Parent-Child Relationships in Childhood and Adulthood and Their Effect on Marital Quality: A Comparison of Children Who Remained in Close Proximity to Their Parents and Those Who Moved Away

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ABSTRACT. This study examines the links between parent-child relationships in childhood and adulthood and the marital quality of adult children. Additionally, the study tests the hypothesis that this association is moderated by residential proximity and frequency of contact between the two generations. In order to test these hypotheses, 54 kibbutz children who have remained in close proximity and daily contact with their parents (“Remainers”) were compared with a matched group of 55 kibbutz-born respondents who moved away (“Leavers”). Findings indicated a strong association between family experiences during childhood (family cohesion, parental marital happiness, and parent-child relationships) and emotional and contact solidarity with parents in
adulthood. Adult children’s marital quality was explained by parent-child relations in childhood and by the interaction between parent-child relationships in adulthood and living proximity. Marital quality was found to be associated with parent-child relations only for the Remainers but not for the Leavers. The findings have implications for parent-child relationships and marital quality among broader populations experiencing geographical mobility.

Interest in the relations between adult children and their parents has grown dramatically over the past three decades (Lye, 1996; Suitor, Pillemer, Bohanon, & Robison, 1995). The most popular organizing framework for understanding intergenerational relationships within the family is that of intergenerational solidarity (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991), in which parent-child relations are characterized by reciprocity of exchange and solidarity along multiple dimensions. Research in this tradition has emphasized shared values across generations, enduring ties between parents and children, and normative obligations to provide help and mutual support. Along this line, researchers have found that parents and adult children maintain regular relations of exchange and support—both instrumental and emotional—and that this exchange has positive as well as negative implications for adult children’s well-being (Antonucci, 1990; Bengtson, Rosenthal, & Burton, 1990; Mancini & Blieszner, 1989).

Whereas the research conducted on intergenerational relationships has yielded valuable knowledge about the implications of these relations for adult children’s individual well-being, relatively little attention has been given to their effect on adult children’s families, in general, and their marital relationships in particular (Ward & Spitze, 1998). Additionally, this research has been narrowly focused on their contemporary relations and has largely ignored the influence of their earlier relationships (Rossi & Rossi, 1990).

The purpose of the present study is to examine the association of parent-child relationships in childhood and adulthood with the marital quality of adult children. The underlying assumption is that this association is moderated by residential proximity and frequency of contact between the two genera-
tions. More specifically, the study tests the hypothesis that adult children’s marital quality is influenced by parent-child emotional solidarity for those who live in close proximity and maintain daily contact, but not for those who are geographically distant from their elderly parents and who maintain less frequent contact. In order to test these hypotheses, children who have remained in close proximity and daily contact with their parents are compared with those who have chosen to move away, using the kibbutz setting as a “natural laboratory” for examining close vs. distant living arrangements.

Following is a review of both theory and research on the association between parent-child relationships in childhood and in adulthood; the effect of these relationships on adult children’s marital quality; and the moderating effect of parent-child living proximity on adult children’s marital quality.

PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS IN CHILDHOOD AND ADULTHOOD

Research on parent-child relationships has typically focused on either the beginning of the life course, during childhood and adolescence, or on its end, dealing with adult children’s relationships with their elderly parents. This trend, characterized as the alpha-omega tendency in parent-child research (Hagestad, 1987), has brought about a paucity of knowledge regarding the association between early and later parent-child relationships.

In one of a few studies on parent-child relationships in childhood and adulthood, Rossi and Rossi (1990) examined the extent to which early family experiences contribute to variation in social interaction, affective closeness, and the exchange of help between parents and children. They found that greater intimacy and a tighter bond in relations between parents and adult children were related to a higher level of affection and acceptance during childhood, a stronger sense of family cohesion, and closer parent-child relations during adolescence. They concluded that intergenerational relations are primarily the result of a “snow-ball” effect, with the qualities of early parent-child relationships continuing to typify relations into the children’s adulthood. We therefore expect that parent-child relationships in adulthood will be related to the parent-child and other family relationships of childhood.

PARENT-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS AND ADULT CHILDREN’S MARITAL QUALITY

Adult children’s marital quality may be shaped both by early family experiences and parent-child relationships and by existing intergenerational rela-
tionships. The link between parent-child relationships in childhood and intimate relationships in adulthood has been the focus of a number of theoretical frameworks, including psychoanalytic theory (Freud, 1949); life-span developmental approach (Baltes & Reese, 1984); attribution theory (Kelly, 1972); attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969, 1988); and Bowen’s (1978) intergenerational theory. Psychoanalytic and object relations theorists have long argued that the parent-child relationship is the prototype for later love relationships. Similarly, attachment theory posits that working models of childhood attachment relationships are strongly related to the quality of couple relationships in adulthood (Bowlby, 1969, 1988; Shaver, Hazan, & Bradshaw, 1988).

A number of studies have documented the link between the quality of parent-child relationships in childhood and later intimate adult relationships (Belsky & Pensky, 1988; Caspi & Elder, 1988; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). There is evidence to suggest that patterns of infant-parent attachment can be translated into patterns of adult attachment relationships (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Furthermore, adult attachment is linked to relationship satisfaction (Collins & Read, 1990), self-disclosure (Feeney & Noller, 1990) and improved functioning (Cohn, Silver, Cowan, Cowan, & Pearson, 1992) between partners.

In addition to parent-child relationships, patterns of intimate relationships may be shaped by other experiences in one’s family of origin. For example, positive associations were found between family cohesion and functioning during childhood and marital satisfaction in adulthood (Fisiloglu & Lorenzetti, 1994; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Adult children’s marital quality may also be related to their parents’ marital relationships (Amato & Booth, 2001; Booth & Edwards, 1990; Lewis & Spanier, 1979; Feng, Giarruso, Bengtson, & Frye, 1999). Rossi and Rossi (1990) found that adult children whose parents had greater marital happiness tended to show more affection and cooperation in their own intimate relationships.

During adulthood, parent-child relations are likely to have both negative and positive implications for adult children and their families. The literature on adult children’s caregiving of elderly parents tends to emphasize burden and stress (e.g., Mancini & Blieszner, 1989; Pearlin, Mullan, Semple, & Skaff, 1990; Pearlin, Aneshesel, Mullan, & Whitlatch, 1996), problems and conflicts (Suitor & Pillemer, 1988) as well as ambivalence in intergenerational relations (Luescher & Pillemer, 1998). Caregiving for parents is a potential source of strain and conflict in marital relations. It may interfere with marital roles by reducing the time and energy available for interaction with a spouse (Suitor & Pillemer, 1992, 1994).

However, other research on the relationships of adult children with their parents points to positive outcomes. Studies indicate that for the adult child, good relations with and support from parents alleviate psychological strain

All in all, there is inconsistent evidence regarding the effects of parent-child relations on the marital quality of the adult child. A number of researchers found only scattered evidence, if any, for the effect of intergenerational exchanges on the marital quality of adult children (Suitor & Pillemer, 1992, 1994; Ward & Spitze, 1998). Thus, it appears that the quality of the marital relationship has little association with intergenerational exchange per se, but rather is more consistently associated with the quality of parent-child relations. In particular, problematic parent-child relations are associated with distress and lower reported marital quality (Krause, 1995; Ward & Spitze, 1998; Umberson, 1992) as well as with increased marital conflict (Suitor & Pillemer, 1988)

THE MODERATING EFFECT OF GEOGRAPHICAL PROXIMITY

A missing link in understanding the association between intergenerational relationships and adult children’s marital quality is the geographical proximity of adult children and their elderly parents. Geographical proximity enables the continuity of parent-child relations, face-to-face interactions, and exchanges of support between generations, whereas geographical mobility increases the physical distance between generations, thereby impeding the exchange of social and instrumental support (Dewit, Wister, & Burch, 1988). In his theoretical framework of intergenerational solidarity, Bengtson and his colleagues (Bengtson & Roberts, 1991; Bengtson, Giarrusso, Mabry, & Silverstein, 2002) conceptualized the opportunity for contact between parents and adult children in terms of structural solidarity, and the frequency of contact in terms of associational solidarity.

Geographical proximity, social contact, and affection also may have a reciprocal effect on each other. Lawton, Silverstein and Bengtson (1994) found that greater contact is associated with greater affection and, in turn, greater affection is associated with greater contact, especially among mother-child dyads. Thus, residential proximity encourages emotional intimacy insofar as it facilitates opportunities for shared experiences. Lin and Lewis (1996) further suggest that families with a stronger sense of cohesion in earlier periods of family life tend to maintain more frequent contact. The greater the physical proximity, the greater the accessibility and opportunity to notice and respond to family members’ needs.

We hypothesized that current intergenerational relations would be associated with early parent-child relationships. Specifically, this meant that one’s
early experiences in the family, especially parent-child relations, would influence the adult child’s choice of whether or not to stay in close geographical proximity to the parents. This intergenerational residential proximity, in turn, would moderate the association between current parent-child relationships and the adult child’s marital relationship. More specifically, we hypothesized that adult children’s marital quality would be negatively associated with a conflicted intergenerational relationship and positively associated with a supportive intergenerational relationship only for those who live in close proximity to, and have daily contact with, their parents.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT:
ADULT CHILDREN WHO STAY OR LEAVE THE KIBBUTZ

The kibbutz is a type of collective unique to Israel, with an average of about 100 families in residence in each community. In the past, child socialization and economic functions were accorded to the collective. However, the privatization process in recent years has “normalized” the kibbutz family, turning it into a “regular” household that is responsible for most of its own functions and services (Palgi, 1997).

Over the years, the extended family has become an important component of the kibbutz community, with several generations and several separate household units within the community maintaining daily contact. For the older generation, living in such proximity and daily contact with their offspring provides a major contribution to their psychological well-being. For the younger generation, however, this arrangement represents an added psychological and emotional burden, despite its instrumental benefits.

One of the focal issues addressed by kibbutz researchers involves the decision-making process of kibbutz-born children about whether to leave or to stay on the kibbutz. Researchers have found that family environment is an important factor in this decision, with those who choose to remain on the kibbutz having a greater need to stay near their parents and a stronger sense of commitment to the kibbutz (Mitleberg & Lev-Ari, 1991).

Within this context, we examine parent-child relationships in childhood and adulthood as predictors of marital quality among kibbutz children who have remained in close and daily contact with their parents and among those who have chosen to move away.
METHOD

Sample

The sample was composed of 109 couples in which at least one member was born and raised on a kibbutz. Fifty-four of the kibbutz-born respondents currently live on the kibbutz (the “Remainers”), together with at least one parent, whereas the other 55 kibbutz-born respondents have moved to other locations in Israel (the “Leavers”).

Procedure

The respondents were recruited from 30 kibbutzim across the country. In order to recruit the sample, contact was first made with a liaison person in each kibbutz, who was informed about the study and was asked to provide the names and addresses of appropriate subjects. The information requested included current kibbutz members as well as former members, matched by age and marital status, who had moved away. A self-report questionnaire was then sent to each potential subject, together with a letter inviting them to take part in the study, a brief explanation of the study, and a stamped return envelope. The packet included a questionnaire booklet for the focal respondent—the kibbutz-born person—and a one-page questionnaire for the spouse (see Measures section below for a more detailed description). Four weeks later, potential subjects who had not responded were contacted by phone to encourage participation. In all, 116 questionnaires were returned (representing a return rate of 49%), of which seven questionnaires were discarded due to incomplete data. Analyses were therefore conducted with data from 109 focal respondents and their spouses, of whom 54 are kibbutz members (the “Remainers”) and 55 ex-kibbutz members (the “Leavers”).

Table 1 provides demographic data of the two groups. As the data show, there were no significant group differences in any of the background variables. In each group, there was an equal gender distribution (27 males and 27 females in the Remainers group; 27 males and 28 females in the Leavers group). The mean age of the respondents was about 39, and on average they had a little more than 14 years of education. Respondents were married for 13-15 years and had, on average, between two and three children.

Group differences also were examined with respect to the respondents’ parents, such as marital status, age, and health, but no differences were found on these variables either. The only significant difference between groups was in the distance between the respondents’ and their parents’ residence. While all Remainers live within walking distance from their parents, the distance be-
tween the Leavers’ place of residence and that of their parents ranged between 20 miles and more than 100 miles ($z = 5.22$, $p < .001$).

**Measures**

A set of standardized measures was used to collect data on the respondents’ current relationship with their parents, family relationships during childhood, and perceived marital quality. The parent-child and family relationship measures, both current and in childhood, were adopted from Rossi and Rossi’s (1990) study on intergenerational relations in American families.

**Current parent-child relationship.** Relationship between the respondents and their parents was measured by two solidarity dimensions: associational and affectional.

**Associational solidarity** was measured by the frequency of face-to-face interaction (visiting) with each parent, ranging from 1 (1-2 times a year) to 8 (every day) and the frequency of phoning (measured on the same eight-point range). A value of zero was assigned if no contact at all was made during the last year. The Cronbach alpha reliability of this measure was .82. As expected, a significant difference was found between the Remainers and the Leavers in their frequency of contact with their parents ($F(4,66) = 33.85$, $p < .001$). The analysis indicated that the Remainers are in closer contact with their parents than are the Leavers, both in terms of visiting ($F(2,68) = 69.74$, $p < .001$) and phone contacts ($F(2,68) = 11.32$, $p < .001$).

**Affectional solidarity** was measured in terms of closeness and intimacy versus distance and strain in the relationship with each parent. Respondents were
asked to rate the relationship with each parent on a scale ranging from 1 (very strained relationship) to 7 (very close relationship).

Two other solidarity dimensions used in Rossi and Rossi’s (1990) study were also measured: functional (amount of help given and received) and consensual (value consensus). However, their internal consistency reliabilities were too low (alpha = .57 and .58, respectively) to be included in the data analysis. All variables concerning current relations with parents were computed so that, if both parents were alive, the variable was a sum of responses regarding both parents, whereas, if one parent was deceased, the variable referred to the relationship with the surviving parent.

Family-of-origin relationships. Family relations in the respondents’ childhood were examined by four variables: emotional bond, parental affection, family cohesion, and parents’ marital happiness.

Emotional bond in childhood was measured in terms of closeness and intimacy versus distance and strain in the relationship with each parent in childhood (around age 10), in adolescence (around age 15), and during young adulthood (around age 25). Respondents were asked to rate the relationship with each parent, at each age, on a scale ranging from 1 (very strained relationship) to 7 (very close relationship). The Cronbach alpha reliabilities of emotional bond with mother and father were .74 and .71, respectively.

Parental affection was measured by a four-item scale rating the extent to which each parent was available when needed, was easy to talk to, showed love and affection, and encouraged sharing of troubles. The reliabilities of these scales for mothers and fathers were .75 and .81, respectively.

Family cohesion was measured by a four-item scale tapping family relationships (e.g., “the family had lots of fun together”) and activities (e.g., “the family did interesting things together on weekends”) during childhood and adolescence. The Cronbach alpha reliability of this scale was .80.

Parental marital happiness was measured by a single item, “How would you describe the relationship between your parents when you were growing up?” Response categories ranged from 1 (very unhappy) to 5 (very happy).

Marital quality. Marital quality was measured by the Hebrew adaptation of the short version of ENRICH (Fowers & Olson, 1992). The original scale is a 10-item Likert-type scale that assesses the respondent’s perceived quality of his/her marriage across 10 dimensions of the relationship (spouse’s personal traits, communication, conflict resolution, financial management, leisure activities, sexuality, parenting, relationship with the extended family, division of household labor, and religious practices). Fowers and Olson (1992) reported good reliability estimates of the short ENRICH scale, as well as high concurrent and predictive validity.
Similar estimates were found in the modified Hebrew version (Lavee, 1995). In this version, items and response categories were modified in order to decrease the response set. Instead of the original Likert scale in which items are ranked between “fully agree” and “disagree,” each item is given two extreme response categories and the respondent is asked to check a number on a scale ranging between these responses (for example: “When we have conflicts or disagreements—[1] We always come to an agreement... [7] We seldom are able to bridge our differences”). A scale of this type (see, for example, Antonovsky, 1987) was found to be less affected by social desirability than the typical Likert scale. Indeed, the modified version was found to correlate only modestly ($r = .16$) with a social desirability scale (Lavee, 1995). The scale has been extensively used in studies in Israel. Evidence for its validity has been shown by high correlation estimates (.86 to .91) between scores of the short and the long scales, as well as its ability to discriminate clinical from non-clinical samples.

In the present sample, the internal consistency reliability (Cronbach alpha) of the marital quality scale was .78. This instrument was completed by both spouses. Initial analyses indicated no significant difference between spouses ($t = .13$) and a high correlation between spouses in their evaluation of marital quality ($r = .79, p < .01$). Based on Larsen and Olson’s (1990) suggestion, the spouses’ evaluations were averaged.

**RESULTS**

The data were analyzed in three steps. First, differences between groups were examined regarding their past family relations. Second, we examined the association between past family relations and current relationships with parents. Finally, the effect of past family relations and current relationships with parents on marital quality was examined.

In order to examine the differences between the Leavers and the Remainers in past family relations, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted, testing for group and gender differences. The analysis indicated a significant difference between groups across the six family-of-origin variables ($F = 3.95, p < .05$), but no gender differences were found ($F = 1.45, p = .23$) nor was there a significant interaction between group and gender ($F = 1.07, p = .30$). The findings of the univariate analyses for differences between groups in the family-of-origin variables are presented in Table 2.

The data in Table 2 show that the Remainers report closer family relationships in their childhood than do the Leavers. As compared with the Leavers, they report a stronger emotional bond with their mothers in childhood, a
higher level of mother’s affection, a more cohesive family, and a higher level of marital happiness between their parents. However, no differences were found between groups in their past relationships (i.e., emotional bond and affection) with their fathers.

Next, we examined the association between current relationships with parents, in terms of emotional bond and contact solidarity, and past family relations.

As Table 3 shows, relationships with parents in adulthood, especially in regard to emotional bond, are highly related to the relationships in childhood. The emotional bond with the parents is associated with all past family relations, with the exception of father’s functioning. A regression analysis of current

TABLE 2. Means, Standard Deviations, and Differences Between Groups in Past Family Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Family Relationship</th>
<th>Leavers</th>
<th>Remainers</th>
<th>Difference</th>
<th>F(1,102)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s emotional bond</td>
<td>4.66</td>
<td>5.27</td>
<td>13.01**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father’s emotional bond</td>
<td>4.79</td>
<td>4.81</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s affection</td>
<td>2.07</td>
<td>2.33</td>
<td>5.99*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father’s affection</td>
<td>1.97</td>
<td>2.05</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family cohesion</td>
<td>2.00</td>
<td>2.87</td>
<td>5.28*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ marital happiness</td>
<td>3.05</td>
<td>3.65</td>
<td>12.47**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\[ F(5, 98) = 3.95, \ p < .05 \]
Note: * p < .05  ** p < .01

TABLE 3. Correlations (Person \( r \)) Between Past Family Relationships and Current Adult-Child–Parent Relationships

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Past Family Relationships</th>
<th>Emotional Bond</th>
<th>Contact Solidarity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional bond with mother</td>
<td>.369**</td>
<td>.354**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional bond with father</td>
<td>.243*</td>
<td>.157</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother’s affection</td>
<td>.337**</td>
<td>.240*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father’s affection</td>
<td>.138</td>
<td>.179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family cohesion</td>
<td>.454**</td>
<td>.323**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents’ marital relations</td>
<td>.311**</td>
<td>.325**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* p < .05  ** p < .01
emotional bond on past family relations indicated that these variables together explain 32% of the variance in emotional bond ($F_{(6,82)} = 6.52, p < .001$). A stepwise regression indicated that family cohesion and emotional bond with the mother in childhood best explain current emotional bond ($R^2 = .28, F_{(2,86)} = 16.97, p < .001$).

Contact solidarity is associated with childhood relationships with the mother, with family cohesion, and with the parents’ marital relations. A regression analysis of contact solidarity on past family relations indicated that these variables together explain 16% of the variance in frequency of contact with the parents ($F_{(6,82)} = 2.59, p < .05$). A stepwise regression indicated that parents’ marital relationship and emotional bond with the mother in childhood best explain current contact solidarity ($R^2 = .15, F_{(2,86)} = 7.41, p < .001$).

**Marital Quality of Leavers and Remainers**

In the final phase of the analysis, we examined how past and current relationships with parents are related to the respondents’ marital quality among the Leavers and the Remainers. First, group and gender differences in perceptions of their marital relations was examined by a two-way analysis of variance. The analysis showed a significant group difference, with the Leavers reporting a higher level of marital quality than the Remainers ($F(1,104) = 5.18, p < .05$). However, no gender differences were found nor was there a significant group x gender interaction effect.

Second, the contribution of past and current family relationships to the adult children’s marital quality was analyzed utilizing a hierarchical regression analysis (see Table 4). In the first step of this analysis, group, past parent-child relations and current parent-child relations were entered. The results of the first step indicated that marital quality is explained by group affiliation and by past family

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Past parent-child relations</th>
<th>Current parent-child relations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Group</td>
<td>-0.36</td>
<td>0.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Group</td>
<td>-1.31</td>
<td>0.47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: $R^2 = .12$ for Step 1 ($F_{(3,102)} = 4.45**$); $\Delta R^2 = .04$ for Step 2 ($F_{(1,101)} = 4.45*$); Total model $R^2 = .15, F_{(4,101)} = 4.57**$.* $p < .05$.  ** $p < .01$. 

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Past parent-child relations</th>
<th>Current parent-child relations</th>
<th>Group x current p-c relations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.14</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>-0.14</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table shows the coefficients ($B$, $Se.B$, and $\beta$) for each step of the regression analysis. The note at the bottom of the page provides the significance levels for the $R^2$ values and the $F$ tests.
relations, but not by current relationships with parents. In the second step of the
analysis, an interaction term of group and past family relations was entered, fol-
lowed by an interaction term of group and current parent-child relations. The
group X past family relations interaction did not yield a significant F change,
and the interaction term was not found to be statistically significant. In contrast,
the group X current parent-child relations interaction added significantly to the
explained variance of marital quality ($F_{\text{change}} = 4.45, p < .05$), with a significant
effect of this interaction term on marital quality ($\beta = .74, p < .05$).

In order to examine the interaction effect of group and current relationships
with parents, respondents were divided into two categories of their relation-
ship with parents, based on the median statistic of this variable: strained and
close relationships. A plot of marital quality by each relationship category for
the Leavers and the Remainers is presented in Figure 1. Figure 1 shows that
among the Leavers, marital quality is nearly equal for both levels of the rela-
tionship with parents. Among the Remainers, in contrast, marital quality de-
pends on the current parent-child relationship insofar as close relationships are
associated with high marital quality, whereas strained relationships are associ-
ated with a significantly lower level of marital quality. These results are fur-
ther confirmed by the finding that marital quality and current relationships
with parents are highly correlated among the Remainers ($r = .35, p < .01$), but
not among the Leavers ($r = .12, p = .37$).

FIGURE 1. Marital Quality as a Function of Parent-Child Relationship Among
“Leavers” and “Remainers”
DISCUSSION

Family scholars have long emphasized the correspondence between parent-child relationships and the capacity of adult children to form intimate relationships. One research tradition emphasizes early parent-child and family relationships as predictors of intimate relationships in adulthood (Bowen, 1978; Bowlby, 1969, 1988; Cohn et al., 1992; Shaver et al., 1988). Another line of research is more focused on the intergenerational relationships between elderly parents and their adult children as they relate to the latter’s psychological well-being and marital quality (Bengtson et al., 1990; Mancini & Blieszner, 1989; Suitor & Pillmer, 1988; Ward & Spitze, 1998).

The present study attempts to add to the accumulating knowledge about the links between parent-child relationships and adult children’s marital quality in two respects. First, we consider parent-child relationships both in childhood and adulthood, thus bridging the gap characterized as the alpha-omega tendency in parent-child research (Hagestad, 1987). Second, we examine the moderating role of residential proximity on the association between intergenerational relationships and the quality of adult children’s marital relationships.

Before we discuss the findings, several caveats should be noted. First, parent-child relationships during childhood were retrospectively reported. Since this memory is not necessarily compartmentalized into distinct domains and periods of life, it loses its acuity as time passes. Furthermore, this memory may be biased by current life situations. Second, given that this is a cross-sectional research, causal relations between parent-child relationships and children’s marital quality cannot be ascertained. Bearing these limitations in mind, our findings do provide some new perspectives on the links between parent-child relationships and the quality of adult children’s marital relationships. Furthermore, our confidence in the validity of the findings is based on previous research on parent-child relationships in childhood and adulthood (Rossi & Rossi, 1990) and the association between intergenerational relationships and marital quality (Ward & Spitze, 1998).

The findings indicate several associations that may attest to the developmental nature of parent-child relations and their correspondence with adult children’s marital quality. The closer the relations with parents were in childhood, the stronger they were in adulthood. In particular, parent-child emotional relations and contact solidarity are strongly related to emotional relations with the mother, parents’ marital happiness, and the level of family cohesion during childhood. This finding provides further evidence for the continuity of contact throughout life and corroborates Rossi and Rossi’s (1990) finding that greater intimacy and a stronger emotional bond between adult
children and their parents are associated with better parent-child relations in childhood. Such families tend to manifest more expressions of affection and a stronger sense of family cohesion.

Our findings also indicate that offspring who had more positive family experiences and closer relations with parents in childhood tend to remain in close proximity and to have more intensive contact with them. In contrast, those whose childhood relations with parents were experienced as less affectionate tend to move away. In particular, the decision to remain in close residential proximity was related to emotional relations with the mother, family cohesion, and parents’ marital happiness. These findings provide support for other studies indicating that the parent-child assistance relationship is weaker when parental marital quality is poor and when offspring do not regard their parents as sources of help (Amato, Rezac, & Booth, 1995; Lin & Lewis, 1996). Presumably, families in which parents’ marital relations are stronger also have a stronger sense of family cohesion and a closer emotional bond between offspring and parents.

However, positive family experiences during childhood are not the sole explanatory factor in the decision to stay in close proximity to parents or to move away. Some children remained close to parents even though they reported unfavorable family experiences. According to intergenerational theories (Bowen, 1978), when unresolved parental tensions exist, a child may fulfill an emotional role in the parental relationship—usually within the matrix of a rigid triangle—making separation more difficult. Unsatisfactory relationships with parents also may invoke a low self-image and a lack of self-reliance among children, making it more difficult for them to cope with the “outside world.” Thus, we find adult children who choose to live in close proximity and to maintain frequent contact with their parents despite having strained relationships.

Upon examining the factors that explain the marital quality of children—those who remained close to or moved away from their parents—the findings show that their marital quality is related to the past emotional bond with their parents. The association between marital quality and current parent-child relationships, however, depends upon residential proximity. More specifically, the marital quality of children who moved away remained the same, regardless of whether they had close or strained relationships with their parents. In contrast, the marital quality of those who remained in close proximity to their parents was affected by their current parent-child relationship. Those with strained relationships experienced poorer marital quality than did those whose relations with parents were defined as close. This finding should be evaluated in light of previous research (e.g., Ward & Spitze, 1998) indicating that there is little association between marital quality and intergenerational exchange per se, but rather a more consistent association with the quality of par-
ent-child relationships. In the same vein, Suitor and Pillemer (1994) found that in the context of intergenerational relationships, adult children’s marital satisfaction declined for some but increased for others.

The present study further suggests that offspring who physically distance themselves from their parents are less affected in their marriages by relations with their parents. For those who live near their parents and encounter them on a daily basis, close emotional relationships with parents may enhance marital relationships, whereas strained parent-child relationships may have an unfavorable effect on adult children’s marital quality.

This study is based on a unique sample of kibbutz families, which serves as a natural setting for assessing the moderating effect of residential proximity and contact solidarity between adult children and their parents. Although additional research is needed, we believe that the findings have implications for broader populations. Given the highly mobile nature of modern society, a norm of “remote intimacy” has emerged, with many offspring choosing their place of residence on the basis of such criteria as school, work, and proximity to leisure centers, rather than staying in close proximity to their parents’ home. The findings presented here shed light on this phenomenon and point to the importance of the state of the relationship between parents and their offspring in the formation of adult children’s marital relationships.

REFERENCES


