The Interpersonal Legacy of a Positive Family

Authors: Ackerman, Kashy, Donnellan, Neppl, Lorenz, and Conger

Title of Article: The Interpersonal Legacy of a Positive Family Climate in Adolescence

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Psychology 101

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Instructor David R. Bailey
Over the last few decades, researches have been closely observing family relationships. A lot of studies have already been done about negative relationships such as divorce or abusive relationships, but researches have paid little attention to the positive aspect of a relationship. Not all affiliations end up as a disaster. Most of them end up as happily ever after. To look further into the little information that society knows about positive relationships, Psychological scientist Robert Ackerman and colleagues “wanted to examine whether positive interpersonal behaviors in families might also have long-lasting associations with future relationships” (Association for Psychological Science, 2013). Ackerman, Kashy, Donnella, Neppl, Lorenz, and Conger (2013) wanted to see how a positive interaction between a sibling and their other family members would affect them in the future if they would have the same positive interaction with their own family.

An experiment was conducted in Iowa where 400 families that were a part of the Iowa Youth and Families Project (IYFP) were used as the sample in the study. The researchers used 288 of the individuals that were part of the sample (Ackerman, et. al., 2013). These individuals would be important later in the experiment because researchers would be observing of how their positive relationship with their families influenced them with their current relationships. The experiment started in 1989, so the 288 individuals at the time were in the seventh grade and around the age of 12. The sample population consisted all Caucasian families who currently lived in Iowa with a father, a mother, the individual being studied, and a sibling that was four years older or younger (Ackerman, et. al., 2013). In the first study the experiment was conducted by observing the families interactions with one another by video tape. The families were videotaped from 1989 to 1991.

After the data was collected from the families, researches waited until the individual of each family was an adult and to be in a relationship to proceed to the next step of the experiment.
In the second study the 288 individuals from the previous families that were sampled were interviewed in 2007 and 2008. Ackerman et. al. (2013) points out that the individuals’ spouses were also interviewed and that the “individuals ages ranged from 30 to 33 years old and their spouses’ ages ranged from 23 to 53 years old” (p. 245). The 288 individuals included 162 women and 126 men. Also, 241 of the individuals noted that they were parents.

In this experiment, there were two steps involved. The first step in the experiment, family- of- origin sample, took place in 1989-1991. Researchers wanted to observe the individual from each of the sample of the 400 families. In this observation, the individual was to start a 15 minute conversation that involved a conflict within the family. The individual was to discuss the situation with their other family members: father, mother, and sibling. Ackerman et. al. (2013) explains that the family’s goal was “finding the possible resolutions” (p. 245). The family’s conversation was recorded by videotape and also was evaluated. The evaluation was recorded based on the interactions the families had during their conversation. This included the listener reaction, assertiveness, prosocial behavior, effective communication, and loving support to each family member (Ackerman et. al., 2013). Each of the five factors from the evaluation were rated on a scale from 1 to 5 with 1 being not all factors involved to five all factors involved. The individual of each family was evaluated with the other family members: individual and father, individual and mother, and individual and sibling. Researchers not only wanted to evaluate the individual with each family member, they also wanted to evaluate the other family members with one another: father and mother, father and individual, father and sibling, mother and father, mother and individual, mother and sibling, sibling and father, sibling and mother, and sibling and individual. The total number of evaluations within one family was 12. At the end of each of the 12 evaluations, an average was put together. In this particular step of the experiment, researchers
wanted to see how a family relationship would predict the individual’s future relationship when he or she were married.

In the second step of the experiment was performed in 2007 and 2008. Researchers interview 288 individuals from the 400 families that were observed in the first step of the experiment. Along with the 288 individuals, their spouses were also interview. The interview was 25 minutes and was recorded by videotape. Each of the couples were asked a series of questions about their relationship. Examples included were history and status, problems, and future plans in each of the couple’s relationship. Not all of the questions asked were positive. Researchers also wanted to know about the negative sides of the couple’s relationship. Ackerman et. al. (2013) points out some of the negative questions asked: “gets angry at him/her and criticize him/her or his/her ideas” (p. 245). Each of these negative questions were rated on a scale from 1 to 7 where 1 was always and 7 was never. The scores were then average for each individual. The averages showed that the individuals had more negative relations with each other. Then, researchers wanted to know about the couples’ opinion on their marriage. Researchers used the Quality of Marriage to accomplish this part of the study. Question were asked to each of the married couple on if they consider their relationship to be good or if it is strong. Each question was rated on a scale from 1 to 5 with 1 being strongly agree to 5 being strongly disagree (Ackerman et. al., 2013). The scores were then averaged and the results showed that the individuals had greater marriage happiness. Finally, researchers used the same evaluation from the family-of-origin interactions from the videotape interactions between the couples. The couples were rated on a scale from 1 to 9 with 1 being not all factors involved to 9 all factors involved. The scores were then averaged from each individual and spouse of the couples. Ackerman et. al. (2013) reported that the experimenters rated the couples on their
“hostility, angry coercion, and antisocial behaviors towards each other” (p. 246). The scores were averaged to show the behavioral-hostility indexes for the individual and their spouses.

The results from the experiment showed that an individual living in a positive atmosphere in a family does not guarantee a positive relationship of their own in the future. Researchers cannot confidently say that these two variables are related to one another. However, Ackerman et. al. (2013) emphasizes “the most striking results from this work was that the quality of one marital partner’s family climate during adolescence was associated with marital outcomes for the other partner” (p. 248). The results showed that some of the 288 individuals who were brought up in a caring and supporting family atmosphere showed positive feelings toward their spouses and their spouses reflected the same positive feelings toward them. Researchers also mention that the individuals that were raised in a positive atmosphere could have had tried to find their significant other that was raised the same way (Ackerman et. al., 2013). This theory could be looked further for future research.

With the amount of time and effort put into this experiment, there were some issues. The first issue was that the sample population used was not accurate. Researchers only used families that were part of the Youth and Families Project (IYFP) in Iowa. What about other families outside of this organization? What about using families in states like New York, Mississippi, or New Mexico? Or better yet, what about using families from other countries? Using a variety of families that were from different parts of country and world could have made the results more reasonable. Researches also only used families that had a father, mother and at least two children. In today’s society, the definition of a typical family does not mean a family of four. There are so many different combinations of families that represent our society today: blended, adoptive, single-parent, cross-generation, and even same sex families. Nuclear families, children
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with two of their biological parents living together, are not the only ones who have a positive relationship within their families. Another issue is that researchers only used Caucasian families. Again, there are different combinations of race in families today. Finally, the length of time spent conducting the experiment took almost 20 years. Researchers had to wait 20 years for their results to come in and prove their theory.

The popular news article that the research article was based on did point out some of the important information that was presented in the research article. The popular news article provided what the researchers were trying to find, the participants that they used during the experiment, and the results that the researchers came up with (Association for Psychological Science, 2013). The popular news article did leave out some things that were presented in the original research article. One thing that they did not include was how many individuals that the researchers used for their experiment. The popular news article also did not mention the year that the experiment started or ended. It mentions that the participants who had a happy relationship among their families showed the same positive atmosphere with their own families 17 years later (Association for Psychological Science, 2013). We as a reader do not know when the 17 years later ended.

The popular article was a bit bias in its presentation because it did not mention any issues that came up during the experiment. For example, the sample size was not accurate to the population today, the time span was long, and not all participants ended up in a happy relationship like the researchers predicted they would. The popular article only focused on the positive results founded in this experiment.

A positive family climate is linked to a positive marriage has never really been looked
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further until now. Even though the experiment did not fully prove that it is 100% likely to happen, it did prove that it can happen. This experiment was something that I was interested in learning because I know that I would want to have a warm-supporting family of my own someday because I grew up with that. Learning from this topic, I know that anyone of any race and family type can have a positive family relationship.
References
