

MARITAL WELL-BEING AND PARENTAL POSITION AT FAMILIES WITH ADULT CHILDREN

Elena Chebotareva

*Moscow State University of Psychology and Education, HSE University, RUDN University,
Moscow (Russia)*

Abstract

The relationships between adult children and their parents remain an important social and emotional resource for both, but can also cause a range of difficulties. The marital and parental subsystems are interrelated, but these interrelations nature changes throughout the family life cycle. Most studies examine the consequences of leaving the parental home for young people, but - for parents - to a lesser extent. Some studies show that postponing leaving the “parental nest” can be detrimental to the well-being of the marital relationship and the parents’ relationships with their adult children. Our study aim was to examine the nature of the relationship between marital relationships and the parental position of parents of adult children at different stages of the family life cycle. The main attention was focused on the “empty nest” stage, when there is a radical redistribution of marital and parental functions. There were parents, who lived separately from their adult children aged 22 to 35 years (30 respondents). The groups of comparison included parents at the previous stage - with older adolescents (39 persons), as well as parents with adult children, who still lived with their parents, i.e. with a protracted separation (26 respondents). The whole study sample consisted of 95 people (30 men and 65 women) aged 41 to 64 years. The following methods were used in this study: "Family Communication" by Yu. Alyoshina et al., "Triangular Love Scale" by R. Stenberg, "Relationship Assessment Scale" by S. Hendrick, "Parental Position in Relation to Adult Children" by R. Egorov & I. Shapovalenko. We came to the following conclusions. The well-being of marital relations is associated with the parental position at different stages of the family life cycle differently. In general, at the *empty nest stage*, there is a deeper closeness both between spouses and with children. The interactions with children are based more on mutual understanding. At this stage, parents are less focused on children and are more focused on marital relations. In spouses, *living together with adult children*, marital relationships are not interconnected with the level of acceptance of the child, but are associated with control over the child. In *families with adolescents*, no correlations were found between marital relations and the parental position, which may indicate a greater concentration of spouses on the parental function. These results allow us to determine the foci of psychotherapeutic influence in psychological assistance to families with adult children more accurately.

Keywords: *Marital well-being, parental position, empty nest stage, adolescent, child-parent relationships.*

1. Introduction

It is known that family relationships are one of the most important factors of psychological well-being (Hawkins & Booth, 2005). Along with this, an important factor is personal maturity and autonomy (Manukyan, 2002). Both of these factors are closely related to the nature of the relationship between adult children and their parents (Saraiva & Matos, 2012). In previous studies, we have proven that the relationship between psychological well-being and parental separation is mediated by marital satisfaction (Chebotareva & Koroleva, 2019).

As a rule, when a child becomes an adult, the quality of parent-child relationships improves. These relationships, despite the changed patterns of interaction (Shapovalenko & Egorov, 2019), remain important social and emotional resources for both parties (Nomaguchi, 2012). Difficulties in the relationships between adult children and their parents can create a wide range of difficulties for both children and parents (Bouchard, 2016). Cohabitation or separate residence of parents with adult children can affect the nature of their relationships in different ways (Alyoshina, 2002; Aquilino & Supple, 1991). On the one hand, couples report an increase in the quantity and quality of their time together and increased intimacy after their adult children begin living independently, which in turn leads to increased marital satisfaction. But some couples

report that at this stage they experience increasing boredom and loneliness in their relationship, which can lead to divorce (Nagy & Theiss, 2013).

The marital subsystem is considered a fundamental element underlying the development and functioning of the entire family. The marital and parental subsystems are interrelated, but the nature of this interrelationship changes over the family life cycle. Most research examines the consequences of leaving the parental home for young adults and parent-child relationships (Jiao & Segrin, 2021), to a lesser extent for parents (Hall, 2023). The few studies that examine the parental experience suggest that delaying leaving the nest may be detrimental to the well-being of the marital relationship and the parents' relationships with their adult children (Aquilino & Supple, 1991).

2. Objectives

The **aim** of our study was to examine the nature of the relationship between marital relations and the parental position of parents of adult children at different stages of the family life cycle. The main attention was focused on the "empty nest" stage, when a radical redistribution of marital and parental functions occurs. As comparison groups, we included spouses at the previous stage - families with older adolescents, as well as from families with adult children who have not moved to the empty nest stage, i.e., with a protracted separation.

Our research hypotheses were:

1. The relationship between marital relationships and parental position is more pronounced at the "empty nest" stage than in spouses living with adult children or older adolescents.
2. The quality of marital relations at the "empty nest" stage is associated with the nature of the relationship with children. The less control and more acceptance parents show towards adult children, the better their marital relations.

3. Methods

The study **sample** consisted of 95 people (30 men and 65 women) aged 41 to 64 years. Families of 30 respondents were at the "empty nest" stage, living separately from their adult children aged 22 to 35 years ($M = 27.8$); 26 respondents lived together with children in the same age range as in the first group ($M = 26.8$); 39 respondents were from families with children - older teenagers (aged 16 - 20 years, $M = 17$), living together with their parents, i.e. at the stage preceding the "empty nest". All respondents were married from 11 to 44 years, had from one to three children in the above age ranges.

The following **methods** were used to study marital relationships: "*Communication in the Family*" by Yu.E. Aleshina et al., which allows us to assess the degree of trust in marital communication, mutual understanding, similarity of views, semantic unity, psychotherapeuticity and ease of communication; "*Triangular scale of love*" by R. Stenberg (adapted by O.A. Ekimchik), which allows us to evaluate the relationship between the three main factors of love: emotional closeness, passion and commitment. "*Relationship assessment scale*" by S. Hendrick (adapted by O.A. Sychev), which diagnoses satisfaction with close relationships in adults, including spouses, which reflects the satisfaction of the psychological needs of partners. To study the *parental position*, the questionnaire "Parental position in relation to adult children" by R.N. Egorov, I.V. Shapovalenko was used, which assesses the ratio of control and acceptance patterns in parental strategies of interaction with the child.

4. The results

The results of the study, obtained from a comparative analysis of the data of the three studied groups, showed the absence of significant differences in the spouses' assessments of their satisfaction with marital relations, the quality of communication and the feeling of love. In all three groups, the spouses highly assess their marital relations. They are also satisfied with the established nature of communication in the couple, understand each other's needs well, know the interests of the partner, and can communicate easily and naturally. In all three groups, the spouses appreciated most mutual understanding, ease and psychotherapeutic nature of communication.

At the empty nest stage, ease of communication is rated somewhat higher than at other stages. The group with adult children living together shows the greatest variability of indicators. The indicators of all three components of love (closeness, passion and commitment) are also within the range of normative values. In general, love relationships in the sample are harmonious. Apparently, such results are explained by the fact that the sample was made up of people with a preserved marriage at mature stages of marriage, accordingly, with more successful relationships. However, within all groups there is a large data scatter in

relationship satisfaction and in the characteristics of love relationships. Our study was aimed at identifying possible reasons for this variability through an analysis of the relationship between marital and parent-child relationships.

The analysis of the **parental position** showed that, in general, all three groups can be attributed to the balanced type of parental position in relation to adult children. At the empty nest stage, parents are somewhat more accepting of the children and recognize their autonomy. Spouses with adult children, living together with their parents, tend to exercise somewhat greater control over their children, while spouses with teenagers have a somewhat lower level of child acceptance.

Spearman's correlation analysis between marital relations (communication, love, and satisfaction) and parental position (acceptance and control) did not reveal statistically significant relationships in spouses with teenagers. Apparently, at this stage, parent-child relations are determined to a greater extent by the crisis of adolescence and are less associated with the marital relations of the parents.

In the group of spouses at the *empty nest stage*, noticeably more statistically significant correlations were found than in the group of spouses - parents of teenagers. At the empty nest stage, *many characteristics of marital relations are negatively associated with the indicator of child rejection*. The strongest negative correlation between parental rejection of a child and closeness in love relationships ($r = -0.55$), trusting communication (self-assessment $r = -0.57$ and spouse's assessment $r = -0.47$), and psychotherapeutic nature of marital communication ($r = -0.43$) was found. Significant inverse correlations were also found between parental rejection of a child and the overall level of relationship satisfaction (-0.39), similarity in spouses' views (-0.38), and such components of love as passion (-0.367) and commitment (-0.453). In general, the ability of spouses to be in good contact with each other gives more opportunities for their adult children to separate from their parents successfully and safe, and for parents to trust their children more, to abandon strict expectations of them, and to focus more on their own spousal relationships.

It is important that in this group there are no significant connections between the characteristics of marital relations and *control over the child*, while in the group of spouses living together with their adult children, on the contrary, connections between marital relations and control over the child were found, and not a single significant connection with rejection of the child was revealed. Control over an adult child living together with parents significantly positively correlates with mutual understanding between spouses ($r = 0.42$) and trust in communication (0.38). The correlation between the degree of satisfaction with the relationship and control showed a tendency towards significance (0.35). Perhaps, in such families, control over the child performs the function of organizing marital communication, which, in turn, complicates the separation of the child from the parental family and postpones the beginning of his or her independent life.

The results of the factor analysis (principal component analysis with varimax rotation) allowed us to see the *differences in the structure of the relationships between the characteristics of marital and parent-child relationships at different stages of family relationships*, and the results obtained confirm the data of the comparative analysis. In general, in the empty nest group, there is a deeper closeness between spouses who have restructured their relationships with each other, in contrast to spouses living together with adult children and teenagers. These two groups are similar in that they are more focused on children.

The conducted content analysis of the parents' ideas about *the factors preserving their marriages* at different stages of the family life cycle provided additional information about what is important for respondents in their marriages. Thus, it turned out that in different groups the importance of communication and feelings for preserving relationships differs. Also, the respondents' answers showed that in the group of parents, living together with their adult children, there is higher percentage of spouses who maintain their marriage out of habit, which distinguishes them from spouses from the empty nest, where there is more focus on partnerships, care for each other and common interests.

5. Conclusions

Thus, we can conclude that the well-being of marital relations is differently associated with the parental position at different stages of the family life cycle.

In general, at the *empty nest stage*, there is a deeper closeness between the spouses, and between the spouses, and with the children. The strategies of interaction with children are more based on mutual understanding. That is, it can be assumed that, in general, there has been a separation and restructuring of relationships with children and with each other. At this stage, parents are less focused on children than in families with adult children and teenagers, and are more focused on their spousal relationships.

In spouses *living together with adult children*, marital relations are not interconnected with the level of acceptance of the child, but certain aspects of marital relations are associated with control over the child. Perhaps this is explained by the high child-centeredness of the parents in such families and a certain degree of triangulation of adult children, the mediation of marital relations by the performance of parental functions.

In *families with teenagers*, no correlations between marital relations and parental position were found, which may indicate a greater concentration of spouses on the parental function.

The results of the study allow us to determine the focuses of psychotherapeutic influence in psychological assistance to families with adult children more accurately. These data allow us to optimize work with requests regarding both marital and parent-child relationships at the empty nest stage, as well as individual psychotherapy aimed at rethinking people's identity in their post-parental period.

Acknowledgments

I express my acknowledgments to my master students M. Goncharova and T. Dubinina for their assistance in collecting empirical data.

References

- Alyoshina, Yu. E. (2002). *Cikl Razvitiya Sem'i: Issledovaniya i Problemy* [Family Development Cycle: Research and Problems]. Samara.
- Aquilino, W. S. & Supple, K. R. (1991) Parent-Child Relations and Parent's Satisfaction with Living Arrangements When Adult Children Live at Home. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 53(1), 13-27. doi: 10.2307/353130.
- Bouchard, J. M. (2016). Dyadic Examination of the Influence of Family Relationships on Life Satisfaction at the Empty-Nest Stage. *Journal of Adult Development Psychology*, 23, 174-182.
- Chebotareva, E. Yu. & Koroleva, E. V. (2019) Psihologicheskoe Blagopoluchie Zhenshhin Srednego Vozrasta s Razny'm Brachny'm Statusom. Rol' Separacii ot Roditel'skoj Sem'i. *Psihologiya i Psihoterapiya Sem'i* [Psychological Well-being of Middle-aged Women with Different Marital Status. The Role of Separation from the Parental Family. Family Psychology and Psychotherapy], 3, 19-44. doi: 10.24411/2587-6783-2019-10002
- Hall, K. (2023). *Empty Nest Couples, Resiliency, and Marriage Stability: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study*. Liberty University. Lynchburg. Accessed January 5, 2025, from: <https://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=5889&context=doctoral>
- Hawkins, D. N. & Booth, A. (2005). Unhappily Ever After: Effects of Long-Term, Low-Quality Marriages on Well-Being. *Social Forces*, 84(1), 451-471.
- Jiao, J., & Segrin, C. (2021). Parent–Emerging-Adult-Child Attachment and Overparenting. *Family Relations*, 70(3), 859-865.
- Manukyan, V. R. (2022). Vzroslenie Molodezhi: Separaciya ot Roditelej, Sub`ektivnaya Vzroslost` i Psihologicheskoe Blagopoluchie v Vozraste 18-27 let. *Psihologicheskaya Nauka i Obrazovanie* [Youth Maturation: Separation from Parents, Subjective Adulthood and Psychological Well-being at Ages 18-27. Psychological Science and Education], 27. 129-140.
- Nagy, M. E., & Theiss, J. A. (2013). Applying the Relational Turbulence Model to the Empty Nest Transition: Sources of Relationship Change, Relational Uncertainty, and Interference from Partners. *Journal of Family Communication*, 13(4), 280-300. doi: 10.1080/15267431.2013.823430
- Nomaguchi, K. M. (2012). Parenthood and Psychological Well-being: Clarifying the Role of Child Age and Parent-Child Relationship Quality. *Social Science Research*, 41(2), 489-498. doi: 10.1016/j.ssresearch.2011.08.001
- Saraiva L. M. & Matos P. M. (2012). Separation-Individuation of Portuguese Emerging Adults in Relation to Parents and to the Romantic Partner. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 15(4), 499-517.
- Shapovalenko, I. V. & Egorov, R. N. (2019). Tipy` Roditel'skoj Pozicii po Otnosheniyu k Vzrosly'm Detyam. *Akmeologiya* [Types of Parental Position Towards Adult Children. Acmeology], 1, 10-14.