

PERCEPTION OF FAMILY FUNCTIONING: PARENTAL VS. NON-PARENTAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Psychological assessment of families in many respects differs from the assessment of the individual. While self-report scales might work well for individuals, they rarely work for the families because members of a given family often have different understanding of their relationships. The individual's perception of family functioning depends on many factors, family role being one of them. Although the literature on family relationships consistently reports the differences in understanding of family relationships between different family members, surprisingly few data is available on the differences directly related to family roles. Thus, the present study aimed to address the differences in perception of family functioning between individuals with different family roles. FACES IV was applied to 538 participants aged 18-45 years to assess individual's perception of cohesion, flexibility, communication and satisfaction in the family. The analyses revealed that family role was associated with all dimensions of family functioning above and beyond age – indicating that the individual's family role should be carefully considered when interpreting self-report measures of family functioning.

Key words: family relationships, role taking, early adulthood, transition

INTRODUCTION

Family psychologists generally agree that measures of family functioning obtained with self-report scales relate to the individual's position in a family. For example, the perception of relational support in the family depends on whether the informant was a parent or a child (Branje, van Aken & Lieshout, 2002), on the perceptions of family relationships (Delsing, Oud, De Bruyn & van Aken, 2003), autonomy support (Kins, Bayers, Soenens & Vasteenkiste, 2009), or privacy boundaries (Hawk, Kejrjersers & Halle, 2009). While there is a general agreement about the existence of these differences, the mechanisms behind the differences are not agreed. Whereas some authors assign differences in perceptions of family relationships primarily to measurement issues (Casper & Hofferth, 2007; Stanley, 2007), other authors focus on the developmental models of family systems (Cowan & Cowan, 2003; Gottman & Notarius, 2000; McGoldrick & Carter, 2003; Segrin & Flora, 2005). Although the literature consistently suggests that the perception of family functioning depends on family position such as parent/child, surprisingly few studies directly focus on the role of family position in relation to the assessment process. We argue that this issue is particularly relevant for addressing both developmental and measurement concerns in family research. The aim of the present study is therefore to focus on the differences in perception of family functioning between individuals with different family positions and roles, particularly parents vs. children. However, the differences in parental vs. children's perception of family functioning might be due to age- rather than role-perspective differences (Ambert, 1997; Cohen, Kasen, Chen, Hartmark & Gordon, 2003; Cowan & Cowan, 2003; McGoldrick & Carter, 2003; Salmela & Schoon, 2009). For this reason, we compared the perception of family relationships in adults of a limited age range: emerging and young adults.

Family role

In psychological literature, family role refers to established and repetitive patterns of behaviour in the family for handling various functions and tasks (Epstein, Ryan, Bishop, Miller & Keitner, 2003; Segrin & Flora, 2005). Roles provide rules to guide the behaviour of family members consistent with their family position such as parent or child. Roles contain expectations that family members hold toward a particular individual and regulate actions, emotions, motivation and attitudes of an individual in a particular setting or situation (Segrin & Flora, 2005).

Many authors claim that patterns of family roles are often not stable over time or context. A significant source of change in the family might be attributed to the developmental processes within the family life cycle, particularly transition to adulthood (Branje et al., 2002; Kins et al., 2009; McGoldrick & Carter, 2003). Transition to adulthood is indicated with a number of indicators such as establishment of an inde-

pendent residence, school completion and career selection, accepting responsibility for themselves, making independent decisions, becoming financially independent and becoming a parent (Cohen et al., 2003; Sieffge Krenke, 2009) which is being referred to, in developmental literature, as emerging adulthood (ages 18-25) and early adulthood (ages 20/25-45) (Arnett, 2000; Berk, 2010; Craig & Dunn, 2010; Feldman, 2010). In the context of family roles and perception of family relationships, the period of emerging and early adulthood is of particular interest because individuals of that age may or may not be parents themselves, allowing us to directly compare “parents” and “children”, adults of the same age who do vs. those who do not carry parental roles in the families they are living in.

The present study

Although there is a lot of evidence to suggest that family role relates to an individual's perception of family relationships, there is little evidence directly supporting this claim. In the present study, we directly related individual's family position to the perception of core dimensions of family functioning (Olson & Gorall, 2003; Segrin & Flora, 2005), such as cohesion, flexibility, communication and satisfaction. Our first prediction was that family role, particularly “being or not being a parent”, relates to the understanding of family relationships above and beyond age. We argue that parents are more positive about family relationships than children because parents are normally those who make important decisions, set the rules, take on the responsibilities and generally invest more resources into the family (Cigoli & Scabini, 2006; Cowan & Cowan, 2003) than children.

With regard to satisfaction with family relationships, we argue that the sources of family satisfaction differ between parents and non-parents. Whereas parents tend to maintain stability in power-relations between family members, their grown-up children tend to change power structures to achieve financial and emotional independence (Ambert, 1997; Cohen et. al, 2003). For this reason, we expected parents to acknowledge cohesion and stability while grown-up children would acknowledge change and flexibility when considering family relationships and family satisfaction.

Therefore, the study aimed to address two research questions. The first was examining differences in the perception of family relations in regard to parental role and the second question was to identify predictors of family satisfaction in adults who are parents vs. those who are not. Note that the terms “parent” or “child” in this article refer to family position rather than to developmental stage of the individual: “children” and “parents” in the present study were all adults. All participants were living either with their parents or their children – in the family they were living in, however, they had a position of either “a parent” or “a child”.

METHOD

Participants

The unrelated sample included 538 participants, 82% females and 18% males from the middle class in Slovenia of both urban and non-urban origin. The age of the participants ranged between 18 and 45 years ($M = 30.22$, $SD = 8.45$). Fifty four percent of the participants were parents themselves. The participants who were parents were older than those who were not, $t(536) = 31.88$, $p < 0.001$; mean ages were 36.55 and 22.86 for parents and non-parents, respectively. Average family in the sample had 2.04 children. Slovenia belongs to central/south-European countries with average living standard and average fertility rate; in 2007 for example, GDP in Slovenia was 90% of mean GDP in EU (GEU, 2010), fertility rate in Slovenia was 1.6 per woman (SURS, 2005) with EU average being 1.7 (Eurostat, 2002). The participants were recruited in a snowball sample, 120 individuals of different age, gender and education were asked both to participate in the study and to provide contacts with additional families/participants so participants from different social groups would be included in the sample. Individual informed consent was obtained for all participants. All participants came from different families and all participants were currently living with their family members.

Instruments and Procedures

FACES IV Package (Olson, Gorall & Tiesel, 2006; adapted by Svetina, Zabret & Bajec, 2009) is a self-report measure of family relationships. The instrument is based on the circumplex model of family systems (Olson & Gorall, 2003; Segrin & Flora, 2005) explaining family relationships with two core dimensions: cohesion and flexibility. Cohesion refers to emotional bonding between family members and is manifested through a number of family behaviours such as family coalitions, the way that family member share time and space, decision making, family friends and maintenance of bonds and boundaries (Olson & Gorall, 2003). The second dimension, flexibility, refers to the ability of the family system to change its rules and roles, particularly during periods of developmental transitions or stress (Segrin & Flora, 2005, p. 17). In addition to cohesion and flexibility, the model points out the importance of communication which serves as a facilitating factor (Segrin & Flora, 2005) necessary to adjust family cohesion or flexibility to maintain balance.

The FACES IV consists of 42 items distributed into two scales of the circumplex model: family cohesion and flexibility, as well as four sub-scales: disengagement, enmeshment, rigid and chaotic family relationships. The sub-scales are a useful tool to assess clinical type of the data (Olson & Gorall, 2003); in the present study, however, only the two core dimensions were considered.

The package consists of two additional scales, family communication (10 items), and family satisfaction (10 items), with the first scale measuring positive emotions

on one side or concerns about the quality of participant's family communications on the other and the second scale assessing the level of general satisfaction with participant's family relationships. All items are presented on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The participants were directed to complete the FACES scale with regard to family members that they live with. Participants who were living with both their parents and their children were asked to complete the FACES scale with regard to their partner/children.

In this study the Slovenian version of FACES IV Package (FACES IV – SI) was administered. The Slovenian version of FACES IV parallels the English version (Olson et al., 2006) and meets major metric requirements of psychological testing (Svetina et al., 2009). Reliability of FACES IV – SI, as measured by Cronbach's coefficients is medium to high, 0.84 for cohesion, 0.73 for flexibility, 0.92 for communication, and 0.93 for satisfaction. Construct validity as indicated by CFA suggested satisfactory fit to the predicted 6-factor model: $\chi^2 = 4429.81$, $df = 804$, $p < 0.001$; $RMSEA = 0.068$; $CFI = 0.93$; $NNFI = 0.92$.

RESULTS

First, to examine whether perception of family relationships related to gender, we computed four t-tests on gender-related differences in the perception of family cohesion, flexibility, communication and satisfaction. The analyses yielded none of the gender-related differences to be statistically significant with means of males and females being almost equal: 27.02 (males) vs. 27.50 (females) for cohesion, 23.38 vs. 23.77 for flexibility, 37.83 vs. 38.40 for communication and 35.89 vs. 34.78 for satisfaction. In the following analyses, male and female participants therefore were treated together.

Second, to examine whether family role distinguished the way participants understood relations in the family, we conducted ANOVAs for parents vs. non-parents on the four measures of family relationships, cohesion, flexibility, communication and satisfaction. Initial analyses, however, showed that family position highly related to participant's age ($r = 0.81$, $p < 0.001$) – as expected, older participants were more likely to be parents than younger ones. Thus, to examine whether the parental role influenced understanding of family functioning above and beyond age, we further included Age as a covariate in the ANOVA to control for the main effect of age. Again, the terms "parent" or "child" in these analyses refer to family position rather than to the individual's age; note that all "children" were adults – however, in a given family they had the position of a "child".

The analyses of covariance yielded "parents" to score higher than "children" on all measures considered: parental role corresponded to higher overall satisfaction with family relations, $F(1, 531) = 15.19$, $p < 0.001$, with mean scores 36.38 for par-

ents and 33.37 for non-parents. Second, parental perceptions about quality of family communication was more positive than that of “children”, $F(1, 532) = 39.78, p < 0.001$, with mean scores 40.56 and 35.71 for parents and non-parents, respectively. Third, “parents” found their families both more cohesive, $F(1, 535) = 37.82, p < 0.001$, and more flexible, $F(1, 535) = 20.47, p < 0.001$, than “children”; mean scores were 28.93 (parents) vs. 25.68 (non-parents) for cohesiveness and 24.80 (parents) vs. 22.43 (non-parents) for flexibility. The results clearly suggested that parental role was related to the perception of family relationships above and beyond age, on all measures concerned.

The design of our study, however, allowed us not only to directly compare the impact of family position to the perception of family relationships but also to gain additional insight into the pattern of factors related to family satisfaction. To explore which factors discriminated between satisfaction of those who were parents and those who were not, we conducted multiple regression analyses separately for “parents” and “children”. In the model, the dependent variable was family satisfaction, whereas the predictor variables were cohesion, flexibility and communication. The results suggested that for both, those who carried parental roles and those who did not, family communication contributed to family satisfaction. In particular, for parents, communication, $\beta = 0.61, p < 0.001$, and cohesion, $\beta = 0.20, p < 0.01$, explained 68% of family satisfaction, $R^2 = 0.68, F(3, 258) = 202.36, p < 0.001$. For “children”, on the other hand, the model explained a similar percentage of variance, 77%, $R^2 = 0.77, F(3, 241) = 270.64, p < 0.001$. Factors which predicted family satisfaction were communication, $\beta = 0.60, p < 0.001$ and flexibility, $\beta = 0.15, p < 0.01$. Whereas both “parents” and “children” greatly considered communication as a core determinant of family satisfaction, the difference between parents and non-parents occurred in acknowledging central elements of the circumplex model, flexibility and cohesion, as factors that contributed to family satisfaction. In “children”, flexibility rather than cohesion was associated with family satisfaction. In “parents”, however, the role of predictors was the opposite: parents acknowledged cohesion rather than flexibility in considering family satisfaction. Developmental mechanisms behind these findings are discussed in the final part of this article.

DISCUSSION

The focus of this study was on assessing the perception of family relations from the family roles perspective. In this concluding section, we first address the differences in the perception of family relations between individuals who are parents and those who are not; second, we address family satisfaction in reference to family position and, finally, we address some limitations of the present study.

The findings revealed that individuals who carried a parental role in general had more positive feelings about their families than their peers who did not carry

parental roles: emerging and young adults who were parents were more satisfied with their family relationships than those who were not parents themselves; parents perceived the relationships in their families as more flexible, more cohesive and communication more positively as their peers who were not parents.

At first sight, the interpretation of these findings is quite straightforward: parents are those who generally set the rules in the family (Cigoli & Scabini, 2006; Rice, 1998; Vangelisti, 1992), and they may set them according to their own liking. For this reason, “children” – not the parents – are usually those who initiate changes regarding independence, power-relations or decision making processes in the family (Cowan & Cowan, 2003; Gavazzi, Anderson, Sabatelli, 1993; Rice, 1998; Steinberg, 2000). Adolescents and emerging adults would not seek changes because they were happy with family relationships, but because they were not (Vangelisti, 1992). In this context, the results make sense: parents, whose role is to maintain stability of family system, perceive the relationships in their families more positively than grown up children, whose role is to form their own family systems and consequently set up change in the family of their origin.

Second, converging evidence for this claim was obtained from the results of regression analyses. In line with previous findings, the sources of satisfaction with family relationships seem to have been different for those who were parents and those who were not. Whereas young adults, regardless of their parental role, considered communication as a core quality of family satisfaction, the difference between those who carried parental role and their peers who did not, occurred in their understanding of cohesion and flexibility; for “parents” it was cohesion whereas for “children” it was flexibility that differentially contributed to family satisfaction.

As with the previous case, the results might be considered in a broader developmental context. The life-cycle approaches suggest that part of the parental role is to maintain the stability of the present family system whereas children’s role includes launching changes in family structure to gain independence during the period of emerging adulthood (Cowan & Cowan, 2003; Reis & Buhl, 2008; Rice, 1998; Sieffge Krenke, 2009; Walsh, 2003; Salmela Aro & Schoon, 2009). Therefore, for parents, cohesion – manifested for example through feelings of “togetherness” and “we” – is an important dimension of family satisfaction. On the other hand, for the grown up children, flexibility is a more important dimension of family because it allows the individual with a “child” role to carry out changes in the family structure.

Although the present study provided some evidence for our claims, the data is also a subject of several methodological limitations that should be taken into account when discussing the results. The first limitation refers to the cultural differences and the specifics of living arrangements in the transition to adulthood. Some data suggested that southern Europeans seem to stay in their parents households longer than northern Europeans. For example, Italians and Slovenians in their early 20’s are more likely to be living with their family of origin than their peers from Germany or Scandinavian countries (Puklek & Zupančič, in press). In Slovenia, however, the

percentage of young adults living in their parent's households is particularly high (SURS, 2005): half of adults aged 25-29 years are living in their parent's households and every fifth household with children have all children older than 25 years of age. Second, the data of the present study were attained by self report measures. To decrease the effects of the same rater-bias and to attain additional external criteria to verify the validity of family relationships results, additional methods could be used in future studies, such as relationship matrix (Brandon, 2007) or the round-robin design (Manders et al., 2007). Third, the sample in the present study was large, implying p -values likely to be significant also with small mean differences (Field, 2000); further studies would be needed to provide clearer insight not only into the presence but also into the extent of these differences. Last but not least, some studies (Ganiban et al., 2009; Kavcic & Zupancic, 2006) suggested that personality traits and temperament fit between family members may also play an intermediating role in the perception of family relationships. For this reason, personality traits and temperament fit as intermediating factors in the perception of family relationships would also be worthy of receiving more attention in future studies.

Overall, the findings of our study suggested that family role corresponded to the perception of family relationships. Being or not being a parent alone seems to be associated to individual's perception of core dimensions of family relationships such as flexibility, cohesion, communication or satisfaction. The findings once again bring forward questions of both developmental and measurement concerns of family research (Casper & Hofferth, 2007; Brandon, 2007; Manders et al., 2007). Perceived family cohesion or flexibility appears to depend on the individual's role in the family at least as much as it depends on the family itself. The data seem to provide us more questions than answers, indicating that further research would be needed to address issues of individuals' family roles and their perception of family relationships in greater detail.

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PERCEPCIJA OBITELJSKOG FUNKCIONIRANJA: RODITELJSKI NASUPROT NE-RODITELJSKOM STAVU

Sažetak

Psihološka procjena obitelji uvelike se razlikuje od procjene pojedinca. Dok su ljestvice samoprocjene učinkovite kod pojedinca, rijetko su djelotvorne kod obitelji budući da članovi obitelji različito percipiraju njihov odnos. Percepcija pojedinca o

obiteljskom funkcioniranju ovisi o brojnim faktorima, a uloga obitelji je samo jedan. Iako literatura o obiteljskom funkcioniranju izvještuje o razlikama u razumijevanju obiteljskih odnosa među članovima, iznenađujuće je malo podataka o razlikama povezanim izravno s ulogom u obitelji. Ovo je istraživanje imalo za cilj ispitati razlike u percepciji obiteljskog funkcioniranja između pojedinaca s različitim obiteljskim ulogama. FACES IV primijenjen je na 538 ispitanika u dobi od 18 do 45 godina radi procjene percepcije pojedinca o koheziji, fleksibilnosti, komunikaciji i zadovoljstvu u obitelji. Analize su pokazale da je obiteljska uloga povezana sa svim dimenzijama obiteljskog funkcioniranja neovisno o dobi – pokazujući da obiteljsku ulogu pojedinca treba uvažiti tijekom interpretacije ljestvica samoprocjene obiteljskog funkcioniranja.

Ključne riječi: obiteljski odnosi, preuzimanje uloga, rana odrasla dob, tranzicija

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