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Parent Derogation and Family Bonding among African American and Non-Hispanic White Males during Middle School

E. Gail Horton, PhD

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore longitudinal relationships between parent derogation and family bonding in a sample of African American and non-Hispanic White males during middle school. While statistically controlling race, regression analyses indicated that parent derogation levels reported in sixth, seventh and eighth grades were statistically highly significant predictors of eighth grade family bonding. However, sixth grade parent derogation was not as strong a predictor as seventh grade parent derogation, and seventh grade was not as strong a predictor as eighth grade parent derogation. These results suggest that improving parent-child communication patterns at any point during middle school could reduce the development of problem behaviors in high school and young adulthood.
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Background

One family factor that has been included in numerous studies exploring risk and protection among adolescents is family bonding. For example, research shows that adolescents who live in families whose members are not strongly bonded tend to engage in higher levels of unprotected sex (Miller, Benson, & Galbraith, 2001), gang membership (Florian-Lacy, Jefferson, & Fleming, 2002), attempted suicide (O'Donnell, O'Donnell, Wardlaw, & Stueve, 2004; Pages, Arvers, Hassler, & Choquet, 2004), and substance use (Jung, 1995; Kingon & O'Sullivan, 2001; Vega & Gil, 1998). Feeling connected to family consistently protects youth from the development of health risk behaviors such as accidental injury, tobacco and other substance use, sexual activity (Resnick et al., 1997). Furthermore, family bonding has been shown to have greater protective value against adolescent alcohol use than other family factors, such as adolescent perception of excessive family drinking or family structure (Kuntsche & Kuendig, 2006), parent derogation, parent-child communication, and family alcohol or drug problems (Horton & Gil, in press).

Another factor that protects against the development of problem and health-risk behaviors in adolescents is open communication between adolescents and their parents (Lambert & Cashwell, 2004; Peterson & Leigh, 1990; Piercy, Volk, Trepper, Sprenkle & Lewis, 1991; Riesch, Anderson, & Kreuger, 2006; Rosenthal, Nelson, & Drake, 1986). According to Olson, Russell and Sprenkle (1989), positive communication (consisting of empathy, reflective listening and supportive comments) has been shown to enhance cohesion and adaptability or flexibility within a family, a factor that allows family members to share their needs and desires with each other. On the other hand, negative communication (double messages, double binds and criticism) blocks family members' ability to share their feelings with other family members. Adolescents who receive negative parental messages concerning themselves, their world or their future have been shown to have

higher levels of depression (Liu, 2003).

Parent derogation is a form of negative parent-child communication in which parents put down or belittle their child. It is a variable that is related to increased probability for the initiation of substance use during adolescence (Biafora & Zimmerman, 1998). It is also associated with higher levels of alcohol use among males during middle school (Horton & Gil, in press) as well as the development of alcohol-related problems in young adulthood (Horton, in press). It is also related to higher levels of delinquency among adolescent females (Taylor, Biafora, Warheit & Gil, 1997). Furthermore, parent derogation has also been shown to be a factor in the level of violent behaviors among urban adolescents (Kingery, Zimmerman & Biafora, 1996).

Self-derogation theory, as formulated by Kaplan, Martin and Robbins (1984), holds that people tend to behave in such a way as to minimize unpleasant (self-rejecting) experiences and maximize pleasant (self-affirming) experiences. These experiences of self come in response to valuations of the person's behaviors by important role models (in the case of adolescents, their parents, among others). This theory, then, would suggest that the negative valuation of an adolescent communicated by parent derogation could result in devaluation of self, and thus act as a risk factor for the development of problem behaviors. When a person is unable "to defend against, adapt to, or cope with circumstances having self-devaluing implications. . . includ[ing] devalued attributes and behaviors or negative evaluations of the person by valued others," self-rejection can occur (Kaplan, Johnson & Bailey, 1986, p. 111). Thus, children are likely to begin to devalue themselves if parents consistently communicate messages of rejection. This could cause distressful feelings that the child would attempt to change by seeking alternative relationships with deviant peers who provide a sense of acceptance (Kaplan & Lin, 2005). Thus, parent derogation might act as an obstacle to the protective effects of family bonding.

Researchers have conceptualized

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communication processes as being a mediating factor between individual, family and environmental factors and adolescent health risk behaviors (Riesch et al., 2006). Since high risk behaviors during adolescence such as substance use, delinquency, and early sexual activity can have long lasting negative effects, it is essential that we examine the relationships between factors such as communication and family bonding that can guide prevention and intervention efforts in mental health and school settings. However, no research has been conducted to date that explores the direct effects of negative parent-child communication patterns in the form of parent derogation on family bonding. Therefore, this study will explore the relationship between parent derogation and family bonding, with the expectation that higher levels of parent derogation will predict lower levels of family bonding.

Methods

Data Source

The data for this study were derived from a two-part longitudinal epidemiologic cohort study. The first part of the study, the South Florida Youth Development Project (SFYD) utilized a sample of adolescents that progressed through middle school in Miami-Dade County in southeastern Florida. The second part of the study, the Transitions Study, gathered data from a subsample of the original SFYD participants after they had left high school and had entered young adulthood. Data were collected in four waves, the first and second waves of data collection during the fall semesters of the sixth and seventh grades (T1, mean age 11.7; T2, mean age 12.9), the third in spring semester of the eighth grade (T3, mean age 14.2), and the fourth wave (T4) when the students were out of high school (T4, mean age 20).

Participants

The Miami-Dade County Public School system granted permission to the researchers to survey all male students entering the sixth and seventh grades. Parents/guardians of 84% of the boys consented to their children's participation in the study ($n=6,934$), and 70% of the boys returned questionnaires ($n = 6,760$) at T1. Ninety percent of these boys ($n=6,089$) were identified and completed the survey at T2, and 79% of the original sample ($n=5,370$) participated at T3. The overall participation rate for the three waves was approximately 80%. A randomly chosen subsample of a total of 956 subjects was recruited from the original SFYD project (75% success rate) for the Transitions phase of the study. For the current study, responses from the African American and Non-Hispanic White participants were extracted from this

subsample, and resulting in a total sample size of 451 (247 Non-Hispanic White and 204 African American male adolescents).

Measurement

Family bonding was measured using a scale derived from Olson, Russell and Sprenkle's (1989) work concerning the circumplex model of family systems. The scale has Chronbach's Alpha for African Americans of .77 for T1 and T2, and .81 for T3. For Non-Hispanic Whites the alphas were .82 for T1, .86 for T2, and .87 for T3. Possible responses ranged from 1 to 4, with higher numbers indicating higher levels of family bonding. The questions in the scale can be found in Appendix A.

Parent derogation was measured using the Parent Derogation Scale developed by Kaplan and his associates (Kaplan et al., 1984), which had Chronbach's Alpha coefficients for African Americans of .73 for T1, .76 for T2, and .77 for T3. The alphas for Non-Hispanic Whites were .69 for T1, .77 for T2, and .83 for T3. Possible responses ranged from 1 to 4, with higher numbers indicating greater parent derogation. The Parent Derogation scale can be found in Appendix A.

Data Analysis

First, overall means at the three data points were calculated for family bonding and parent derogation, and independent sample t-tests were conducted on the means to determine between-race differences in the scores. Then the variables were recoded into dichotomous, "low" and "high," categories, and two-way contingency analyses were conducted to determine overall and group percentages for the variables. The cut-points for the categories were based on epidemiological procedures outlined in previous studies regarding the use of cut-points for risk factor variables (Ellickson & Morton, 1999; Felix-Ortiz & Newcomb, 1999; Newcomb & Felix-Ortiz, 1992; Newcomb, Maddahian, Skager & Bentler, 1987; Scheier, Newcomb & Skager, 1994; Vega, Zimmerman, Warheit, Apospori, & Gil, 1993).

Multiple regressions were then conducted on parent derogation in sixth, seventh and eighth grades with family bonding in eighth grade as the dependent variable while controlling for race. The regressions were conducted in a way that allows for the determination of the effects of parent derogation at each developmental period, as well as determination of the differential impact of the developmental periods by controlling all three periods, sixth grade, seventh grade and eighth grade, simultaneously. To do this, race was entered into an equation for the purpose of determining its unique effect on family bonding. Race was coded African American "0" and

non-Hispanic White “1.” In the next equation, sixth grade parent derogation was entered after race, as were seventh and eighth grade parent derogation in the next two equations. In the final equation all three-parent derogation data points were entered in the same equation, again after controlling race. The incremental effect of each variable was then determined by noting the change in R^2 after each addition.

Results

Family bonding.

The distribution of family bonding scores at all three data collection points is shown in Table 1. The overall scores dropped slightly from 3.5 in sixth grade to 3.3 in both seventh and eighth grades. The independent samples t-tests indicated significant between-race differences in both seventh ($p<.05$) and eighth grades ($p<.01$). The two-way contingency analyses showed that a high percentage of both racial groups reported high family bonding scores at all three data collection points. Between-race differences, however, were not statistically significant, although the differences in eighth grade

did approach significance (Chi-square = 3.38, $p = .066$) with 7% of African Americans compared to 12% of Whites reporting low family bonding.

Parent derogation.

Whereas family bonding scores dropped during the course of middle school, parent derogation scores rose for both races. Table 2 presents the results of independent means t-tests and chi-square analyses for sixth, seventh and eighth grades. Although the differences in means for African Americans and non-Hispanic Whites was not statistically significant at any point, the results of the chi-square analyses indicated that a higher proportion of African Americans than White non-Hispanics reported high parent derogation scores, 18.8%, 22.2% and 21.5% in sixth, seventh and eighth grades, respectively compared to 10.9%, 15.6% and 18.9%, respectively, for White non-Hispanics. These between-race differences were statistically significant in sixth grade (Chi-square = 9.07, $p < .01$), and approached significance in seventh grade (Chi-square = 5.43, $p < .05$). The difference in eighth grade was not statistically significant.

Table 1. Racial differences in mean family bonding scores and percentages of respondents reporting “low” family bonding.

Family Variable	Race		
	All	African American	White non-Hispanics
6th grade bonding <i>M (SD)</i>	3.5	3.5 (.65)	3.4 (.60)
6th grade % responding “low”	6.7%	5.6%	7.5%
7th grade bonding <i>M (SD)</i>	3.3	3.4 (.59)	3.3 (.66)**
7th grade % responding “low”	10.1%	8.4%	11.5%
8th grade bonding <i>M (SD)</i>	3.3	3.4 (.60)	3.2 (.69)**
8th grade % responding “low”	10.0%	7.1%	12.3% ^a

Note: Results obtained utilizing chi-square and independent-samples *t*-test analyses for percentages and means, respectively

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. ^a p approaches significance.

Results for the regression analyses for parent derogation and family bonding are presented in Table 3. It should be remembered that African Americans were coded as “0” and non-Hispanic Whites as “1”. In Equation 1 (Eq.1), race was entered alone to determine its unique contribution to the variance in family bonding. The results of this regression

indicate that African American youths reported significantly higher levels of family bonding, with race accounting for about 2% of the variance in family bonding ($p<.01$). In subsequent equations, race was entered first, followed by the parent derogation variable so that the amount of variance accounted for by parent derogation could be determined while race was held constant. While in

each equation race was a highly significant predictor of family bonding, parent derogation made highly significant contributions to variance even after race was controlled. In Equation 2 (Eq. 2), after controlling for race, sixth grade parent derogation accounted for an additional 3.8% of the variance in family bonding ($p < .01$). In Equation 3 (Eq. 3) and Equation 4 (Eq. 4), the parent derogation variables accounted for an additional 11% ($p < .001$) and 25% ($p < .001$) of variance in the dependent variable, respectively. In Equation 5 (Eq. 5), all of the variables were entered as a block, and only race and eighth-grade parent derogation were statistically significant, the full model accounting for almost 30% of the variance in family bonding. These analyses indicated that there was statistically significant negative correlation between parent derogation and family bonding at all three data points. That is, high levels of parent derogation were significantly correlated with low levels of family bonding, even after controlling for race.

Discussion

In this study, it was expected that higher levels of parent derogation would be related to lower levels of family bonding, and results indicated that this was indeed the case. Results of the regression analyses indicated that the levels of parent derogation reported by respondents in each grade in middle school were highly significant predictors of level of family

bonding in eighth grade, even after statistically controlling race. These results are consonant with other studies that have shown the correlation between negative communication and health risk behaviors among adolescents (Lambert & Cashwell, 2004; Peterson & Leigh, 1990; Piercy et al., 1991; Rosenthal et al., 1986). However, the longitudinal structure of this study allowed us to examine negative parent-child communication over an extended period of time and gauge its predictive value in relation to family bonding. It was determined that in sixth-grade parent derogation was a less valuable predictor of level of eighth-grade family bonding than was seventh-grade parent derogation, and seventh-grade parent derogation was a less valuable predictor of level of eighth-grade family bonding than was eighth-grade parent derogation. That is, the more distal factors were less influential than the more proximal factor. These results suggest that the influence of negative parental communication on family bonding during middle school may have neither a lasting nor cumulative impact on family bonding, but may be more immediate in nature. Riesch et al. (2006) have noted that parent-child communication is a modifiable behavior, and the results here suggest that modifying parent-child communication processes at any point during middle school could result in improved family bonding even though a parent may have used a negative communication style with his or her child for several years.

Table 2. Perceived parent derogation means and proportions in 6th, 7th and 8th grades by race

Family Variable	Race		
	All	African American	White non-Hispanics
6th grade parent derogation <i>M (SD)</i>	1.33 (.56)	1.40 (.62)	1.26 (.40)
6th grade % responding "High"	14.4%	18.8%	10.9%*
7th grade parent derogation <i>M (SD)</i>	1.37 (.59)	1.41 (.63)	1.34 (.55)
7th grade % responding "High"	18.6%	22.2%	15.6% ^a
8th grade parent derogation <i>M (SD)</i>	1.37 (.59)	1.39 (.64)	1.36 (.55)
8th grade % responding "High"	20.1%	21.5%	18.9%

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. ^a p approaches significance.

Table 3. Summary of multiple regression analyses for perceived Parent Derogation reported in 6th, 7th and 8th grades on Family Bonding in 8th grade.

Variable	Standardized Regression Coefficients (Beta)				
	Eq. 1	Eq. 2	Eq. 3	Eq. 4	Eq. 5
Race	-.136**	-.165**	-.167***	-.155***	-.177***
6 th Grade Derogation		-.166**			-.016
7 th Grade Derogation			-.317***		-.031
8 th Grade Derogation				-.502***	-.497***

R ² :	.019	.047	.122	.271	.296
F:	8.29***	10.33***	29.86***	78.98***	41.71***

** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

The results found here, however, cannot be considered evidence of the causal relationship suggested above. From a systems perspective, it is entirely possible that family bonding and parent derogation influence each other in a circular rather than linear manner. That is, it may not be that a parent's putting his or her child down causes problems with family bonding. It could be that existing family bonding problems results in a negative parent-child communication style that in turn results in the child feeling even less bonded to family which prompts him to engage in behaviors that elicit more negative messages from parents. Systems theory (Garbarino, 1992) would, however, suggest that intervention at any point in the reciprocal interactions of parent and child could interrupt the downward trend in family bonding found in this study, an intervention that could improve adolescents' chances of success as they enter high school.

Results of this study should be viewed with some caution due to limitations inherent in its design. First, the data were gathered using self-report. No objective measures of either family bonding or parent derogation were employed, and so responses could be biased in unknown ways. Second, the sample consisted of African American and non-Hispanic males located in south Florida, and therefore results cannot be generalized to females, other racial or ethnic groups, or youths in other parts of the country. Lastly, family bonding may be affected by many

other factors that were not addressed in this study, and as mentioned above, may have a circular relationship with parent communication patterns. The effects of parent derogation could be mediated or moderated by factors such as temperament, mental health status, peer relations, and connectedness to other adults in the community. Future studies should therefore utilize a multivariate design and more sophisticated statistical analyses that could tease out the various relationships.

This study does, however, have implications for practice. Data for this study were collected during middle school, the last wave being collected just before students matriculated into high school. Since family bonding is a factor that protects adolescents from the development of problem behaviors Resnick et al., 1997), it is important that it be strengthened, or at least maintained, as adolescents begin the developmentally appropriate transition to greater freedom from parental oversight and increased time spent with peers that normally occurs during high school. Therefore, ways should be found for prevention and intervention efforts to identify adolescents who feel that they are being denigrated by their parent, and target parent-child communication patterns to increase positive interactions. In addition or alternatively, identified youths could be paired with adult mentors through after school programming or through programs such as Big Brothers-Big Sisters that could work specifically to counteract the negative messages

being received from parents with poor communication skills.

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E. Gail Horton (ehorton2@fau.edu) is Assistant Professor, School of Social Work, Florida Atlantic University, Boca Raton, FL. This paper was submitted on February 12, 2007, and accepted for publication on June 1, 2007. Copyright 2007 by the *Florida Public Health Review*.

Appendix A

Family Bonding Scale

Scale Items:

1. Family members respect one another.
2. We share similar values and beliefs.
3. Things work out well for us as a family.
4. We really do trust and confide in each other.
5. Family members feel loyal to the family.
6. We are proud of our family.
7. We can express our feelings with our family.

Possible responses:

- 1 = agree a lot
- 2 = sort of agree
- 3 = sort of disagree
- 4 = disagree a lot

Parent Derogation Scale and Responses

Scale items:

1. My parents do not like me very much.
2. My parents have put me down for a long time.
3. My parents are usually not very interested in what I say.

Possible responses:

- 1 = Not true at all
- 2 = Not very true
- 3 = Pretty true
- 4 = Very true