

This article uses a panel study of children and mothers to examine how parents and children conceptualize, perceive, and report on their relationships with each other during the children's transition to adulthood years. The article provides strong support for the reliability and validity of reports of parent-child relationships. The article documents generally positive and supportive relationships between parents and children, more positive relationships with mothers than with fathers, and an improvement in relationships as children mature from age 18 to 23. Further, parent-child relationships are perceived differently by parents and children in that there is not just one perception of the relationship between child and parent, but a relationship as perceived by the child and a relationship as perceived by the parent.

## **Parent-Child Relationships During the Transition to Adulthood**

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Virtually all theoretical or conceptual frameworks of individual behavior recognize that interpersonal relationships are central and significant to the lives of individuals.<sup>1</sup> These theoretical frameworks stress the influential nature of interpersonal relationships in the formation and maintenance of individual behaviors, attitudes, and values. Interpersonal relationships can provide important social capital for achieving other individual goals. These theoretical frameworks also emphasize that the quality of interpersonal relationships is strongly related to an individual's overall well-being. Research results consistently indicate that interpersonal relationships are vital to individual physical and mental well-being, in that they

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help define one's satisfaction and enjoyment in life (Campbell, Converse, & Rodgers, 1976; Gurin, Veroff, & Feld, 1960).

Numerous kinds of interpersonal relationships have been examined for their influence on individual lives, including those organized around neighborhoods, friendships, schools, and workplaces. Nonetheless, most theoretical perspectives emphasize that those relationships centered on the family are particularly fundamental. Parent-child relationships are especially central because they begin early in life and are intensive across large portions of the life course.

Given the importance of parent-child relationships as central components of individual well-being and as facilitators for achieving other goals, researchers have begun to examine how these relationships are formed and used. Although this is a significant and worthwhile endeavor, we believe that before we can thoroughly explain the determinants and consequences of parent-child relationships, we must understand how individuals conceptualize, perceive, and report on those relationships. Through consideration of these issues, we both enhance our understanding of the measurement and distribution of parent-child relationships and set the stage for subsequent examination of the determinants and consequences of these relationships.

Although a wide range of dimensions of parent-child relationships has been identified in the literature (Bengtson & Schrader, 1982; Gronvold, 1988; McChesney & Bengtson, 1988; Rossi & Rossi, 1990), this article focuses on the degree of affection, sentiment, enjoyment, and understanding in the relationship. We investigate several conceptual and methodological issues concerning the quality of parent-child relationships.

Although most of the literature addresses mother-child relationships, we examine the relationship between child and both mother and father. We are particularly interested in the extent to which children have similar relationships with their fathers and mothers. Because of the emotional bond between most parents and the intense joint interaction required in rearing children, parents might develop similar patterns of relating to their children. In addition, the two parents are dealing with the same child, a child with an independent set of personality characteristics, which may suggest a similarity of relationships between children and their mothers and fathers.

At the same time, mothers and fathers have been socialized to their gender-specific roles. These parental roles carry with them different expectations about behaviors and attitudes that may influence interactions with children. Furthermore, because the meanings of father and mother in

our culture are conceptually distinct, these meanings may influence how children identify and perceive their parental relationships. Mothers are typically seen as nurturing and understanding; fathers are perceived as powerful and deserving of respect. Given these gendered roles and meanings, we expect that children will perceive their mothers as warmer and more understanding, whereas they will report higher levels of respect for their fathers. Although relationships with mothers and fathers could also vary by the gender of the child, the effects of children's gender on these relationships are beyond the scope of this analysis.

Most studies of parent-child relationships have focused on what Hagestad (1987) calls the alpha and omega of parent-child relationships—those existing at the beginning of the child's life or at the end of the parent's life. This article focuses on parent-child relationships during the middle years, when the child is making the shift from dependence within the parental home to independent adulthood. Although parent-child relationships during this transition period may be characterized as difficult for some parents and children, we anticipate that parent-child relationships during this period of the life course will be perceived as positive by most parents and children.

Given the increased attention by researchers to issues of change and stability within relationships across time (Bradbury, *in press*; Hatchett, Veroff, & Douvan, *in press*; Orbuch, House, Mero, & Webster, 1992), we also are interested in the stability of parent-child relationships. We expect changes in parent-child relationships during these middle years, because the transition to adulthood brings numerous changes in the lives of young people—including shifts in school attendance, employment, marriage, living arrangements, and parenthood (Goldscheider & Goldscheider, 1994; Rindfuss, 1991; Thornton, 1988; Thornton, Young-DeMarco, & Goldscheider, 1993). We argue that these changes will positively influence the quality of parent-child relationships. As children make the transition to adulthood, parents and children are able to make adjustments that can ameliorate stresses and strains in the relationship. In addition, as children experience the same adult roles as their parents, they are more likely to understand and identify with their parents.

Another focus of our study considers whether the relationship is perceived similarly by parents and children. For example, do mother and child report similar perceptions of their relationship with each other? Furthermore, if the relationship is perceived differently by the two actors, are the individuals involved cognizant of the different perspectives? One prior study suggests that children and parents evaluate their relationship differently, but that individuals involved report the two perspectives

similarly (Gronvold, 1988). We agree with Gronvold; there are numerous reasons to argue that parents and children see the relationship differently yet are unaware of each other's perspective.

We also examine whether the quality of the relationship between parents and children is unidimensional or multidimensional. Do members of parent-child dyads perceive the quality of their relationships as one overarching dimension or do they distinguish multiple dimensions? We expect that parents and children perceive their relationships as multidimensional and that they distinguish between active and passive dimensions. We hypothesize that parents and children differentiate those aspects of relational quality that are active and require behavior (e.g., communication, affection, enjoyment of time) from those dimensions that are passive and require thought and cognitive processing (e.g., understanding, respect, sympathy). The unidimensionality of quality in parent-child relationships is an issue that parallels a debate in the general relationship literature about whether marital quality is unidimensional or multidimensional (Fincham & Bradbury, 1987; Glenn, 1990, 1991; Johnson, White, Edwards, & Booth, 1986; Spanier & Lewis, 1980).

Finally, we focus on the reliability of the reports given by parents and children concerning their relationships. This is an important issue if we are to trust our findings and interpretations about parent-child relationships. There is reason to believe that these reports may not be reliable, because individuals are highly responsive to situational, external, and researcher cues and demands. Nonetheless, we expect that parents and children give generally reliable reports to researchers when asked about their personal relationships with each other.

## DATA AND METHOD

The data used in this study were taken from an intergenerational panel study using a probability sample of first-, second-, and fourth-born White children drawn from the July 1961 birth records of the Detroit metropolitan area. The mothers of these children were interviewed seven times between 1962 and 1985, and the children were interviewed in 1980 and 1985 when they were 18 and 23 years of age, respectively.<sup>2</sup> The data for this analysis come from the 1980 and 1985 interviews. The mothers were interviewed by telephone in both years. The children's interviews were conducted face to face when the children were living in the Detroit area; children living away from the Detroit area were interviewed by telephone.

In the initial 1962 survey, 92% of the sampled mothers were interviewed; in 1985, interviews were obtained with both the mother and child in 82% of the families originally interviewed in 1962.<sup>3</sup> The analysis in this article is restricted to those 867 families in which both the mothers and children were interviewed in both 1980 and 1985.

The questions used in this study were adapted from measures of parent-child affection used by Gold and colleagues in multiple studies (Atwood, Gold, & Taylor, 1989; Gold & Mann, 1972; Gold & Yanof, 1985; Weintraub & Gold, 1991). The measures are also quite similar to those reported by Gronvold (1988) in her study of affectual solidarity. In Table 1 we provide the exact wording for the questions used. Panel A of the table lists the five questions asked of the mothers in both 1980 and 1985. Those questions were introduced by the comment: "The next group of questions has to do with your relationship with NAME."<sup>4</sup> For the following statements, please tell me whether it is *always*, *usually*, *sometimes*, or *never* true."

Panel B of Table 1 provides the questions asked of the children in 1980 and 1985 about their relationships with their mothers. Identical questions were asked of the children about their fathers; these questions are listed in Panel C. For the children interviewed in person, these questions were ascertained in a self-administered format. The questions asked of the children about both mothers and fathers were introduced as follows: "For the following statements, please mark whether it is *always*, *usually*, *sometimes*, or *never* true."

A modification of this procedure was used for children whose biological mothers and fathers were not currently married and living together (because of either mortality or marital discord). These young people were asked to identify "which female/male *parent* or *guardian* do you think has had the most influence in your life?" The response choices given to the children were natural mother/father, adoptive mother/father, step-mother/father, foster mother/father, other female/male relative or guardian. The children were then instructed to answer the questions in Table 1 for their most influential mother/father figure. This approach was followed because for those instances of marital disruption, we wanted information about the most *influential* parent rather than the *biological* parent.

In 1980, 76% of the children reported their biological parents as currently married and living together; by 1985 that number had fallen to 71%. In both 1980 and 1985, the overwhelming majority of children whose parents were not currently married and living together reported their most influential female parent or guardian to be their natural mother.<sup>5</sup>

TABLE 1  
Measures of Parent-Child Relations

<i>Models and Associated Constructs</i>				
	1 <sup>a</sup>	2 <sup>b</sup>	3 <sup>c</sup>	4 <sup>d</sup>
A. Mother about relationship with child				
1. NAME'S ideas and opinions about the important things in life are ones you can respect (Respects Child)	m	m-m	ma-m	mc-m
2. He/she respects your ideas and opinions about the important things in life (Child Respects Mother)	m	m-m	mb-m	mc-m
3. You find it easy to understand him/her (Understands Child)	m	m-m	ma-m	mc-m
4. You enjoy doing things together with NAME (Enjoys Doing with Child)	m	m-m	ma-m	md-m
5. You enjoy talking to NAME (Enjoys Talking Child)	m	m-m	ma-m	md-m
B. Child about relationship with mother				
6. My mother's ideas and opinions about the important things in life are ones I can respect (Child Respects Mother)	m	m-c	ma-c	mc-c
7. My mother respects my ideas and opinions about the important things in life (Mother Respects Child)	m	m-c	mb-c	mc-c
8. My mother accepts and understands me as a person (Mother Understands Child)	m	m-c	mb-c	mc-c
9. I enjoy doing things together with my mother (Enjoys Doing with Mother)	m	m-c	ma-c	md-c
10. My mother makes it easy for me to confide in her (Confides Mother)	m	m-c	mb-c	md-c
11. My mother gives me the right amount of affection (Affection Mother)	m	m-c	mb-c	md-c
12. When something is bothering me, I am able to talk it over with my mother (Talks over Mother)	m	m-c	ma-c	md-c
C. Child about relationship with father				
13. My father's ideas and opinions about the important things in life are ones I can respect (Child Respects Father)	f	f-c	fa-c	fc-c
14. My father respects my ideas and opinions about the important things in life (Father Respects Child)	f	f-c	fb-c	fc-c

(continued)

TABLE 1 Continued

	Models and Associated Constructs			
	<i>1</i> <sup>a</sup>	<i>2</i> <sup>b</sup>	<i>3</i> <sup>c</sup>	<i>4</i> <sup>d</sup>
15. My father accepts and understands me as a person (Father Understands Child)	f	f-c	fb-c	fc-c
16. I enjoy doing things together with my father (Enjoys Doing with Father)	f	f-c	fa-c	fd-c
17. My father makes it easy for me to confide in him (Confides Father)	f	f-c	fb-c	fd-c
18. My father gives me the right amount of affection (Affection Father)	f	f-c	fb-c	fd-c
19. When something is bothering me, I am able to talk it over with my father (Talks over Father)	f	f-c	fa-c	fd-c

a. Mother-child relationship has one dimension, *m*, reflected in both mother and child responses. Father-child relationship has one dimension, *f*.

b. Mother-child relationship has two dimensions: one measured from the mother's perspective, *m-m*, and one measured from the child's perspective, *m-c*. Father-child relationship has one dimension, *f-c*.

c. Mother-child relationship from the mother's perspective has two dimensions: insider, *ma-m*, and outsider, *mb-m*. Mother-child relationship from the child's perspective has two dimensions: insider, *ma-c*, and outsider, *mb-c*. Similarly, father-child relationship has an insider-outsider dimension, *fa-c* and *fb-c*.

d. Mother-child relationship from the mother's perspective has two dimensions: passive, *mc-m*, and active, *md-m*. Mother-child relationship from the child's perspective also has passive, *mc-c*, and active, *md-c*, dimensions. Father-child relationship also has passive, *fc-c*, and active, *fd-c*, dimensions.

Although the children in maritally disrupted families were less likely to report their natural father to be their most influential parent figure, the majority of such children reported their natural father as the most influential father figure. Consequently, the percentage of all children reporting information about their natural father was 89% and 88% in 1980 and 1985, respectively. In each year, about 4% of the children reported data about a stepfather, and between 4% and 5% reported about another male relative or guardian. In a few cases, children were unable to answer the questions because the biological father had died, and there was no father substitute identified by the interviewing procedures.

For most of the analyses in this article, we report data from all of the children giving information, ignoring whether the data concerned a natural parent or someone else. However, for some analyses where it was particularly important to have information about the natural parents, we restricted the sample as appropriate (to be described later).

In addition to providing the wording of the study questions, Table 1 indicates four different models for conceptualizing the 19 questions into underlying constructs. The first model posits that there are only two constructs underlying the 19 questions—one (labeled *m* in the table) indicating the relationship between the mother and child, and the second (*f* in the table) indicating the relationship between the father and child. All of the indicators in Panel C, of course, indicate the father-child relationship (*f*). All of the questions in both Panels A and B are listed as indicators of the mother-child relationship (*m*) and ignore the fact that the Panel A questions were ascertained from the mother whereas the Panel B questions came from the children. Thus Model 1 posits that there is only one perspective on the mother-child relationship (*m*) and that relationship is seen similarly through the eyes of mothers and children.

Model 2 of Table 1 hypothesizes that mothers and children have different perspectives on the same relationship. Questions about the mother-child relationship are subdivided into two subsets in Model 2: those reporting the relationship from the mother's perspective (*m-m*) and those reporting the relationship from the child's perspective (*m-c*). All of the data about the father-child relationship were ascertained from the child and are noted as *f-c* variables in the model. Thus Model 2 posits three factors or constructs underlying the 19 questions.

Model 3 of Table 1 accepts the Model 2 assumption of different perspectives between people about the same relationship. In addition, Model 3 posits that individuals recognize that their mother/father/child may view the relationship differently than the individual views the relationship. Consequently, Model 3 posits separate insider and outsider<sup>6</sup>



constructs underlying the measures of quality. For the five items obtained from the mother, the first, third, fourth, and fifth items (*ma-m* in Model 3) reflect the mother's own (insider) evaluation of the relationship. The second item (*mb-m*) reflects the mother's (outsider) view of the child's evaluation of the relationship. Similarly, Items 6, 9, and 12 (*ma-c*) all indicate the child's (insider) view of the relationship with mother whereas items 7, 8, 10, and 11 (*mb-c*) reflect the child's (outsider) perception of the mother's views and actions. Finally, Model 3 posits that the structure of the child's report of the father-child relationship is the same as for the mother-child relationship. Model 3 contains a total of six constructs underlying the 19 measures.

Model 4 of Table 1 assumes that relational quality is a multidimensional concept and proposes that the aspects of quality cluster on a passive-active distinction. Consequently, Model 4 posits separate passive and active constructs underlying the measures of quality. For the mother's perception of quality, the first three items (*mc-m*) reflect those aspects of the relationship that are passive in nature. The fourth and fifth items (*md-m*) indicate the active dimension of quality as reported by the mother. For the child's reports of quality of relationships with mother and father, the labels are similar (*mc-c* and *fc-c* reflecting the passive dimension; *md-c* and *fd-c* indicating the active dimension). In all, Model 4 contains a total of six constructs underlying the 19 measures.

These four conceptualizations of parent-child relations were evaluated by fitting these operationalizations to the data using LISREL (Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993). By comparing the goodness of fit of the models with each other, it was possible to choose among them. In addition, the estimation of the different models provided insight into measurement reliability and the consistency of individual attitudes across time. These models were fit in three ways: separately for the 1980 data, separately for the 1985 data, and with the 2 years of data combined. Before examining the results of these models, we consider the aggregate distributions for the 19 measures in 1980 and 1985.

## RESULTS

### AGGREGATE DISTRIBUTIONS

The aggregate distributions for both 1980 and 1985 measures of parent-child relationships are listed in Table 2. Looking first at the mothers' data in 1980, we see that most of the mothers reported that their

TABLE 2  
Percentage Distributions of Parent-Child Relations Measures, 1980 and 1985

	1980				1985			
	Never	Sometimes	Usually	Always	Never	Sometimes	Usually	Always
A. Mother about relationship with child								
1. Mother Respects Child	1.3	24.9	50.7	23.1	0.7	21.1	49.0	29.2
2. Child Respects Mother	1.9	29.4	53.4	15.3	1.3	21.1	57.3	20.3
3. Understands Child	2.3	28.8	47.9	20.9	1.5	20.2	49.8	28.5
4. Enjoys Doing With Child	1.0	15.2	38.5	45.2	1.0	10.9	34.1	53.9
5. Enjoys Talking Child	0.6	8.8	32.4	58.3	0.0	6.5	25.8	67.7
B. Child about relationship with mother								
6. Child Respects Mother	0.6	24.3	54.1	21.0	0.8	19.1	53.8	26.3
7. Mother Respects Child	2.3	22.4	51.5	23.7	1.2	21.4	53.9	23.5
8. Mother Understands Child	2.1	19.2	35.6	43.2	0.8	14.8	36.2	48.2
9. Enjoys Doing with Mother	1.4	28.8	40.3	29.4	0.8	20.3	37.3	41.7
10. Confides Mother	6.4	35.8	30.7	27.1	5.2	31.6	30.9	32.4
11. Affection Mother	2.0	18.1	37.3	42.6	1.2	15.8	35.3	47.7
12. Talks Over Mother	7.3	37.0	33.8	21.8	5.4	31.3	35.0	28.4
C. Child about relationship with father								
13. Child Respects Father	2.0	22.7	48.6	26.7	1.1	19.0	49.0	30.9
14. Father Respects Child	4.2	25.9	48.2	21.7	2.7	25.2	51.3	20.9
15. Father Understands Child	4.6	23.9	37.3	34.2	1.7	19.4	42.4	36.6
16. Enjoys Doing With Father	4.2	24.4	38.4	33.1	2.7	19.2	40.6	37.6
17. Confides Father	16.1	38.2	29.0	16.8	13.5	39.9	28.0	18.7
18. Affection Father	7.5	28.6	36.2	27.7	6.5	29.5	34.8	29.2
19. Talks Over Father	17.6	40.3	28.7	13.4	13.5	41.1	29.0	16.4

NOTE: Percentages add to 100 across rows, within years. See Table 1 for full wording of each questionnaire item.

relationships with their children were usually or always characterized with respect, understanding, and enjoyment (Panel A of Table 2).<sup>7</sup> Less than a third of the mothers reported such attributes existing only some of the time or less, whereas even fewer reported that these attributes never existed. The data, however, suggest that the levels of enjoyment in mother-child relationships are higher than levels of respect and understanding.

The overall pattern of children's reports about their relationships with their mothers in 1980 is similar to the reports of the mothers' relationships with their children. This similarity can be seen in the distributions for the two questions about respect, which were asked identically in the mother and child questionnaires (Items 1, 2, 6, and 7). Also note that nearly 80% of the children reported that their mothers usually or always accepted and understood them as people and gave them the right amount of affection (Items 8 and 11).

One area of difference between children and mothers is the enjoyment of joint activities; mothers reported substantially more enjoyment than did their children. Whereas 45% of the mothers reported always enjoying doing things together with their children, only 29% of the children reported always enjoying activities with their mothers (Items 4 and 9). This difference is consistent with Gronvold's (1988) finding of greater affection among the senior generation.

Communication difficulties appear to exist for many children. More than 40% reported that they never or only sometimes felt that their mother made it easy for them to confide in her and that when something was bothering them they could talk it over with their mother. This suggests that for children, communication may be a more difficult issue between mothers and children than respect, understanding, affection, and the enjoyment of joint activities.

Turning to fathers, we find results consistent with earlier research suggesting that children generally report less favorable relationships with their fathers than with their mothers (Gronvold, 1988). With just two exceptions, more children reported a consistently positive relationship with their mothers than reported a consistently positive relationship with their fathers. Furthermore, the differences on some of the items, particularly affection and being able to confide and talk things over, are quite large. For example, 43% of children said they always got the right amount of affection from their mothers, whereas only 28% reported always getting the right amount of affection from their fathers.

The two exceptions to the general pattern of more positive relationships with mothers are worth noting explicitly. The first concerns the children's respect for their parents' opinions. More children reported that they always

respected their fathers' opinions than their mothers' opinions (compare rows 6 and 13). In addition, the children more frequently reported that they always enjoyed doing things with their fathers than with their mothers (compare rows 9 and 16).

Comparisons of the 1980 and 1985 distributions indicate that there was an important improvement in parent-child relationships as the children matured from ages 18 to 23. With only minor exceptions, there were increases in the number saying that they always felt respect, understanding, enjoyment, affection, and confidence in their relationship with child, with mother, or with father. Furthermore, some of these increases were substantial. For example, the number of mothers who said that they always enjoyed talking and doing things with their children increased by nearly 10 percentage points during this 5-year interval (rows 4 and 5).

The improvement in parent-child relationships between ages 18 and 23 was greater for mothers than for fathers. The percentage point increase between 1980 and 1985 saying that a positive relationship always existed was consistently greater for children's relationships with mothers than with fathers. As a result, the differential between mother-child and father-child relationships widened as the children made the transition to adulthood.

Note that although we have interpreted the changes between the 1980 and 1985 interviews as reflecting the influence of parents or children maturing with age, the data could be interpreted as the results of changing historical times. Yet we are inclined to attribute the change to differences in the life courses of children, parents, or their relationships rather than to differences in historical circumstances because we believe that the changes in the lives and relationships of families as children make the transition to adulthood are much greater than any historical changes occurring between 1980 and 1985. However, this is not to say that historical trends could not have played some part in the changes observed.

## CONCEPTUAL MODELS

We now turn our attention to the results of testing the conceptual models summarized in Table 1. Recall that Model 1 posits that the observed measures reflect two underlying constructs: the mother-child relationship and the father-child relationship. Model 2 indicates that the relationship between parents and children may be viewed differently by the two generations; this model has three underlying constructs or factors. Model 3 uses the Model 2 assumption that there are separate parent-child perspectives and further posits that each of the parties is able to report the

**TABLE 3**  
**Goodness-of-Fit Statistics for Models of Parent-Child**  
**Relations, 1980 and 1985 Separately**

	1980		1985	
	$\chi^2$	df	$\chi^2$	df
<b>A. Simple Models<sup>a</sup></b>				
Model 1: Two Factors	2181.4	151	2187.4	151
Model 2: Three Factors	1223.7	149	1271.1	149
Model 3: Six Factors (Insider/Outsider)	1149.9	138	1168.4	138
Model 4: Six Factors (Active/Passive)	678.3	137	816.3	137
<b>B. Complex Models<sup>b</sup></b>				
Model 2a: Three Factors—plus correlated measurement error	773.4	142	818.5	142
Model 2b: Three Factors—plus equal measurement structure	1230.2	156	1279.1	156
Model 4a: Six Factors—plus correlated measurement error	364.7	130	483.3	130

a. These are the models defined in Table 1.

b. These models represent modifications of Models 2 and 4. See text for full description of these models.

relationship from both his or her own and the other person's perspective, resulting in six underlying constructs. Similarly, Model 4 postulates six underlying factors or constructs, but the distinction recognized here is of a passive-active nature.

Each of these four models was fit to the observed data separately in 1980 and 1985, using LISREL maximum likelihood estimation. Relevant goodness-of-fit statistics from these four models are summarized in Table 3.<sup>8</sup> For each of the models, the underlying constructs were allowed to correlate. No equality constraints were imposed, and the errors of measurement were assumed to be uncorrelated.

Beginning first with the simple two-factor model (Table 3, Model 1, a single mother-child and a single father-child relationship), we see that in both years the chi-square statistic is very large relative to its degrees of freedom. The fit is improved substantially with Model 2, which posits separate mother and child views of the mother-child relationship. Although the chi-square statistics associated with Model 2 in both years remain fairly large relative to their degrees of freedom, they represent a reduction of chi square of more than 40% from Model 1. This result provides very strong support for the hypothesis that mothers and children view their relationship differently. Thus these data are consistent with

Gronvold's (1988) conclusion that there is not a single mother-child relationship but one relationship perceived by the child and another perceived by the mother.

Model 3 provides a statistically significant but modest improvement of fit over Model 2. However, this model provides implausible estimates of the correlations between the insider and outsider dimensions of the mother-child and father-child relationships. For the 1980 data, the model implies that all three of the correlations between the insider and outsider dimensions—for mothers about the mother-child relation, for children about the mother-child relation, and for children about the father-child relation—lie between 1.02 and 1.08. For 1985, these three correlations range from 1.05 to 1.07. These results suggest that if there are two different dimensions along the insider-outsider axis, these dimensions are more than perfectly correlated.<sup>9</sup> Thus the insider-outsider distinction as it is measured here is not a useful one, and we will not consider it further.

The improvement in fit between Models 2 and 4 is substantial and statistically significant in both years. In 1980 and 1985 the improvements in chi-square were 545.4 and 454.8, respectively, with two degrees of freedom. Model 4 suggests that the correlations between the passive and active dimensions in 1980 and 1985 are as follows: .69 and .72 for the mothers' reports of their mother-child relationship; .85 and .81 for the children's reports of their mother-child relationship; and .85 and .83 for the children's reports of their father-child relationship. These data indicate that the passive and active dimensions are clearly not the same thing (the correlations being less than one), but they also suggest that they are very highly correlated. Thus, although this distinction appears to be a valid one, the two dimensions do not seem to be substantially different.

We hypothesized that children have similar relationships with their mothers and fathers. Our hypothesis was confirmed by all four conceptual models summarized in Table 3, with the models estimating important correlations between the underlying or global constructs of father-child and mother-child relations. The magnitude and implications of those correlations will be discussed in a later section.

We also investigated the possibility that the connection between the mother-child and father-child relationships extends beyond the correlation between the underlying constructs. This analysis was motivated by two ideas: first, that the specific measures of parent-child relationships—like respect, affection, and communication—contained specific indications of parent-child relations that are not picked up by the global constructs we posited as underlying the observed measures; second, that the item-specific parts of these measures are correlated across relationships with

mothers and fathers. We investigated this issue by allowing the errors of measurement for each of the seven items asked of the child about the mother-child relation to be correlated with the errors of measurement for that same item for the father-child relation. Such modified models were estimated for both Models 2 and 4 and are reported in Table 3 as Models 2a and 4a, respectively.

The empirical results for Models 2a and 4a are consistent with the idea that there are unique elements of the father-child and mother-child relationships that are similar within families. The introduction of the correlated error terms dramatically reduces the chi-square in both Models 2 and 4 and does so in both years. This suggests that there are within-family patterns of affection, communication, and trust that characterize the child's relationship with both parents and that these specific elements go beyond the global similarity of the two relationships.

#### MEASUREMENT RELIABILITY

We begin our discussion of measurement reliability by addressing the question of measurement equivalence between the children's reports of their relationships with their fathers and their relationships with their mothers. That is, do young people report their relationships with their fathers and their mothers with the same reliability? This issue was addressed within the context of Model 2 by setting the coefficients<sup>10</sup> linking the underlying mother-child construct to each of its observed indicators to be equal to the coefficients linking the underlying father-child construct to its corresponding indicators. The goodness-of-fit data for this model are presented in Table 3 as Model 2b. By comparing Model 2b with Model 2, we can evaluate the null hypothesis that the model with separate parameters for children's relationships with mothers and fathers (Model 2) fits the data the same as a model with the parameters constrained to be equal (Model 2b). The deterioration in fit resulting from this equality constraint is very small and statistically insignificant, which suggests that the children's measurement model is very similar for relationships with fathers and mothers.

We next addressed the issue of measurement consistency across time by estimating Models 2a and 4a with the combined 1980 and 1985 data. With the 2 years combined, Model 2a had six underlying constructs (three for each year) whereas Model 4a had 12 (six for each year). We evaluated whether the mother's report of the mother-child relationship, the child's report of the mother-child relationship, and the child's report of the

father-child relationship were equally measured in 1980 and 1985 by sequentially setting the coefficients linking measures and underlying constructs to be equal in the 2 years. The results of these tests are reported as Models 2b-2d and Models 4b-4d in Table 4.

The goodness-of-fit tests strongly indicate that the mother's reports were measured with similar reliability in 1980 and 1985. There is very little deterioration of fit between Models 2a and 2b and between Models 4a and 4b as the measurement reliability constraints are imposed. Very similar findings are observed for the equality of measurement across time for the children concerning their fathers (compare Models 2d and 4d with Models 2a and 4a).

There is, however, some indication that measurement reliabilities in 1985 for the children's reports of their relationships with their mothers may have been different than in 1980. This is suggested by the statistically significant differences between the goodness of fit for Models 2c and 2a and between Models 4c and 4a. However, closer examination of the 1980 and 1985 coefficients relating the indicators of mother-child relationships with their underlying constructs reveals that these differences are generally not substantively important.<sup>11</sup>

In the models with the measurement-effect parameters constrained to be equal in 1980 and 1985, the five parameters for mothers reporting about the mother-child relationship range from .65 to .72 (with a mean of .68) in Model 2b and from .69 to .78 (with a mean of .75) in Model 4b. The effect parameters for the children's reports of the mother-child relationship range from .56 to .84 (with a mean of .69) in Model 2c and from .63 to .86 (with a mean of .73) in Model 4c. Finally, the effect parameters for the children's reports of the father-child relationship range from .64 to .84 (with a mean of .74) in Model 2d and from .68 to .87 (with a mean of .77) in Model 4d.

These estimates suggest that the measurement reliabilities are slightly higher when the parameters are estimated using the 12 underlying constructs (six from each year) in Model 4 than when using the six underlying constructs (three from each year) in Model 2. This suggests that the more complex models are able to capture somewhat more true variance in the observed indicators than are the less complex models.

These estimates indicate that the effect parameters tend to cluster around .7. Because the squares of these standardized coefficients equal the fractions of the variance in the observed variables that are shared with the underlying constructs, these parameters suggest that about one half of the observed variance is true variance and about one half is error.



TABLE 4

# Goodness-of-Fit Statistics for Models of Parent-Child Relationships, 1980 and 1985 Combined

	$\chi^2$	df	Difference Chi-Square			$p \leq .05$
			Models Compared	$\chi^2$	df	
Model 2a: Six factors with correlated measurement error	2612.4	636	—	—	—	—
Model 2b: Model 2a with 1980 and 1985 lambdas equal for mother's report of mother-child relation	2616.0	641	2b-2a	3.6	5	no
Model 2c: Model 2a with 1980 and 1985 lambdas equal for child's report of mother-child relation	2627.8	643	2c-2a	15.4	7	yes
Model 2d: Model 2a with 1980 and 1985 lambdas equal for child's report of father-child relation	2621.5	643	2d-2a	9.1	7	no
Model 2e: Model 2a with 1980 and 1985 correlations between underlying constructs equal	2620.3	639	2e-2a	7.9	3	yes
Model 2f: Model 2a with 1980 and 1985 errors of measurement between comparable items allowed to correlate	2143.0	617	2f-2a	469.4	19	yes
Model 4a: Twelve Factors with correlated measurement error	1681.0	585	—	—	—	—
Model 4b: Model 4a with 1980 and 1985 lambdas equal for mother's report of mother-child relation	1685.9	590	4b-4a	4.9	5	no
Model 4c: Model 4a with 1980 and 1985 lambdas equal for child's report of mother-child relation	1695.8	592	4c-4a	14.8	7	yes
Model 4d: Model 4a with 1980 and 1985 lambdas equal for child's report of father-child relation	1688.2	592	4d-4a	7.2	7	no
Model 4e: Model 4a with 1980 and 1985 correlations between underlying constructs equal	1697.2	600	4e-4a	16.2	15	no
Model 4f: Model 4a with 1980 and 1985 errors of measurement between comparable items allowed to correlate	1351.8	566	4f-4a	329.2	19	yes

NOTE: Models 2a and 4a are the same as Models 2a and 4a in Table 3 except for the fact that the separate models for 1980 and 1985 are combined into one model here. All of the underlying constructs are allowed to correlate. Models 2b-2f all represent modifications of Model 2a whereas Models 4b-4f are modifications of Model 4a.

## CORRELATIONS AMONG SUBSTANTIVE CONSTRUCTS

We examined whether the correlations among substantive constructs were the same in 1980 and 1985 by estimating Models 2e and 4e with the correlations between the underlying constructs constrained to be equal in 1980 and 1985 and then comparing the goodness-of-fit statistics of these models with those of Models 2a and 4a. Those results indicate that the differences between correlations in 1980 and 1985 are statistically significant in the context of Model 2 but not in the context of Model 4.

In Table 5 we list the 1980 and 1985 correlations among the underlying constructs from Model 2a with no distinction made between the active and passive dimensions and from Model 4a with the active-passive distinction. Depending on the conceptualization used, the correlation between maternal and child reports about the mother-child relationship ranges from .36 to .47 in 1980. Thus, although there are clearly different maternal and child perspectives on the same relationship, these perspectives are significantly correlated.

The results in Table 5 also indicate that the correlation between the children's views of relationships with their mothers and fathers is in about the same range—from .38 to .52 in 1980 depending on the conceptualization. We interpret these correlations as representing the fact that mothers and fathers within the same families have bonds with each other that make their within-family parenting styles more similar than the styles of any two random fathers and mothers. Mothers and fathers within the same family also have the opportunity to model and reinforce each other's behavior in important ways. At the same time, however, the fact that these correlations are substantially less than one also suggests that children make important distinctions between their relationships with fathers and mothers.

The data in Table 5 also demonstrate consistent but modest declines among the correlations across the transition to adulthood years. The decline in the correlation between the mothers' and children's views about the mother-child relationship indicates that as mothers and children mature, their views of the relationship are less closely connected. Similarly, the decline in the correlation between the children's views of their relationships with mothers and fathers suggests that as children mature, they see their parents less as a "package" with common characteristics and more as individuals with distinctive features.

If our interpretations about mothers and fathers coming as a package are correct, we would expect to find larger correlations between the two relationships in father-mother pairs that are still married and living to-

**TABLE 5**  
**Correlations Among the Underlying Constructs of Parent-Child Relationships, Separately for 1980 and 1985**

	<i>Total<sup>a</sup></i>			<i>Passive<sup>b</sup></i>			<i>Active<sup>b</sup></i>		
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>
<b>A. Correlations in 1980</b>									
1. Mother about mother-child relation	1.00			1.00			1.00		
2. Child about mother-child relation	0.47	1.00		0.46	1.00		0.36	1.00	
3. Child about father-child relation	0.17	0.42	1.00	0.21	0.52	1.00	0.11	0.38	1.00
<b>B. Correlations in 1985</b>									
1. Mother about mother-child relation	1.00			1.00			1.00		
2. Child about mother-child relation	0.38	1.00		0.38	1.00		0.32	1.00	
3. Child about father-child relation	0.10	0.35	1.00	0.18	0.41	1.00	0.06	0.32	1.00

a. Estimated from Model 2a of Table 3 where there is no active-passive distinction made in parent-child relations.

b. Estimated from Model 4a of Table 3 where each of the three main underlying constructs is split into an active and passive subdimension.

gether than in parental pairs whose marital ties have been disrupted. Parents living apart would have less opportunity to model and reinforce each other's parenting; in fact, the separation might lead the parents to follow disparate parenting styles. Furthermore, we believe that marital separations both reflect and increase the lack of unity between parents, which makes maternal and paternal parenting less similar.

We tested these expectations by limiting the sample to those 766 families where the child reported relationships with both biological parents in 1980. We then divided this sample into two subgroups: the 658 families in which the mother and father were still married and living together; and the 108 families in which they were separated or divorced. Then we estimated Model 2a of Table 3 separately for the two groups.

This analysis reveals substantial subgroup differences in the correlations between father-child and mother-child relationships that are consistent with the motivating hypothesis. The estimated correlation between the children's views of the father-child and mother-child relationships is only a statistically insignificant .05 for the maritally disrupted families, compared to a highly statistically significant .50 for the families with continuously married parents.

The low correlations for the maritally disrupted families are not simply part of a general pattern of unreliable or disconnected responses and relationships for this group. Indeed, the estimated correlation between the mothers' and children's reports of the mother-child relationship is higher for the maritally disrupted group (.58) than for the continuously married families (.50), a difference which is not statistically significant. Furthermore, the estimated measurement reliabilities of the two groups are remarkably similar.

Thus the similarity of measurement models and correlations between maternal and child views of the mother-child relationship across the two groups stands in stark contrast to the remarkably different correspondence between mother-child and father-child relationships in the two groups. This pattern of results suggests that marital dissolution is strongly associated with an attenuation of the similarities existing in father-child and mother-child relationships.<sup>12</sup>

#### **STABILITY OF INDIVIDUAL RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN AGES 18 AND 23**

To evaluate the degree of stability of individual relationships across the transition to adulthood, we estimated models that included substantive equations with the 1985 underlying constructs predicted by 1980 vari-

**TABLE 6**  
**Effects of 1980 Parent-Child Relations**  
**on 1985 Parent-Child Relations**

	<i>1985 Mother About Mother-Child Relations</i>		<i>1985 Child About Mother-Child Relations</i>		<i>1985 Child About Father-Child Relations</i>	
	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>
1980 Mother about mother-child	.66*	.67*		.03		-.06
1980 Child about mother-child		-.03	.54*	.52*		-.05
1980 Child about father-child		-.04		-.02	.63*	.66*

NOTE: These are standardized regression coefficients estimated from a modification of Model 2a that has the listed substantive effects estimated. These models do not include the active-passive distinction.

\* $p < .001$ .

ables. These models also allowed the errors of prediction of the 1985 underlying constructs to be correlated. Summaries of these equations are presented in Table 6 for models that do not include the distinction between passive and active dimensions. We also estimated models with the passive-active distinction but do not report them because they are extremely similar to those reported in Table 6.

Equation 1 for each of the 1985 parent-child constructs contains only one predictor variable—the same construct measured in 1980. In these equations the stability coefficients are statistically significant and of substantial size, ranging from .54 to .66. This indicates a high degree of continuity of individual parent-child relations across the years of the transition to adulthood.<sup>13</sup>

Equation 2 for each of the 1985 constructs includes all three of the 1980 parent-child relations variables as predictors—again, with the errors of prediction of the 1985 constructs being allowed to correlate. These equations produce very little change in the stability coefficients from a particular 1980 construct to the comparable construct in 1985 (compare Equations 1 and 2). Furthermore, the estimated effects of the variables added to Equation 2 are inconsequential. This latter result means, for example, that the children's views of their relationships with their parents in 1980 have no influence on the mothers' views of their relationships with the child in 1985 net of the mothers' views of those relationships in 1980.

We also posited that the stability of parent-child relationships across time extended beyond the stabilities of the underlying constructs. This hypothesis was motivated by two ideas: that the specific indicators of parent-child relationships measured—for example, respect, affection, and communication—contained specific indications of parent-child relations that were not picked up by the global constructs we posited as underlying the observed measures; and that these item-specific dimensions are correlated across time. We tested this notion by allowing the errors of measurement for each of the nineteen 1980 indicators to be correlated with the errors of measurement for that same indicator in 1985. The improvement in chi-square fit in a model with three underlying factors in each year is a substantial 469 with 19 degrees of freedom. This result provides overwhelming support for the hypothesis that there are unique and meaningful dimensions of parent-child relationships contained in the individual indicators that are correlated across time but are not picked up by the underlying constructs.

## CONCLUSIONS

The focus of this article was on how parents and children conceptualize, perceive, and report on their relationships with each other. This article represents a first step in a research agenda to understand the determinants and consequences of parent-child relationships. The results from this study set the stage and establish important groundwork for subsequent analyses that examine the processes by which parent-child relationships are formed and used.

Our research indicates the existence of positive and supportive relationships between most parents and their children. Only a minority of parent-child relationships are not characterized by positive sentiment and affection. Children generally rate their relationships with their mothers as more positive than their relationships with fathers. As expected, the exception to this mother-father generalization exists in the areas of respect and enjoyment—specific dimensions where children tend to rate their fathers higher than their mothers. The generally positive relationships between children and parents suggest that the role of parents in the lives of young adults extends far beyond the provision of financial support and includes many other kinds of social and emotional assistance. The role of this parental emotional and social support in affecting children's well-being and success during the transition to adulthood deserves more attention in policy and scientific discussions.

We also find that, as predicted, there is a general improvement in parent-child relationships as young people make the transition to adulthood. This improvement tends to be greater for mother-child relationships than for father-child relationships. Our results suggest that as young people begin to experience adult roles and have more independence, there are increases in respect, understanding, affection, confidence, and enjoyment between them and their parents. These parent-child relationships may continue to be important as the children establish their own careers and families and the parents mature into old age. More research is needed concerning the nature and consequences of the parent-child relationship in the adult lives of both the first and second generations.

There is also strong continuity of individual relationships between parents and children across time. Young people and parents with positive relationships at age 18 also tend to have them at age 23. The strength of the continuity of individual relationships between ages 18 and 23 suggests that the quality of relationships established in the teenage years is likely to persist well into later adulthood. The early investments that parents make in their relationships with their children appear to have important ramifications for long-term relationships. It is thus important to understand what parental behaviors and styles of parenting lead to close relationships with children.

Our research provides strong support for the idea that parent-child relationships are evaluated differently by parents and children. Apparently, there is not just one perception of the relationship existing between a child and a parent, but two: the relationship as perceived by the child and the relationship as perceived by the parent. Although the two perspectives are, of course, correlated, conceptually, they are two separate entities. The data also indicate that neither mothers nor children distinguish between the perspectives of the two generations. Because parents and children have different perspectives on the same relationship and neither generation reliably distinguishes its perspective from the perspective of the other generation, it is critical that future research collect data directly from both generations.

We were able to separate active and passive subdimensions of parent-child relations. Both mothers and children distinguish between a dimension centering on respect and understanding and one that focuses on affection, enjoyment, and communication. Although this contrast appears to be a real one, there is also strong overlap and association between the two dimensions. In fact, the combination of both the very substantial correlations between the passive and active subdimensions and the demands of parsimony suggest that this distinction might be safely ignored

in analyses of the causes and consequences of parent-child relationships. This emphasis on the unidimensionality of the measures is consistent with other research (Atwood et al., 1989; Weintraub & Gold, 1991).

Finally, our data provide strong support for the reliability and validity of the reports by parents and children. Although our analyses indicate that there are, as expected, errors in our observed indicators of parent-child relationships, these indicators also contain substantial true variance. Furthermore, the conceptual and measurement models used in this research allow adjustments for measurement error.

Confidence in our ability to measure the quality of parent-child relationships is further enhanced by the observation that people effectively distinguish among their relationships. Our data, for example, indicate that children distinguish between their relationships with mothers and fathers. In addition, as we would expect theoretically, this separation between relationships with mothers and fathers is much sharper in families that have experienced marital disruption than in families with continuously married parents. These results demonstrate the structure of parental relationships can strongly influence relationships between parents and children. We expect that additional research will reveal other important effects that parental behavior can have on parent-child relationships.

Our findings also indicate that the measurement properties of our indicators of parent-child relationships are remarkably invariant across time and the parent-child relationship being observed. That is, there is considerable equivalence of measurement between father-child and mother-child relationships and between these relationships measured at ages 18 and 23. This observation enhances our confidence that these measures will support reliable research concerning the causes and consequences of parent-child relationships.

## NOTES

1. This emphasis on relationships is shared by such divergent conceptual perspectives as sociobiology, social ecology, the life course, modes of organization, psychoanalysis, human capital, social capital, social exchange, social learning, symbolic interactionism, and attachment theory (see, for example, Bandura 1977; Becker, 1964; Bowlby, 1969; Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Coleman, 1988; Elder, 1977, 1987; Erikson, 1950; Gewirtz, 1969; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Miller, 1969; Orbach, 1992; Thornton & Lin, 1994).

2. Fathers were not interviewed. Thus, we examine father-child relationships only from the perspective of the child.

3. This response rate excludes from the denominator the small number of deceased or seriously ill mothers and children.



4. This is the name of the child participating in the study.
5. In both years less than 2% of the children gave data about someone other than their biological mother.
6. We borrow the terms *insider* and *outsider* from Olson's (1977) model of methods used in relationship research. The insider frame of reference is from the respondent answering the question. Although Olson refers to the outsider perspective as someone observing the respondent or dyad, for the purposes of this article, we define this perspective as the respondent observing and reporting for the other member of the dyad.
7. We are interpreting these data to suggest that the majority report positive relationships. However, because the questions in this study only focus on the more positive aspects of the parent-child relationship, we are not able to assess the negativity or level of conflict that may characterize these relationships.
8. The four simple models listed in Panel A were defined precisely as in Table 1.
9. These correlations are estimated as being greater than their maximum possible level (1.0) because the observed correlations *among* the items posited to measure the same underlying constructs tend to be slightly smaller than the correlations *between* the items posited to measure different underlying constructs. This, of course, should not happen if the underlying constructs are valid and represented by the indicated measures.
10. These coefficients are called lambdas in LISREL terminology.
11. For both Models 2a and 4b, six of the seven effect coefficients were within .06 of each other in 1980 and 1985. The one measurement parameter that was substantially different in 1980 and 1985 was the item about whether the mother accepted and understood the child as a person (Mother Understands Child). In both Models 2a and 4a, the effect parameter was .13 larger in 1980 than in 1985.
12. Further evidence of the powerful influence of marital disruption on perceptions of parent-child relationships is provided in a study by Smith and Morgan (1994). These researchers found that observed discrepancies between mothers' and children's reports of father-child relations were much greater when the marriage of the mother and father was disrupted.
13. We were concerned that the estimates of relationship stability between 1980 and 1985 might be biased downward by the fact that some of the young people changed the parent or guardian they were referring to in their responses. This could have happened because of marital dissolution and changing of the person considered to be the most influential. For this reason, we reestimated these equations with the sample restricted to those families in which the mother and father were continuously married—families in which our procedures required reporting about both natural parents in both years. The results of this analysis are consistent with our concerns in that all of the reestimated coefficients are higher than those estimated in Table 6. However, the differences are not large: the coefficient of stability for the mothers about their mother-child relationships increased from .66 to .68; for the children about their mother-child relationships, the increase was from .54 to .60; and for children about their relationships with their fathers the increase was from .63 to .68.

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