Autonomy, Control, and Other Reasons Why "Mom Is the Greatest": A Content Analysis of Children's Mother's Day Letters

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WEISZ, JOHN R. *Autonomy, Control, and Other Reasons Why "Mom Is the Greatest": A Content Analysis of Children's Mother's Day Letters.* CHILD DEVELOPMENT, 1980, **51**, 801–807. For Mother's Day, a community newspaper published letters from children on "Why my Mom is the greatest." Letters from the 249 children, aged 7–17, were analyzed for age and sex differences in the maternal behaviors selected for positive evaluation. References to being granted autonomy and control declined with age; this was interpreted as evidence for developmental gains in identification of the intent underlying parental behavior. References to physical nurturance decreased with age, while references to psychological nurturance and just "being there" increased—findings consistent with person-perception literature on age increases in the use of abstract, covert, and psychological categories. Sex differences were harder to interpret, but appeared consistent with the literature on sex-role identification in children. In addition to its substantive findings, the study illustrates the use of a multivariate procedure that is particularly well suited to naturalistic data in nonorthogonal designs.

> She cooks the best chili and she kisses me every day on the nose. [APRIL, age 7]
>
> My mother is the greatest because she lets us do most anything. [MELISSA, age 10]
>
> She teaches me right from wrong, even though it may hurt. She very heart warming when your down in the blues [sic]. [BILL, age 15]
>
> . . . the type of feelings the child has for his mother will tend to make him love in a certain way, sometimes all through his life, because . . . he partially assimilates his successive loves to this first love which shapes his innermost feelings and behaviors. [JEAN PIAGET, *Play, Dreams, and Imitation in Childhood*]

That children are perspicacious observers of adults, particularly their parents, is well known. Most theories of socialization maintain that children's behavior is based, in part, on their observations of parental behavior. Yet, surprisingly little is known about which aspects of parent behavior children attend to and value. Over the past 90 years there have been flurries of research on children's perception of their parents with methods including contrived classroom writing assignments (e.g., Barnes 1894), free association (Meltzer 1943), projective testing (e.g., Cox 1962), and structured interviews (e.g., Simpson 1935). Particularly useful theoretically have been the numerous studies using questionnaires by Bronfenbrenner (1961) and Schaefer (1965a; see Goldin 1969; Schaefer 1965b; Siegelman 1965). Yet, even these studies are not designed to tell us what children *value* in parent behavior. Moreover, the questionnaires involve only behavior dimensions and fixed-response categories selected by the experimenter. On such instruments, responses may be more constrained and less spontaneous than is needed for a full understanding of what parental behavior children select as praiseworthy when free to choose any behavior.

The present study presents a means of exploring this question using data free of experimenter influence and constraint. These data were letters from children to an upstate New

This article is dedicated to my mother, Oneita Johnston Weisz, an expert in physical and psychological nurturance and in optimum autonomy granting. Her intent has been consistently benevolent, even when her children were too preoperational to appreciate it. The study was supported by grants from the College of Human Ecology at Cornell University and the University Research Council at the University of North Carolina. I am grateful to Lee Pogatshnik, Eileen Goldman, and Mary Gratch for their assistance in the study, and to Bernadette Gray-Little, Harriet Rheingold, Fred Rothbaum, and Deborah Stipek for their helpful comments on an earlier draft.

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York newspaper. In May, this community newspaper invited children to submit letters on "Why my Mom is the greatest," then published all the letters, along with writers' names and ages, in its Mother's Day issue. Coded for various categories, the contents of these letters could be analyzed for sex and age differences, both of which could be anticipated from theory and evidence reviewed below.

Such data have advantages and disadvantages relative to less naturalistic data. Advantages include self-selection of subjects and the perceived importance and uncontrived nature of the task. In the typical experiment, children's participation is decided by their parents and teachers; the task is contrived by the experimenter and it may or may not be important to participants. In contrast, the letter project was initiated by newspaper staff because of its perceived importance to the community; children's voluntary participation presumably reflected personal investment in the task. Finally, although such free-response data tend to tell more about what children *do* than what they *can* do, they are probably less subject to adult bias than are data from adjective checklists, rating scales, and other precategorized response formats (Shantz 1975).

The disadvantages of such data include awkwardness in analysis and limited inferential power. Fortunately, a rather powerful multivariate procedure has been developed for handling the multiple response categories and nonorthogonal designs generated by such data (Appelbaum & Cramer 1974). The use of this procedure will be illustrated here. The problem of limited inferential power (discussed further under "Results and Discussion") exists largely because naturalistic data are usually not structured to promote hypothesis testing. Instead, such data are most often useful in assessing the cross-setting validity of experimentally derived findings and theoretical models (see Weisz [1978] for discussion of this issue). The usefulness of the data depends upon the identification of important themes in the experimental and theoretical literature for which the naturalistic evidence might provide cross-validation.

In the present study three such themes were identified; two concerned developmental change, one concerned sex differences.[1] One theme was developmental change in reactions to being granted autonomy and control. Factors involving autonomy versus parental constraint have emerged rather consistently from the factor analyses cited earlier (see Goldin 1969). In this literature, however, as in developmental research on control (see Weisz 1979; Weisz & Stipek, Note 1), the usual focus has been on the degree to which children perceive themselves and others as causing outcomes. Relatively little attention has been given to children's values with respect to control, or to their evaluations of parents who permit them to exercise control. Because the ability to handle autonomy grows as children mature, one might expect age-related increases in children's appreciation of mothers who grant them freedom and control. On the other hand, Appel (1977) has argued that as children mature they come to appreciate maternal constraints on their autonomy and control. The hypothesized basis for this change is the child's growing awareness of intentionality (Piaget 1962) —in this case the recognition that curtailed freedom may represent a "good mother's intent to socialize her child." Appel's reasoning suggests a decline with age in the frequency with which children would argue that "Mom is the greatest" because she grants them control (see category 5 under "Method"), and an increase with age in valuing maternal restrictions (category 6). Yet, as noted above, opposite predictions could plausibly be made.

Nurturance was the second theme emphasized here. In one review (Dubin & Dubin 1965), nurturance was suggested as the behavior underlying the repeated finding that children have more positive feelings toward their mothers than their fathers (Gardner 1947; Hawkes, Burchinal, & Gardner 1957; Meltzer 1943; Nimkoff 1928; Simpson 1935; Bowers, Note 2). Yet nurturance can take both physical and psychological forms, and the literature on person perception suggests that these may be differentially emphasized by children at different ages. Person perception in younger children generally focuses on categories that are relatively concrete and overt; physical nurturance seems to fit this description. With increasing maturity, children increasingly emphasize categories that are more abstract, covert, and psychological (i.e., requiring inferences about people's internal states [see Livesley & Bromley 1973; Shantz 1975]); psychological nurturance (meeting needs for emotional support and understanding) seems to have these qualities. Thus, the person-perception literature gives us

[1] These themes, of course, reflect my own interests. Other investigators might well have focused on other themes quite legitimately.

reason to suspect that letters may focus on physical nurturance (category 9) less and on psychological nurturance (category 10) more as age level increases.

One question about sex differences was of particular interest here. Social learning theorists (e.g., Mischel 1970) argue that children acquire sex-typed behavior largely through attending to and learning from same-sex models, especially same-sex parents. Most cognitive-developmental theorists (e.g., Kohlberg 1966) agree that same-sex modeling plays a role, provided that children have acquired the concept of gender identity. (Our letter writers were all at or above the typical age of gender-identity acquisition.) Evidence on selective attention to, and imitation of, same-sex models (see Maccoby & Jacklin 1974; Slaby & Frey 1975) gives modest support to the modeling view. That research, however, does not directly answer the basic question of whether children are more likely to value the modeling and teaching of a parent if the parent is of the same sex than if the parent is of the opposite sex. Here it was possible to shed some light on the issue by assessing the relative frequency with which girls versus boys referred to the modeling and teaching role of their mothers (category 8) as a basis for regarding them as "the greatest."

A number of other categories of mother's behavior were included in the analysis either because they appeared frequently in the children's responses (see categories 4 and 11 below), because they were difficult to subsume under existing categories (2, 3, 7), or because their prominence in developmental literature justified giving them some attention (1, 12, 13, 14). Since categories of the first two types emerged from the investigator's inspection of the letters, it is probable that other investigators would have identified a somewhat different set of categories.

Method

Subjects and Solicitation of Letters

The newspaper had announced that it would publish all letters received and award a prize (dinner in a local restaurant) for the two "best" letters (criteria for judging were not announced). Some 302 letters were received. The newspaper's circulation was 21,000, so the letter writers were a distinct minority of children whose families received the paper. Of the 302 letters, 53 were eliminated from the sample because age was not reported, the name was ambiguous as to sex, or the letter had dual authorship. Writers of the 249 remaining letters were 70 boys and 170 girls aged 6–17 years.

Response Categories

Consistent with the purpose of the study, the response categories used incorporated only references to the mother's behavior toward her child; other dimensions that could have been abstracted from these letters (e.g., physical attributes of mother, syntactic properties of letters) were ignored. The 14 categories were:

1. Showing Affection: Demonstrating that she likes, loves, or cares about the child. ("My Mom is loving." "She kisses me.")

2. Serving as Advocate: Defending, protecting, taking the child's side in cases of conflict or threat. ("She sticks up for me." "She tells my brother to get out of my room.")

3. Just Being There: Mere presence, with no particular activity specified. ("She's always there when I need her." "She always will be there.")

4. Collaboration: Working or playing together with the child. ("She plays with me." "We bilt [*sic*] a bird feeder.")

5. Permitting Control: Granting autonomy, removing or overlooking limits, loosening up on rules, acceding to the child's requests for privileges or material goods; any act that lets the child's will prevail, or allows the child to set his or her own limits or make his or her own decisions. ("She lets me stay up late." "She let me have my ears pierced.")

6. Restricting Control: Setting limits, making or enforcing rules, saying no to requests for privileges or material goods, curtailing the child's autonomy. ("She makes us eat fruit and vegetables." "She tells me to go to bed early.")

7. Joking and Entertaining: Being playful or humorous, making the child laugh, playing tricks or otherwise entertaining the child. ("She tells great stories." "My Mom is nice and gay, and always wants to play.")

8. Modeling and Teaching: Direct instruction, serving as a model, or showing by example. ("My mother teaches me things I do not know, like history, math, and vocabulary words." "She teaches us to love and respect other people.")

9. Physical Nurturance: Providing for the child's physical needs and wants, including food, toys, sports equipment, and transportation. ("She cooks noodles that I like." "My Mom also bought me a new long dress.")

10. Psychological Nurturance: Satisfying needs for emotional support and understanding; listening, understanding, or providing counsel regarding personal problems or emotional distress. ("She understands many of my teenage problems." "When I have troubles she talks them over with me.")

11. Vague Nurturance: Responses that refer to taking care of the child or meeting the child's needs or wants, but which lack enough detail to identify the nurturance as either physical or emotional. ("She takes good care of me." "She gives me plenty of tender loving care.")

12. Praising or Showing Interest: Expressing pleasure, pride, or interest in what the child does. ("She compliments me on all my work." "She was always proud of the things I did.")

13. Punishing: Rebuking, physically punishing, or withholding rewards explicitly in response to unwanted behavior. ("She yells at me when I need it." "When I'm bad she sends me to my room.")

14. Rewarding: Giving rewards explicitly for appropriate behavior. ("She gives me money when I do something good." "She rewards me when I do right.")

Reliability of the Categories

Using these categories, rater A, who was unfamiliar with literature related to the study, coded all 249 letters. Rater B, who was familiar with relevant literature, independently coded one-third of the letters. On the 83 letters which both raters coded, agreement as to number of codable responses was substantial ($r = .89$). On responses which both agreed were codable, agreement for the categories was generally high. Of the responses coded as Vague Nurturance by rater A, 75% were so coded by rater B. Concordance was 77% for Showing Affection, 80% for Punishing, and 86% for Psychological Nurturance. For all remaining categories the concordance was greater than 90%, except for Rewarding, which showed only 50% concordance. However, Rewarding, Serving as Advocate, Joking and Entertaining, and Praising occurred less than four times each, so concordance figures for these four are hardly meaningful.

Results and Discussion

Qualifications Regarding the Findings

The findings should be read with certain qualifications in mind. First, unlike controlled studies of either the laboratory or field variety, this study used a self-selected and thus nonrandom sample, the representativeness of which is unknown. Children's motives for writing are impossible for us to ascertain and are undoubtedly diverse. Since the letters were written for inspection by adult newspaper staffers, and were probably designed in part to compete with other letters, their content may depart somewhat from the children's most private perceptions of their mothers' good qualities. In these and other ways the children's observations in these letters may have been influenced by adults and perceived adult standards. Finally, age differences in the frequency of certain categories may reflect differences in the ability to express certain categories verbally; however, such differences may, in turn, reflect age differences in ways children think about and evaluate their mothers' behavior.

Frequency of Letter Writing by Age and Sex

Before examining the content of the letters, let us focus on incidence alone. A table showing the number of letters written by children of both sexes at each of the 12 yearly age levels revealed a statistically significant relation between age and sex, $\chi^2(11) = 20.1$, $p < .05$. With increasing age, girls were increasingly more likely than boys to write. When the table was collapsed to provide the most even distribution of letters into two age groups, ages 6–9 and 10–17, the resulting 2(sex) × 2(age) table was also significant, $\chi^2(1) = 8.53$, $p < .01$. Of the letters written by 6–9-year-olds, 50% (68/116) were by girls. This figure increased to 77% (102/133) for the 10–17-year-olds.

These findings may conceivably reflect age increases in the strength of children's identification with the same-sex parent. Alternatively, one might argue that as children mature, male-female differences in verbal fluency become more pronounced. Yet, available evidence (see Maccoby & Jacklin 1974) offers relatively little support for the latter view. Even if it did, such sex differences in ability could not explain the decline with age in letter writing by boys, since absolute levels of verbal ability are certain to increase with development. It may be that with increases in age, girls were more motivated to write for reasons unrelated to the match between their gender and their mothers' —perhaps because of socialization that makes them more willing than boys to express their feelings in writing; but this is a difficult possibility to test in the absence of a Father's Day letter contest.

Low-Frequency Categories

A surprising finding was the low frequency of two behavior categories developmentalists have traditionally viewed as central to the parent-child relationship. Praising was mentioned only once by four children, and Rewarding only once by two children. That these behaviors were not mentioned because they were obvious functions of mothering seems unlikely because references to such obvious behaviors as feeding the child were exceedingly frequent. More plausible is the possibility that praising and rewarding are less salient to children than to the developmentalists who study them. This is not to say that praise and reward have little influence on children's behavior—such a conclusion would fly in the face of overwhelming evidence. But the finding may suggest that for many children, the perceived impact of maternal praise and reward is less noticeable, or their perceived importance is less pronounced, than their actual impact and importance would lead many of us to suspect.[2]

Frequency of Response Categories: Multivariate and Univariate Tests

For the principal analyses, subjects were grouped into the 2×2 table described above. To control for number of responses, each subject was given 10 scores in the form of proportions—the proportion of all his or her codable responses that fell into each category. The four low-frequency categories mentioned earlier were excluded. The 10 scores were arcsine transformed, then subjected to a 2 (age) $\times$ 2 (sex) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) using the procedure recommended by Appelbaum and Cramer (1974) for nonorthogonal analysis of variance. In it, the method of least squares is used to estimate the values of parameters in various models with the goal of selecting the simplest components-of-variance model that fits the data well. In accord with the recommended sequence of model comparisons, the age $\times$ sex interaction was tested first; it was nonsignificant ($p > .9$), thus indicating that the γ_{ij} term should be dropped from the full $Y_{ij} = u + \alpha_i + \beta_j + \gamma_{ij} + e$ model. Next, the multivariate main effect of age was tested, eliminating (i.e., controlling for) sex, as was the multivariate main effect of sex, eliminating age. The sex effect was not significant ($p = .18$), but the age effect was, $F(10,237) = 2.84$, $p < .01$. Hence, the solution algorithm leads to the model, $Y_{ij} = u + \alpha_i + e$, in which α_i represents the effect of age.

Age effects.—Univariate F tests for age revealed three significant main effects and one that was marginal. A main effect on Permitting Control, $F(1,245) = 6.79$, $p < .01$, revealed a decline with age in the frequency of this category (mean proportions: .137 and .061). This finding appears consistent with Appel's (1977) view that as children mature they come to recognize that maternal restraints often reflect a benevolent intent and that permissiveness may reflect laxity or disinterest. Appel's perspective would have received additional support if scores for Restricting Control had shown a developmental increase, but this effect did not materialize ($p > .50$), possibly because of the very low frequency of such statements overall ($N = 13$). Perhaps statements to the effect that "She doesn't let me . . ." seemed to most letter writers to be superficially too negative in tone to convince others that their mother was "the greatest."

References to Psychological Nurturance increased with age, $F(1,245) = 13.62$, $p < .001$ (means: .004 and .187); references to Physical Nurturance showed a marginal decline with age, $F(2,245) = 3.20$, $p = .075$ (means: .419 and .305). The high frequencies for Physical Nurturance (easily the most frequently mentioned category) suggest that even with increasing maturity children value their mothers' ability to satisfy their physical needs. But the two effects taken together suggest that consistent with the person-perception literature, children's emphasis on this rather concrete and overt dimension declines with age as greater attention is given to the more abstract, covert dimension of Psychological Nurturance. One aspect of what seems to emerge with age could be termed "meta-perspective-taking." Children eventually are able not only to take the perspective of others, but to recognize instances where others (e.g., mothers) take *their* perspective. Statements such as, "She always seems to know how I feel" and "When I'm sad she knows what's on my mind" seem to reflect such meta-perspective-taking—a skill that requires a fairly advanced level of cognitive development.

[2] Another possibility worth considering is that some of the food, toys, recreational privileges, etc., coded under Physical Nurturance were actually rewards for good behavior. In the present coding scheme these were not labeled rewards unless the child indicated that they were contingent on certain behavior.

References to the mother's Just Being There were not frequent, but those that did occur were confined almost exclusively to older writers, and the univariate age effect was significant, $F(1,245) = 4.61$, $p < .05$ (means: .001 and .037). Among several possible explanations, one of the simplest and most appealing relates to the person-perception literature. It is a relatively easy task cognitively to recognize that one's mother is contributing something positive when her activity level is high and she is generating tangible products (e.g., cooking good food). But to perceive a contribution in her presence alone is to recognize an intangible, psychological contribution that is not perceptually salient; this should be more likely to occur with greater cognitive maturity.

Modeling, teaching, and gender.—Although the multivariate effect of sex eliminating age was not significant, an a priori interest in sex effects on Modeling and Teaching justified a univariate F test on this variable. Frequencies for this category were low, but the F test did reveal that girls referred to Modeling and Teaching more often than boys, $F(1,245) = 4.31$, $p < .05$ (means: .005 and .036). The effect supports the general view that children are more inclined to select the modeling and teaching role of a parent as worthy of praise if the parent is of the same rather than the opposite sex.[3] The low frequency with which children mentioned modeling and teaching at all, as with the low scores for praising and rewarding, may signal another domain of parent behavior that is less salient for children than its apparent importance would lead us to suspect.

Conclusions

The results seem to illustrate several significant changes that occur as children mature. Although they cannot be interpreted unambiguously, the strong and increasing preponderance of female over male letter writers and the gender difference in references to the Modling and Teaching role of the mother are consistent with experimental findings on sex-role identification in children. The age findings indicate that both children and adolescents strongly value Physical Nurturance in their mothers, but that with maturity they emphasize such concrete and perceptually salient behavior less and increasingly emphasize such subtle and psychologically significant behavior as Psychological Nurturance and simply Being There. These findings are consistent with the general developmental literature on person perception (see Livesley & Bromley 1973; Shantz 1975). Finally, the findings on Permitting Control are in harmony with Appel's (1977) proposition that the absence of parental restraint is less likely to be considered praiseworthy as children mature enough to recognize parental intent.

These findings justify the use of a class of data rarely exploited by psychologists. Since the data are uncontrolled, findings are subject to careful qualification (as noted above). But the self-selection of subjects, the naturally occurring task and setting, and the apparent importance of the activity to participants seem to bring us closer to the children in several respects than we usually get with structured questionnaires and contrived laboratory tasks. These naturalistic data provide a useful complement to questionnaire and laboratory evidence (see Weisz 1978).

In addition to generating substantive findings, the study illustrates how Appelbaum and Cramer's (1974) method of handling multivariate nonorthogonal designs may be applied to naturalistic, free-response data. With other multiple-category data of this type the method can provide a useful means of testing whether, as was partly true here, theoretically plausible patterns found in controlled experiments are borne out in the often unwieldy data of real life.

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2. Bowers, S. M. A study of child-parent relationship. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Ohio State University, 1931.

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[3] To more adequately test this interpretation, it would be useful to have data from Father's Day letters, since one alternative interpretation that cannot be ruled out here is that girls value the modeling and teaching role of both mothers and fathers more than do boys.

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