HUMAN DEVELOPMENT AND FAMILY STUDIES

DISSERTATION DEFENSE FOR

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TITLE: FAMILY LIVES OF MARRIED COUPLES IN MIDLIFE

Dissertation Committee:

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PLACE: S211 Henderson Building

Area of Specialization: Family and Methodology

Abstract

Due to prolonged life expectancy, married couples spend more time together and rely on each other in times of need. Further, the parent-offspring tie is one of the longest-lasting ties middle-aged parents experience across their life span. The nature of relationships with spouses and offspring has resulted in extended periods of support and affective connections between family members in adulthood.

My dissertation consists of three papers that utilize dyadic perspectives from both husbands and wives with regard to their relationship to each other and to their adult offspring in adulthood. Papers one and two used middle-aged couples from the Family Exchange Study, a study of exchanges of support and quality of relationships between parents and adult offspring.

Using both spouses’ accounts concerning exchanges of support with offspring and their relationships with offspring, paper one looked at how much parents report imbalance in support for each offspring and then examined whether this imbalance in support contributed to parental feelings of ambivalence towards offspring. The results show that parents felt greater ambivalence when there was a larger imbalance in support for each offspring. In addition, this linkage was moderated by their feelings of
stress and rewards in helping offspring. In addition, similar connections were observed between imbalance in support and parental ambivalence towards offspring between husbands and wives.

Paper two examined the linkage between parents and children in their report of relationship quality using both variable and typological approach. Analyses were conducted using the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM), which takes into account the interdependence of observations between partners. Results show that parents who reported higher satisfaction in parent-child relationships also reported higher marital satisfaction. Conversely, parents who reported lower satisfaction in parent-child relationships reported lower marital satisfaction. This effect did not differ by parental gender. Results from the typological approach revealed somewhat diverse family patterns, families with similar valence and families with dissimilar valence across parent-child and spousal relationships. Different family patterns also had implications for the mental health of couples.

Finally, paper three examines how one spouse’s activity restriction resulting from illness is related to one’s own and his or her spouse’s well-being. Using data from a baseline of the psychosocial intervention study of patients with Osteoarthritis (OA) and their spouses, the paper investigated whether activity restriction (AR) is associated with depressive symptoms of both patients with OA and spouses and also whether marital satisfaction moderates such associations. To account for the interdependent reports of both spouses, APIM was conducted. Results reveal that higher levels of AR predicted higher depressive symptoms for both patients and spouses. Furthermore, marital satisfaction was found to buffer the relationship between levels of AR and depressive symptoms. Significant partner effect found between spouses’ AR and depressive symptoms suggest the interdependent nature of marital context.

In sum, my dissertation aims to extend our knowledge of how middle-aged couples experience their family lives as a spouse and a parent. Together, these studies demonstrated the shared family experiences of middle-aged couples and the implications of involvement in the lives of adult children and spouse on individuals’ well-being. Further, this study underscores the importance of considering both spouses’ perspectives in examining qualities of relationship between marital and parent-adult offspring relationships.