Relationships between Perceived Adult Parental Role, Intergenerational Ambivalence, and Personal Well-Being among Midlife Parents

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Abstract

http://dx.doi.org/10.15405/epsbs.2016.12.74

The long middle phase of parenting is neither sufficiently understood, not are there enough studies on the issue. The reported research was undertaken with the intention of revealing associations among three variables: perceived parental role, intergenerational ambivalence and parents' well-being with an examination of gender differences. Sixty mid-life Israeli parents with at least one offspring over the age of 25 constituted the population in this two-phase mixed methods research. Quantitative research tools included three questionnaires whose reliability and validity were established; semi-structured interviews comprised the qualitative research tools. The main quantitative findings indicated significant correlations among the research variables. There was a positive correlation between Self-Perceived Parental Role (SPPR) and Parental Well-Being (PWB), and a negative correlation with Intergenerational Ambivalence. Qualitative results suggested a direct and strong relationship between ambivalence expressed by parents and their evaluation of their perceived role and well-being as parents. This research enriches existing theoretical knowledge with regard to experiences of midlife parents, and in particular with regard to their parental role. The correlations identified between midlife parenthood variables as studied in this research may contribute to parents' quality of life, to improving family well-being when identifying problems and strengthening coping resources for cases that lead to stress and crisis.

Keywords: Midlife; parenting adult children; perceived parental role; intergenerational ambivalence; parental well-being.

1. Introduction

The importance of parenting is considered as very high, and therefore, the evolutionary perspective, for example, positioned it at the top of the pyramid of human needs (Kenrick et al., 2010). Having a child is a lifelong commitment, more than any other human endeavour, which exposes the potential of a large range of consequences for parents in most life domains. Research of parenthood at this particular stage in life focuses on two aspects: (1) parents' perception of their role and the level of their subjective experience as parents; (2) parents' perception and evaluation of their relationship with their children and all aspects of this relationship.

In this domain, some major conceptual frameworks, from several research fields, are part of the theoretical landmarks. The prevailing approaches to research of parenting in later life are: *The Life Course Perspective:* it allows researchers to conduct studies and develop assumptions regarding the changes and the influence of family roles throughout the years. This approach highlights the social creation of meanings for family roles, and sees individuals as active agents in the interaction between social contexts and structures (Bengtson, & Allen, 1993). Life course dynamics are usually conceptualized by the interrelated concepts of role trajectories and transitions (Elder, 1985), and other key components: roles, role configurations, pathways and linked lives. Intergenerational connections persist through life, and as family members, the lives of parents and children are intimately intertwined (Macmillan, & Copher, 2005).

Bowen's family systems theory: his family model contributes to understanding the dynamics of the two opposing forces: the poles of closeness-emotional fusion and distance-differentiation of self, and their centrality in the lives of families, and their 'contribution' to the presence of intergenerational ambivalence (Bowen, 1978; Kerr, & Bowen, 1988).

Role theory: Long & Mancini (1989), Nydegger & Mitteness (1996) emphasized that most family researchers go about their work without referring to role theory. The reason for this is partly the complexity posed by expressive roles, but mostly the emphasis of ties of affection in family membership. In the study of identity, it is usually perceived as a role. Thoits (1992) found that family roles are normally the most central ones. Researchers acknowledge that role development is an ongoing lifelong process (Gecas, & Burke, 1995) and that middle-aged adults are usually actively involved in negotiating the meanings of their role and in constructing and maintaining integrated concepts of self.

Intergenerational ambivalence: Merton & Barber (1963) moved the concept of ambivalence beyond its pathological implications, by considering it an intrinsic trait of human relationships, caused by clashing demands from one another. Luescher & Pillemer (1998) extended the application of ambivalence to intergenerational relations, on the basis that family members proved to display both warm and antagonistic feelings toward each other.

Parents' well-being: Ryff's (1989) Scales of Psychological Well-Being constitute a multidimensional model of positive psychological functioning. In particular, these scales were employed in this research, as they appear to be appropriate for an evaluation of well-being in midlife. Parents and adult children's relationships are addressed in some studies and treated as diverse and complex (Silverstein, & Giarrusso, 2010). Findings show that both parents and their adult children have mutual mixed feelings (Birditt, Fingerman, & Zarit, 2010; Fingerman et al., 2008; Lowenstein, 2007;

Pillemer et al., 2007). Intergenerational ambivalence was negatively correlated with parents' psychological well-being (Fingerman et al., 2008). The discovered association between parenthood and well-being have garnered interest from social scientists, such as sociologists, psychologists, and economists, although there are conflicting findings regarding these links (Nelson, Kushlev, & Lyubomirsky, 2014).

2. Problem statement

The topic of intergenerational relationships has been studied extensively, investigating the way midlife parents experience their relations with their adult children. Studies on the role of parents once their children mature point out to inconsistent findings (Levitzki, 2006, 2009). The scientific literature on the matter lacks insight about what becomes or should become of the parental role (Levitzki, 2006, 2009) therefore, the centre of the research was the parental *role* with the aim of highlighting the parents' experience of their *role* rather than the relationship itself.

Based on literature, the research fills the gap by concentrating on parenting during the period of midlife**.** The research advances the study of midlife parenting, focusing on the examination of the parental role through the viewpoint of the parents themselves, which is rarer in research. This study is among the few examining the relationship between two prominent characteristics/components of parenting in midlife and personal well-being from the perspective of the older parent. Presently, there is limited knowledge on the direction of causality between ambivalence and parents' well-being (Katz, 2009). Research on the implication of parenting on well-being has been mostly dominated by quantitative methods. In this research, we use the mixed-methods design, which has recently been recommended for this field of study by Umberson, Pudrovska & Reczek (2010).

3. Research questions

The research questions emerged from the research aim: what is the relationship between adult parents' perceived role, intergenerational ambivalence, and personal well-being?

The research followed *a general research hypothesis:* significant correlations between parents' role perceptions, their level of intergenerational ambivalence, and aspects of their well-being will be found and *secondary hypotheses:*

1. A positive relationship will be identified between parents' role perceptions (SPPR) and aspects of parents' well-being (PWB).
2. A negative correlation will be found between parents' level of intergenerational ambivalence and aspects of well-being (the lower the level of the intergenerational ambivalence variable, the higher the well-being score).

4. Purpose of the study

The research sought to examine correlations between variables and different well-being aspects among parents in midlife, with regard to their parenthood. Therefore, the aim was to examine the relationships between the parental role intergenerational ambivalence, and personal well-being as perceived by midlife parents.

5. Research methods

The research was based on a mixed methods approach, where quantitative and qualitative research strategies were employed. This seemed to be a proper research design for a thorough examination midlife parents' well-being regarding their perceived parenthood and levels of intergenerational ambivalence.

The research was conducted in a two-phase design: (1) - Quantitative Approach: Three questionnaires - Self-Perceived Parental Role (SPPR) (MacPhee, Benson, & Bullock, 1986); Intergenerational ambivalence (Elder, Robertson, & Conger, 1996) and Psychological Well-Being (PWB) (Morozink et al., 2010; Ryff, 1989), were administered to 60 midlife parents sampled by a "snow ball" method with accordance to the research criterions pinned in its goals, (2) - Parents who volunteered participated in a Semi-Structured interview (*N*=12), whose questions derived from the key data features indicated by participants in completion of the questionnaires in the first phase of the research. Data analysis of the questionnaires was conducted by Pearson correlation amongst the three research variables and between their subscales and of the interviews' content via content analysis.

6. Findings

The major research findings revealed positive relationship between perceived parental role and parental well-being and negative relationships between perceived parental role and intergenerational ambivalence, and between parental well-being and intergenerational ambivalence. These findings are consistent with and support the research hypotheses. To conclude the research findings, a clear tendency aroused of the majority of participants, which consider a strong connection between the aspects of their perceived parental role, their estimation of their level of affection, and the positive emotions and feelings between them and their adult children, as opposed to conflicts and disputes with them, and aspects of their well-being.

7. Conclusions

Parents in midlife with adult children appear to attribute key importance to their role as parents. Therefore, their evaluation of their own well-being depends on and affects their self-esteem and emotions that pertain to their role perception. The finding emerging from the current research can

suggest evaluation strategies, involvement and treatment of parents in midlife who have adult children, for the benefit of the family unit at this stage in life.

Preparation for crises in the process of parenting adult children relies largely on understanding the personal processes that take place in the reconstruction of parents' role and adjustment to their needs and their children's changing needs.

This research offers a universal contribution to knowledge as if offers insights that are relevant for populations in different cultures and countries around the world. This research is universal as it offers insights into parenting adult children, and the fact that parents are constant occupied with and think about their children, but perceive and realize their role differently from parents of young children.

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