

How Parental Marriage Status Influences Children's Romantic Relationships: An Inter-Generational Transmission in the Family of Origin

Zhan Haodong

Beijing Foreign Studies University, Beijing, 100089, China

Keywords: Parental marriage, family of origin, romantic relationship, behavior, value

Abstract: The romantic relationship consists of a prominent part of people's adolescence. As all the children born in family of origin would be more or less influenced by their parents, their parents' marriage is likely to shape their romantic relationships. A body of literature has testified the relevance between the intimate relationship of two generations. However, most of the previous studies are quantitative researches conducted abroad, thus lacking sufficient evidence to prove the domestic status quo and unearth the deeper connection. Therefore, in this study, in-depth interviews targeting undergraduates in BFSU were conducted. In the first place, the study validates the previous conclusion that parents' marriage status does influence children's interaction in romantic relationships. It suggests that parental interaction can be modeled by children directly while parental marriage quality can impinge on children's relationships by constructing their values and perceptions. Moreover, a deeper analysis revealed that by the effect of mirror neuron, a segment of the visual and auditory information input are transformed into similar output data. As a result, children are able to emulate the behavioral patterns of parents. Apart from the behavioral psychology, the analysis in the light of cognitive psychology concludes that the mirror neuron can also process the accessible data and impel people to make specific reactions when it comes to similar circumstances.

1. Introduction

1.1. An Inter-Generational Transmission: Investigating the Connection between Parental Marriage and Children's Romantic Relationships

Historically, marriage in the United States constituted a unified set of ideas about appropriate adult behavior (Cunningham & Thornton, 2006)^[1]. In recent decades, however, marriage has been deinstitutionalized as its meaning is no longer broadly shared, and the package of behaviors that were associated with marriage in the past has become much less linked (Cherlin, et al. 2004)^[2]. Behaviors such as premarital sex, cohabitation, childbearing outside of marriage, extended singlehood, and divorce have become much more common in recent years, and they have also become more widely accepted (Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001)^[3]. However, as soon as children are born and enrolled in the family, the parental marriage seems to no longer only concerns

parents themselves but links to the inter-generational continuity of relationships to offspring.

Romantic relationships become increasingly important over the course of adolescence as they appear to determine the development of adult-like skills and have been related to qualities of subsequent marriage (Furman & Flanagan, 1997)^[4]. However, little is known about the protective and risk factors that may facilitate the development of positive skills and limit the development of negative romantic behaviors during adolescence.

Scholars have gradually become aware of the possible inter-generational transmission from parental marriage to children's romantic relationships. Yet, it is unlikely that all aspects of the interparental relationship are learned through modeling, particularly when certain relationship qualities, such as parental marital satisfaction, are not easily operationalized nor observed. The formation of values concerning relationships is a latent process. The logical link between the parental relationship and children's cognition seems to be complex, thus demanding more exploration.

Premised on the knowledge of sociology and psychology, this paper argues that the inter-generational transmission lies in the emulation of behavioral interaction and the latent construction of values and perceptions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Family of Origin and Children

According to Anne K. De Core and Karen Focht (2009), the term "family of origin" describes a family which is composed of members, consanguine or not, who play a significant role in the early development of children^[5]. In his paper *Family Systems Therapy*, Murray Bowen (1978, quoted in Crossno, 2011) conceptualizes the family of origin as an emotional unit that behaves in patterned and predictable ways because it is seen as the crucible in which a person's early emotional, physiological, and psychological development occurs^[6]. Multiple therapists seek to understand how the primordial roots shape later-in-life intrapsychic and interpersonal functioning (Hovestadt et al. 1985)^[7].

2.2. Parental Relationship and Children's Romantic Relationship

Increasing literature provides insight into the relevance between the parental relationship and the children's romantic relationship. In terms of parental relationships, the profound influence upon children has been proposed by more than ten scholars.

Social learning theory suggests that behavior can be learned through observing the actions of others (Bandura, 1977)^[8]. Consistent with Bandura's theory, Richard Georg Straus, Richard J. Geller, and Suzanne K. Steinmetz (1980) reported that children model their parents' behavioral interactions in their personal intimate relationships by observation (quoted in Saunders, 1989)^[9]. In this sense, exposure to stable and mutually supportive parental relationships during childhood and adolescence can be mirrored in romantic experiences in young adulthood (Conger et al., 2000, quoted in Saunders, 1989)^[9]. Conversely, growing up in a less than optimal family with problematic parental relationships increases the individuals' risk of displaying similar jeopardizing problems (Ming & D. Fincham, 2010)^[10]. However, there appear to be discrepancies between some of the reported observations. Goldscheider (1998) proposed that a number of adolescents who lack sufficient support from their families shift emotional dependencies to romantic partners, forming more intense relationships with peers to compensate for what their families do not provide^[11].

In short, amounts of the existing literature abroad have revealed that parental relationships in the family of origin can intensively influence the children's romantic relationship quality, yet domestic

studies on whether parental marriage status directly relates to or indirectly influences children's interaction with intimate partners remain scarce. Therefore, this paper seeks to examine the specific correlation domestically between parental marriage status in the family of origin and children's interaction in romantic relationships.

3. Methodology

This research design utilizes the qualitative approach to explore possible relations between parental marriage status and children's interactions with mates in romantic relationships. Focal participants of this study were selected by the criteria that they are female undergraduates in BFSU who are currently in a formal romantic relationship or have had the experiences. Moreover, to ensure the result's credibility, participants' families of origin cover most of the general situations concerning parental marriage status.

On the premise of their agreements, semi-structured index interviews were conducted with five eligible participants. Four of the interviews except for an online one were conducted face to face in a cafe, with a cup of coffee provided for each participant for free, to encourage them to narrate their stories in a relaxed state. The interview protocol concentrated on parents and children, including questions in five general categories: (a) degree of parental harmony, (b) parents' daily communication with each other, (c) parents' daily habits in marriage, (d) children's daily interaction in a romantic relationship, (e) children's view of love

All of the interviews were converted into text for data analysis. The content analysis was then conducted by paying attention to the high frequency words and expressions, as well as the main ideas of descriptive stories. As a result of the coding, experiences of parents were made a contrast with that of children, and different participants' cases were paralleled with each other to find the similarity and specificity. In this sense, categories of relations between parental marriage status and children's romantic relationships were established in light of the connections found in the inter-generation.

4. Findings

The survey validates the parental marriage status in the family of origin as one of the crucial factors influencing the trajectory of children's interactions in romantic relationships. Parents' interactional behavior could serve as a legacy transmitted to their children. Children were found to be likely to reproduce the scene that they learned from their parents by replicating their way of getting along with partners.

In addition to modeling their parents directly, participants were also discovered to be shaped by their marriage quality, to some degree unconsciously. An inconspicuous bond seemed to link the two generations by which the offspring is constructed. As an invisible shadow, parental marriage wellbeing can encroach on their children's perceptions and values of the relationship.

4.1. Reproduce the Scene

The research sheds light on the striking similarity in interaction between the two generations. Comparing the parental interactions in participants' descriptions with that of their own, it seemed like stories with the same plots were performed once again by different actors and actresses. In this process, the daily communication and the conflict were found to be the focuses in which the generations had the most striking similarities. When participants entered into their romantic relationships, they automatically inclined to mimic their parental interaction patterns to reproduce the scene.

4.1.1. A Reappearance of Daily Communication

Participants were found to reconstruct the pattern of their parental daily communication in their personal romantic relationships. Except for the participants who spent their childhoods in divorced families, other participants all indicated a strong relevance to their parents in terms of the frequency and the topics of daily communication with intimate partners. Charlie, who grew up in a complete family with happiness stated:

My parents usually communicated and complained about many trivia including what happened today. My mom is the person who would share everything outside home with my father.

Subsequently, Charlie described her parallel experiences to her parents:

My boyfriend and I would meet each other at least once a day because I need him to enlighten me and provide me with emotional value.

Echoed with Charlie's case, as Zoya "enjoyed the time when her parents chatted about trivial things in the front seat of the car", she translated the fondness into the way of communication in her intimate relationship. Zoya noted: "I used to enjoy cozing with my ex-boyfriend, we kept no secret from each other." On the one side, the harmonious conjugal relationship which entails parents' frequent conversations relates to children's agreeable talk with her intimate partner with a high frequency. On the other side, a parental discordant relationship associates with children's less frequent conversation in which she would be reserved with her intimate partner.

4.1.2. A Reappearance of Conflict

The reproduction of parental interaction patterns not only refers to the reappearance of daily communication, but it also entails the reappearance of the outbreak and management of conflict in relationships.

From the interviews, participants who grew up in a peaceful family with less furious quarrels between their parents were more likely to build wholesome relationships with their spouses. Even though sometimes quarrels and fights among them was still inevitable, the conflicts could be much easier to solve at short notice. When referring to her parents, Cristina recounted:

My parents barely quarrel with each other, because my mother has a good temper, therefore the two of them form a very peaceful relationship.

In contrast, participants growing up in less peaceful family circumstances are inclined to break out into more serious conflicts with their mates. The frequency and intensity of parental conflicts can be reproduced in children's interactions in their romantic relationships. Annie illustrated:

A few years ago, my parents frequently broke out conflict. On the very day of the Spring Festival in the last year, they were still quarreling, which terribly spoiled our family reunion dinner.

Then, when it comes to Anna's relationship, she disclosed that she frequently quarreled with her boyfriend over little things, once even intensely squabbled in campus. In this way, the familiar scene is found to be reproduced.

4.2. Project the Consciousness

In addition to the dominant reproduction of communication patterns in parental interactions, the quality of parental marriage affects children's romantic relationships in a potential way. The degree of parental marriage wellbeing can be projected onto children's relationships by shaping their perceptions and values which entail the freedom in romantic relationships and the closeness with spouses.

4.2.1. A Reflex on Freedom

In light of participants' shared experiences, parental harmony in different families plays a significant role in deciding the children's freedom which embodies the privacy in romantic relationships and the social distance.

Participants growing up in families with harmonious parental relationships tend to have less privacy in their intimate relationships. Coming from a harmonious family, Cristina was willing to share time with her boyfriend. She disclosed:

I would spend a large part of my time sticking around my boyfriend every day because I think my life is simple and I have nothing to hide from him.

In contrary, participants who grew up in families with a broken parental relationship prefer to have more privacy in their own relationships. Annie, who used to be disturbed by her parental frequent quarrels, stated: "Both of us can have our private secrets and affairs that we do not want to mention. I feel comfortable in this way."

The survey also illustrates that parental harmony determines the interpersonal space that participants perceived as appropriate from the opposite sex. Having a stronger demand for privacy in romantic relationships, participants from divorced families appear to have a broad acceptance to close interpersonal space with the opposite sex. As Zera usually stays up late and plays with a crowd of boys, her boyfriend was unsatisfied with these social activities that she participated in. Nevertheless, she refuted: "I think there is no problem as long as it is a normal social contact."

4.2.2. A Reflex of Closeness

As is often the case, children tend to be clingy physically and mentally in terms of couplehood. The closeness between a pair of couple can be specified in their attitude toward intimacy and their dependency upon their intimate partner. According to the experiences shared by participants, these two major factors are supposed to be predictable by assessing the wellbeing of parental relationships.

Participants with healthy parental relationships generally showed greater acceptance of intimate behavior. Cristina and Zoya, who were both in blissful families, pointed out that they are willing to have intimate body contact with their boyfriends. "I like him kissing and hugging me because it gives me a sense of happiness and security," Cristina explained. In addition, when it comes to the question of premarital sex, Zoya claimed: "It was acceptable to me if we deeply fall in love with each other." On the opposite, participants from divorced families appeared to be alienating their boyfriends. The child of a single-parent family, Zera, elaborated:

I do not like intimate contact in public, like kissing publicly, because I think it is a very private thing. Besides, I do not accept premarital sex either.

5. Discussion

Participants were discovered to be associated with their parental relationship in terms of daily interaction and cognition of romantic relationships. The influence was embodied in two major aspects. On the one hand, parents' behavioral patterns could be replicated by children in their interaction. On the other hand, parental marriage quality could shape children's cognitive development of their intimate relationship. Premised on these findings, the study illustrates why the inter-generational transmission could take place from the behavioral and cognitive psychological perspective.

5.1. Parental Interaction as a Dominant Exemplar: Behavioral Psychology

The findings of this study validate Bandura's (1977) social learning theory as well as numerous scholars' studies that individual intimate behaviors are related to their childhood experiences^[8]. Echoed by Cristina and Zoya's experiences, if parents' marital relationships are peaceful and intimate, children may acquire positive interactions with the opposite sex and show similar behavioral patterns in later gender relationships.

The similarity between parents and children in daily interaction is likely to be emanated from the mirror neuron activity. Under the stimulation of the mirror neuron, a segment of the visual and auditory information input is transformed into similar output data. As the social interaction concerning parental daily communication and conflicts are characterized by observable behaviors, part of the parental doings could be assimilated into children's cognition. Mirror neurons represent the neural basis of a mechanism that creates a direct link between the sender of a message and its receiver (Rizzolatti & Laila, 2004)^[12]. Then, reckoning on the special mechanism, children are capable of further encoding and decoding the parental behavior pattern in a straightforward way (Fogassi, et al., 2001)^[13]. As a result, children can reproduce what they have observed from their parental interaction in their intimate relationships.

5.2. Parental Marriage Quality as a Latent Determiner: Cognitive Psychology

The findings also reported that other than the dominant modulation of behaviors based on the input information, a set of value system was established in a latent process. The parental marriage quality is crucial to shaping children's cognition of romantic relationships, thus determining the privacy and individuality in their future relationships. Consistent with the study done by Ming and D. Fincham (2010), parental divorce is related to a less positive attitude toward marriage as well as a more positive attitude toward divorce, which could further link to a lower relationship quality^[10]. As Gina suggested, "marriage is a bit scary for her from a divorced family" and she is "not willing to dedicate much to a relationship". These are proved to be the reflection of the established values and perceptions.

The mirror neuron builds a bridge between parental marriage and children's values and perceptions. As Chen (2015) claimed, mirror neurons compress the achievements of human cultural evolution over tens of thousands of years into specific cultural codes, which are stored in human nerve cells^[14]. In this way, a new "epiphanic model" is created. The mirror neuron helps people generate understandings of inner characteristics and deep relationships of objects without the need for complex reasoning processes (Chen, 2015)^[14]. Consequently, children's values and perceptions of romantic relationships are formed by their comprehension and experience of parental marriage.

As the mirror neuron were found to construct children's expectation of relationships and attachment security in the context of parental marriage quality, it could further associate with privacy, social constraint, and intimacy. Privacy depends on the degree of trust and dependence of the couple. As participants with a broken parental relationship were inclined to be manipulated by the mirror neuron's comprehension of tragedy, they no longer trusted and relied on their partners to a great extent. Consequently, they preferred to have more private time and space in their relationships without any interference. Echoed with Chen's interpretation (2015), mirror neurons turn the role of inter-generational transmission into a process from cranial nerve to physiology, which turns out to be a "transcendental function" that is innate to human beings.

6. Conclusion

This study sets out to investigate the possible correlation of the two generations' relationships.

As children can get the most intuitive feeling from parents' experience, they emulate part of their parents' behaviors and construct their personal value system. The dominant and latent processes proceed simultaneously. Explaining from the psychological perspective, the mirror neuron manipulates people's brain activity. As children absorb an huge amount of information from the external world, a portion of the input transforms into similar output, thus appearing the modeling effect; while a other portion is internalized and promotes the formation of specific values and perceptions. Hinging on individual differences, the degree of the influence varies from family to family, thus this study both pays close attention to individual differences and draws broad patterns. It fills the scarcity of domestic studies on the specific connection between parental marriage status and children's interaction with intimate partners. Furthermore, it paves the way for the future studies on inter-generational continuity and transmission. Additional research is needed to take more complicated factors into consideration so that the to what extent parental marriage could determine children's interaction in romantic relationships can be ascertained more precisely and convincingly.

References

- [1] Mick Cunningham and Arland Thornton (2006). *The influence of parents' marital quality on adult children's toward marriage and its alternatives: main and moderating effects.* *Demography*, 43(4), 659-672.
- [2] Cherlin, A. J., Hurt, T. R., Burton, L. M., & Purvin, D. M. (2004). *The influence of physical and sexual abuse on marriage and cohabitation.* *American Sociological Review*, 69(6), 768-789.
- [3] Thornton, A., & Young-DeMarco, L. (2001). *Four decades of trends in attitudes toward family issues in the United States: The 1960s through the 1990s.* *Journal of marriage and family*, 63(4), 1009-1037.
- [4] Furman, W., & Flanagan, A. S. (1997). *The influence of earlier relationships on marriage: An attachment perspective.*
- [5] DeCore, A. K., & Focht, K. (2019). *Family of origin.* *Encyclopedia of couple and family therapy*, 1087-1090.
- [6] Crossno, M. A. (2011). *Bowen family systems theory.* *Marriage and family therapy: A practice-oriented approach*, 39-64.
- [7] Hovestadt, A. J., Anderson, W. T., Piercy, F. P., Cochran, S. W., & Fine, M. (1985). *A family-of-origin scale.* *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 11(3), 1087-1090.
- [8] Bandura, A. (1977). *Self-efficacy: toward a unifying theory of behavioral change.* *Psychological review*, 84(2), 191.
- [9] Saunders, D. G., & Azar, S. T. (1989). *Treatment programs for family violence.* *Crime and Justice*, 11, 481-546.
- [10] Ming Cui and Frank D. Fincham (2010). *The differential effects of parental divorce and marital conflict on young adult romantic relationships.* *Personal Relationships*, 17, 331-343.
- [11] Goldscheider, F. K., & Goldscheider, C. (1998). *The effects of childhood family structure on leaving and returning home.* *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 745-756.
- [12] Rizzolatti & Laila (2004). *The Mirror-Neuron System.* *Annual Review of Neuroscience*, 27(1), 169-192.
- [13] Fogassi, L., Gallese, V., Buccino, G., Craighero, L., Fadiga, L., & Rizzolatti, G. (2001). *Cortical mechanism for the visual guidance of hand grasping movements in the monkey: A reversible inactivation study.* *Brain*, 124(3), 571-586.
- [14] Chen Jianxiang. (2015). *Mirror Neuron Theory Perspective on "Mother Thinking" and Knowledge Presentation.* *Beijing Normal University. Courses. Teaching Materials. Teaching Methodology*, (7), 52-56.