Support, Closeness, and Influence Tactics as Predictors of Acceptance of Unsolicited Parental Advice Regarding a Romantic Relationship during Emerging Adulthood

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This study assessed the effectiveness of parental communication, in addition to relational variables, when attempting to influence an emerging adult to terminate a romantic relationship. Based on survey responses from 173 college students, hierarchical regression analyses indicated that perceived support available from a parent was a significant predictor of accepting parental advice, even when unsolicited. Closeness in the parent-emerging adult relationship was not a significant predictor of advice acceptance and the use of influence tactics (i.e., induction or power assertion) during the advice episode decreases the likelihood that emerging adults will take the parent's advice to terminate a romantic relationship. Findings from the current investigation suggest that supportive, honest, and open communication between the emerging adult and parent play an important role in determining when unsolicited advice is accepted.

An important phase in the developmental transition from adolescence into adulthood is the "winding road" between 18 and 25 referred to by Arnett (2004) as emerging adulthood. Among the features that distinguish this phase of identity exploration is the initiation of a romantic relationship (Arnett, 2004). As Collins (2013) argues, these transitional relationship experiences are not "trivial." The quality of these early relationships influence personal and relational self worth even into adulthood. Moreover, the selection of a partner weighs heavily on the minds of parents who monitor carefully, and often attempt to control, their adolescent's decisions regarding mate choices (Buunk, Park, & Dubbs, 2008).

Efforts to understand the intervention practices of concerned parents have revealed that when adolescents have a good relationship with their parents, they seek their guidance and are receptive to their advice (Kan, McHale, & Crouter, 2008). However, research analyzing 130 emerging adults' descriptions of their experiences in receiving and implementing parental advice revealed that unsolicited advice about romantic relationships was less likely to be accepted than advice directed toward other types of relationships (e.g., friends, family, co-workers) (Carlson, 2014). Carlson (2014) speculates that this type of advice might be dependant on the relational history and interpersonal communication within the emerging adult-parent relationship. Thus, the goal of the current investigation is two-fold: (1) to illuminate the parental influence process by including pre-existing factors in the parent-emerging child relationship (i.e., perceived available support and closeness) that speaks to the parent and child's relational history, as well as, (2) the communicative influence strategies (i.e., power assertion and induction) used by a parent during an episode motivated by the parent's desire to persuade the emerging adult to terminate his or her romantic relationship.

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Advice, Perceived Support, and Closeness

Conceptualized as ''recommendations about what might be thought, said, or done to manage a problem'' (MacGeorge, Feng, & Thompson, 2008, p. 145), research on advice has indicated that people are most positive toward and inclined to follow decisions based on advice of those they perceive as being more expert and confident (MacGeorge et al., 2008). Undoubtedly, parents have more expertise when it comes to dating and when parents disapprove of their child's dating partner, they often want to provide advice, even when that advice is not asked for. Unsolicited advice is a common way of communicating relationship rules about what is appropriate or inappropriate in social interactions (Baxter, Dun, & Sahistein, 2002; Kouper, 2010) and may be used by parents of emerging adults to provide advice about appropriate dating partners. While this type of advice is not necessarily welcomed, researchers have noted that feeling supported by and close to an advice-giver facilitates the likelihood of accepting the advice (Mashek & Aron, 2004).

Perceived support is the belief that if the need arose, support would be available from network and family members (Sarason, Pierce, & Sarason, 1990). Its broad scope subsumes more specific types of support likely to emerge in parent-child relationships, including emotional and instrumental support. Research has indicated that perceived support from parents affects how satisfied and certain emerging adults in college are with their romantic relationship (Bryan, Fitzpatrick, Crawford, & Fisher, 2001). In addition to perceived support, closeness, or the emotional connection arising from trust and affection (Mashek & Aron, 2004), is a salient aspect in responses to advice. For example, Feng and MacGeorge (2006) found in their study of advice giving with regard to a personal problem that emerging adults reported highest receptiveness to advice from people with whom they had the closest relationships, which included their parents. Feng and MacGeorge (2006) speculate that either emerging adults expect advice from individuals who are close to them to be of higher quality, or they believe the advice-giver will care more and have more knowledge about the problem.

Parental Influence Strategies

Research has examined parental influence strategies in the areas of discipline and advice with two strategies emerging consistently: power assertion and induction. Power assertion is a form of discipline in which parents rely on superior power to control a child's behavior, while induction is a non-punitive form of discipline in which parents use explanatory behaviors to address why a child's behavior is wrong and should be changed (Shaffer, 2009). In one of the few studies focused on specific tactics that parents use to manipulate the dating practices of young adult children, Apostolou (2013) derived 12 tactics from interviews with parents and found the two tactics most likely to be employed when attempting to influence the mate choices of their daughters and sons were *advice and reasoning* (similar to an inductive strategy) and messages regarding *whom one should marry* (similar to a power assertive strategy).

Taken together, the research on perceived support and relational closeness suggest that these pre-existing factors should emerge as important influences on a young adult's willingness to accept parental advice regarding a romantic relationship. However, the messages that emerge during the advice-giving episode may be more salient and thereby diminish the positive effects of these relational qualities. That is, messages that use power

assertion may be perceived as "bossy" or critical, threatening the recipient's autonomy (Feng & MacGeorge, 2006), and the response may then be rejection rather than acceptance of the unsolicited advice. By contrast, inductive reasoning intended to lead the young adult to see the negative implications of his or her dating relationship and reach the conclusion that it should be terminated may induce less negative affect and greater likelihood of accepting parental advice. These assumptions are tested in the following hypotheses:

H1: Perceived support and closeness will be positive predictors of accepting unsolicited parental advice regarding a romantic relationship.

H2: A power assertive influence strategy will be a negative predictor of accepting unsolicited parental advice regarding a romantic relationship.

H3: An inductive influence strategy will be a positive predictor of accepting unsolicited parental advice regarding a romantic relationship.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of 173 young adults from a mid-sized Midwestern University was used for this investigation. Respondents ranged in age from 18 to 25 ($M =$ 20.37, $SD = 2.54$), with the sample consisting of mostly women (67.8%). Participants were predominately Caucasian (82.5%) and in their first year of college (40.4%). Relationship status included 43.4% not dating, 19.1% dating casually, 34.7% dating one person exclusively, 1.7% engaged, and 1.2% married.

Procedures

Instructors of undergraduate communication courses distributed a link to an online survey. The survey asked participants to keep one parent in mind (biological mother: $n = 128$ and biological father: $n = 40$) and rate the level of support and closeness felt toward this parent. Respondents were then asked to read a hypothetical scenario:

You've been dating someone for six months now. You honestly believe this person is a good partner for you and you hope to see the relationship continue. However, your parent does not approve of your partner and he/she wants you to terminate the relationship all together. Your parent asks you to sit down for a few minutes so you can have a discussion about your relationship.

The scenario was followed by a single question asking whether they had experienced a similar situation (yes/no) and by a list of items assessing the degree to which their parent had or would use each type of influence strategy in such a situation. Finally, respondents were asked to indicate whether they have or would take the advice.

Scenario Validity Check. In order to confirm the intended perspective within the scenario that the parent's advice was unsolicited, two additional samples of college students were recruited. To avoid bias, one sample of respondents ($n = 40$) were asked to read the scenario and indicate the extent to which they perceived the parent initiated the conversation (i.e., advice was unsolicited) and a second sample of respondents ($n = 42$) were asked to read the scenario and indicate the extent to which they perceived the young adult initiated the conversation (i.e., solicited the advice). Both samples responded on a Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 1 = strongly agree) with scores reverse coded for the second sample. A mean of 4.26 ($SD = .85$) for the combined samples indicated

recognition that the advice was unsolicited.

Measures

All scales were rated on a Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 5 = *strongly agree*). *Perceived support* was assessed with Weber and Patterson's (1996) 13-item Communication Based Emotional Support scale ($M = 3.93$, $SD = .66$) ($\alpha = .88$). Because the scale is designed for romantic partners, some of the items were dropped or adapted and four items were added to assess support likely to be given specifically by a parent. *Closeness* in the relationship was assessed using a revised 12-item version of the Wheeless (1976) Interpersonal Solidarity Scale (ISS) ($M = 4.06$, $SD = .65$) ($\alpha = .89$). *Influence strategies* used during the advice-giving episode were adapted from the Dimensions of Discipline Inventory (DDI) by Straus and Fauchier (2005). Three power assertive questions ($M = 3.88$, $SD = .91$) ($\alpha = .80$) and three inductive influence questions ($M = 2.77$, $SD = .91$) ($\alpha = .69$) were selected and altered. Finally, because no measure of parental advice acceptance is available, three items were constructed for the purpose of this study ($M = 3.36$, $SD = .90$) ($\alpha = .65$) based on scales developed to measure receptiveness to advice (Feng & MacGeorge, 2006) (e.g., "I did (would) take my parent's advice even though it was advice I didn't ask for"). The alphas for the inductive influence items and the advice acceptance items were low (although acceptable). A follow up scale reliability test indicated a reduction in alphas if any items were deleted. Thus, all items were retained for both measures.

Results

Preliminary Analyses

The full sample was used in both regression models as results from an independent samples *t*-test revealed no significant differences on willingness to accept parental advice between those who had actually experienced the situation described in the scenario ($n = 38$) and those who had not ($n = 133$) ($t(12) = -.19$, $p = .72$).

Hypotheses

The hierarchical regression analysis indicated partial support for H1. After controlling for age, sex of respondent, and sex of parent, an additional 16% of the variance in accepting unsolicited advice was predicted by *Support* and *Closeness* ($F(5, 148) = 6.66$, $p < .001$). As indicated in Table 1, support and closeness are both positive predictors of accepting parental advice with regards to terminating a relationship; however, closeness did not reach statistical significance indicating a relatively more salient role for pre-existing perceptions of available support than feelings of closeness in the parent-emerging adult relationship.

The hierarchical regression analysis failed to support H2 and H3. As indicated in Table 1, an additional 5% of the variance in accepting advice was predicted by the *Induction* and *Power Assertion* block, $F(7, 146) = 6.213$, $p < .001$). However, although *Power Assertion* was a negative predictor of advice acceptance, it did not reach statistical significance. Thus, the proposed negative effect of power assertion on an emerging adult's willingness to accept parental advice (H2) was not supported. Also, although *Induction* was statistically significant, it was a negative predictor rather that the

hypothesized positive predictor set forth in H3. Thus, contrary to the proposed positive outcome of leading an emerging adult to accept a parent's preference for romantic relationship termination through logic and reasoning, the reverse effect was evident.

Table 1
Predictors of Accepting Unsolicited Parental Advice Regarding a Romantic Relationship

Blocks	R^2 chg	F chg	Sig.	β
Block 1: Controls	.03	1.39	.25	
Age of Respondent				-.12
Sex of Respondent				.11
Sex of Parent				-.02
Block 2	.16	14.20	.00	
Support				.33*
Closeness				.08
Block 3	.05	4.34	.02	
Inductive Influence Tactic				-.21*
Power Assertive Influence Tactic				-.07

$p < .05$*
Note: These are the final beta weights after including all three blocks.

Discussion, Limitations, and Future Directions

The findings that emerged provide important insight into the effectiveness of a parent's communication in giving unsolicited romantic advice. First, regarding the pre-existing qualities of the relationship, perceived parental support, not feelings of closeness, predict emerging adults' willingness to accept unsolicited parental advice. This suggests that these qualities serve different functions in the decision making process of the emerging adult, particularly in the domain of romantic relationships (Masarik et al., 2013). Cumulative previous interactions during which a parent provided support in other areas of life, including when difficult decisions were made or when challenges were encountered, may lead an emerging adult to trust in the good will, insights, and competence of that parent (Carlson, 2004). These factors may then become more salient than feelings of closeness in decisions to accept parental advice regarding romantic relationships.

Second, the use of influence tactics during an advice episode diminishes the probability that the advice will be accepted. It is plausible that romantic advice, compared to more mundane types of advice such as academic or financial decisions, may be more difficult for parents to communicate given its implications for personal identity, self-sufficiency, and desire to explore romantic possibilities characteristic of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004; Carlson, 2014). Moreover, results indicated that resistance to romantic advice is even more likely when parents attempt to persuade through reasoning rather than direct assertion. Although this may seem counter-intuitive, from the emerging adult's perspective, attempts to lead him or her logically to the conclusion that he or she should break up with a romantic partner may be perceived as more intrusive, or even condescending, than a more direct assertion of disapproval. In actual practice, an open

discussion that facilitates mutual understanding may be the best course of action for a concerned parent.

Although the findings that emerged are useful in illuminating the nuances unique to advice giving episodes during emerging adulthood, the study has limitations that should be noted and addressed in future research. First, the sample was predominately female (68%). As Veksler and Meyer (2004) argue, emerging adult research needs to increase the number of male participants in studies to assess potential differences in gendered and sexual dimensions of communication. In addition, the respondents were, on average, very close to their parents and perceived them to be generally supportive, which is certainly not true of all families. Emerging adults grow up in homes sometimes strained by parental conflict, or after a divorce they live with a single parent or a stepfamily. As Veksler and Meyer (2014) recommend, existing research should be extended to include "troubled or even dysfunctional parent-child relationships" (p. 244). This recommendation may be particularly relevant when the advice given to an emerging adult regarding a romantic relationship is offered by parents who have a dysfunctional marriage or are divorced.

Further, the method used in this study was both a strength and limitation. The quasi-experimental design provided the opportunity to standardize the stimulus scenarios while manipulating the independent variable of influence strategy. At the same time, however, a tightly controlled design preludes the deeper insights that might emerge from thematic analysis of emerging adults' personal descriptions of advice-giving episodes, both solicited and unsolicited (e.g., Carlson, 2014). Future research using emerging adults' descriptions of advice-giving interactions with a parent, followed by questions focused on why and how the conversation was initiated, degree of parental intrusion felt by the emerging adult, and degree of influence the conversation had on his or her romantic relationship decisions, would enrich our understanding of the advice episode.

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