

Thus, across all dyads and outcome variables, divergent parent-adolescent perceptions of parental acceptance did not provide meaningful information over and above level of acceptance. That is, once it was known how an adolescent perceived his or her parent (in terms of how accepting the mother or father was), it did not matter how similar or different their perceptions were. These results give us cause to examine previous research more critically. Most studies which have found a significant (negative) relationship between divergent perceptions and various indices of adolescent adjustment (Almeida & Galambos, 1993; Carlson et al., 1991; Ohannessian et al., 1995) have not controlled for level of acceptance. The present findings seriously question the interpretability of divergent perceptions when level is ignored.

Future research may serve to further clarify in which ways divergent perceptions regarding parental acceptance remains a psychologically significant phenomenon. Perhaps divergence is a meaningful predictor of adolescent adjustment (while controlling for level) over time. That is, divergent perceptions may be an early indicator of more troubled relationships, signs of which become more apparent with time. Alternatively, divergence may be related to adolescents' psychosocial functioning more so than in the present study when the "targets" of divergence are less "essential" or have less overwhelmingly positive effects--such as orientation toward achievement or family organization. Similarly, divergent perceptions may be important for outcomes other than adjustment as measured in the present study (e.g., greater autonomy and individuation for adolescents).

Studying divergent perceptions separate from level of acceptance is highly questionable, given the strong association between the two. To have neglected this methodological issue is a serious limitation of previous studies. Future research needs to elucidate whether divergent perceptions are psychologically important variables in relation to other domains of development and psychosocial adjustment.

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Measures

	Mean	Standard Deviation	Cronbach Alpha
<u>Parental Acceptance Scale</u>			
Mother--Older Sibling	6.22	15.21	.91
Father--Older Sibling	4.29	17.19	.93
Mother--Younger Sibling	1.58	14.40	.92
Father--Younger Sibling	-.35	17.15	.92
<u>Adolescents' General Self Worth</u> - measured using the Perceived Competence Scale for Adolescents (Harter, 1988)			
Older Sibling	15.96	3.22	.84
Younger Sibling	15.61	3.23	.78
<u>Adolescents' Depression</u> - adapted from the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) (Devins & Orme, 1985; Radloff, 1977)			
Older Sibling	20.97	5.55	.80
Younger Sibling	20.94	4.97	.70
<u>School Performance</u> - GPA across main subject areas			
Older Sibling	3.31	.64	.75
Younger Sibling	3.33	.69	.81
<u>Problem Behavior</u> - adapted from Eccles & Barber (1990)			
Older Sibling	25.45	6.26	.84
Younger Sibling	23.18	5.47	.86
<u>Parent-Adolescent Conflict</u> - adapted from Smetana (1988)			
Mother--Older Sibling	24.77	6.37	.75
Father--Older Sibling	23.53	7.12	.82
Mother--Younger Sibling	25.50	7.55	.81
Father--Younger Sibling	23.19	7.32	.84

Table 2

Bivariate Correlations between Divergent Perceptions and Level of Acceptance for Parent-Adolescent Dyads

	Divergent Perceptions			
	Mother-- Older Sibling	Father-- Older Sibling	Mother-- Younger Sibling	Father-- Younger Sibling
<u>Level of Acceptance</u> ^a :				
Mother--Older Sibling	-.76 **			
Father--Older Sibling		-.72 **		
Mother--Younger Sibling			-.68 **	
Father--Younger Sibling				-.74 **

^a Level of acceptance is according to the adolescent's report.

** $p < .01$.

Table 3

Hierarchical Regression Analysis for Mothers and Older Siblings for the Six Predictors of Frequency of Conflict

	β		
	Step 1	Step 2	Step 3
<u>Predictor:</u>			
Older sibling gender	.07	.07	.08
Level of acceptance ^a	-.29 **	-.29 **	-.29 **
Level of maternal involvement	-.03	-.03	-.03
Divergent perceptions ^b		-.01	.01
Older sibling gender X divergent perceptions			.01
Maternal involvement X divergent perceptions			.10
<u>Statistics:</u>			
R ²	.10	.10	.11
Overall F	6.98 **	5.21 **	3.79 **
R ² change	.10	.00	.01
F ^c	6.98 **	.00	.32

^a Level of acceptance is according to the adolescent's report. ^b Divergent perceptions are operationalized as mothers' acceptance score minus older siblings' acceptance score. ^c F value reflects the increase in variance accounted for by that variable(s) at entry.

** $p < .01$.

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