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Relationship Quality Between Older Fathers and Middle-Aged Children: Associations With Both Parties' Subjective Well-Being

Courtney A. Polenick,¹ Nicole DePasquale,² David J. Eggebeen,² Steven H. Zarit,² and Karen L. Fingerman³

¹Department of Psychiatry, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. ²Department of Human Development and Family Studies, The Pennsylvania State University, University Park. ³Department of Human Development and Family Sciences, The University of Texas at Austin.

Correspondence should be addressed to Courtney A. Polenick, PhD, Department of Psychiatry, University of Michigan, 2800 Plymouth Road, Building 16, Ann Arbor, MI 48109. E-mail: cpolenic@med.umich.edu

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Abstract

Objectives: Relationships between fathers and their children are salient to both parties throughout the life course. Yet little is known about how these ties may affect well-being in later life. This study examined the implications of aging fathers' and middle-aged children's perceptions of father–child relationship quality for their own and the other party's well-being.

Method: Using a sample of 103 fathers ($M = 77.88$ years) and their children ($M = 49.92$ years) drawn from Wave 1 of the Family Exchanges Study, we estimated actor–partner interdependence models to evaluate associations between each party's perceptions of father–child relationship quality and their well-being.

Results: Fathers had elevated depressive symptoms when they reported more negative relationships with children. This association was exacerbated for fathers of daughters when daughters reported a highly negative relationship. Fathers had better self-rated health, however, when they reported more positive relationships with daughters. Children had elevated depressive symptoms and lower life satisfaction when they reported more negative ties with fathers. Finally, sons had lower depressive symptoms when they reported more positive ties with fathers.

Discussion: Findings suggest that father–child relationship quality has significant implications for the well-being of both aging fathers and middle-aged daughters or sons.

Keywords: Father–child relationships—Intergenerational relationships—Parent–child relationships

Relationships with fathers have been found to play a unique and enduring role in shaping their children's well-being (Amato, 1994; Flouri, 2004; Mallers, Charles, Neupert, & Almeida, 2010; Morgan, Brugh, Fryers, & Stewart-Brown, 2012). Yet current knowledge is largely limited to the consequences of father–child ties during childhood or adolescence for young adult children's well-being, with the implications of these ties for fathers' well-being throughout the life course remaining comparatively neglected (Roy,

2014). Given the bidirectional nature of father–child relationships, along with the longevity of these bonds, a critical next step for research is to examine how fathers and children influence one another's well-being in later life. This study examined the associations between perceptions of father–child relationship quality and three indicators of subjective well-being (depressive symptoms, life satisfaction, and self-rated health) among older fathers and middle-aged children.

Life Course Perspectives on Father–Child Relationships and Well-Being

According to life course perspectives on intergenerational ties, relationships between fathers and children have dynamic and long-standing implications for well-being; that is, these relationships influence each party's well-being across the life span through the "linked lives" shared by fathers and their offspring (Umberson, Pudrovska, & Reczek, 2010). When children are young, fatherhood can provide structure and imbue meaning into men's roles within their families and wider communities (Roy, 2014), and this may continue after children are grown. Father–child ties similarly encompass considerable personal and symbolic salience for adult children (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001). Relationships between fathers and their adult children tend to evolve into more reciprocal ties over time. When these ties are caring and affectionate, they may be a valuable source of social support that enhances each party's well-being. More conflicted or distant father–child relationships, however, may diminish each person's well-being.

Although the links between father–child relationships and well-being in adulthood continue to be understudied, it appears that the significance of ties between fathers and children is maintained or even increased during the later years of their relationship. Adult children are a critical source of everyday types of social support (e.g., emotional, practical, and financial) for older parents (Fingerman et al., 2011) and may be especially crucial for fathers who lack a spouse or partner (Umberson et al., 2010). Likewise, parents remain an important source of everyday support for middle-aged children. Notably, fathers give similar amounts of everyday support to adult children as mothers (Kahn, McGill, & Bianchi, 2011). Aging fathers also care for adult children in other meaningful ways, such as supporting their offspring's marriage and being involved in the lives of their grandchildren (Roy, 2014). In sum, ties between aging fathers and middle-aged children are likely to hold salience for the well-being of each party.

Father–child relationship quality and well-being

Complementing the life course perspective on family relationships, solidarity theory contends that the quality of the ties between parents and adult children may be particularly instrumental in shaping well-being for both generations over the life span (Bengtson, Giarrusso, Mabry, & Silverstein, 2002). In line with this theory, emotionally close and supportive ties between parents and grown offspring benefit the well-being of each party, while greater strain or tension in these relationships undermines well-being (Lowenstein, 2007; Fingerman, Pitzer, Lefkowitz, Birditt, & Mroczek, 2008; Umberson, 1992). Scholars have proposed that positive and negative aspects of parent–child relationships each carry significant and distinct consequences for well-being within these ties (e.g., Bengtson et al., 2002; Birditt, Miller, Fingerman, & Lefkowitz, 2009).

Several studies focused on the quality of relationships with fathers during childhood have revealed persistent effects on children's later well-being (e.g., Flouri, 2004; Mallers et al., 2010; Morgan et al., 2012). Current views of relationship quality with fathers in adulthood may also directly influence adult children's subjective well-being. Indeed, for young adult children, higher quality father–child ties have been linked to lower psychological distress and greater life satisfaction in both daughters and sons (Amato, 1994; Barnett, Kibria, Baruch, & Pleck, 1991; Barnett, Marshall, & Pleck, 1992). These studies raise the question of how positive and negative aspects of current ties between aging fathers and middle-aged children may be related to well-being within these relationships. In accord with the present literature on adult intergenerational ties, more positive qualities may be linked to better well-being for each generation, whereas more negative qualities may be linked to worse well-being for each generation.

Interdependence within father–child dyads

Life course perspectives also posit that the individual experiences of family members are interdependent and reciprocally linked over time (Bengtson & Allen, 1993). Put simply, fathers and children influence one another throughout their lives because of their lasting bonds. The theoretical focus on interdependence within father–child relationships is best served by examining the views and experiences of each generation in relation to the other. Nevertheless, the vast majority of studies on parent–child ties in later life have relied on reports from either a parent or an adult child (Umberson et al., 2010). Many studies of late life parents also focus exclusively on mothers, to the neglect of an understanding of fathers (e.g., Fingerman, 2001; Sutor, Gilligan, & Pillemer, 2013). Consequently, the reciprocal influences that fathers and adult children have on each other's well-being remain largely unexplored.

In a notable exception, a study of parents and their young adult or middle-aged children found that fathers' greater ambivalence (i.e., coexisting positive and negative sentiments) toward children was linked to children's worse self-rated health (Fingerman et al., 2008). Consistent with the interdependence perspective, this finding suggests that one party's feelings about the father–child tie may affect the other party's well-being. When a father has more negative feelings about his child, for example, he may elicit similar negativity from the child through interactions that convey antagonism and/or a lack of warmth. As a result, both party's feelings toward their relationship may be associated with the child's well-being. Conversely, a father's highly positive feelings about his child may evoke similar positivity from the child through interactions that foster mutual care and affection. Within interdependent relationships, the perceptions and behaviors of each individual both influence and are influenced by the other person (Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008). Accounting for the reciprocal influences between fathers and children therefore facilitates a more nuanced

understanding of how father–child relationship quality may be associated with well-being. In line with life course perspectives on interdependence within family relationships, more positive relationship qualities reported by fathers and children may be linked to their own and the other party's better well-being. In contrast, more negative relationship qualities reported by fathers and children may be linked to their own and the other party's poorer well-being.

Although we propose that fathers' and children's views of their relationship quality may affect the well-being of both parties, it is possible that each person's well-being also affects relationship quality. Research indicates, for instance, that people who experience psychological distress interpret their close relationships more negatively and are perceived more negatively by the other party (Sacco, 1999). People who report better well-being, however, may be more likely to evaluate their social ties more positively and may be viewed more positively by the other party. Consistent with the life course framework, such bidirectional influences further illustrate the interdependent nature of family relationships.

Differences between father–daughter and father–son dyads

Life course perspectives on intergenerational ties pose that gender represents a key social structural context that molds the nature of parent–child relationships (Umberson et al., 2010). As such, it is imperative to consider how the links between father–child relationship quality and well-being in later life may differ between father–daughter and father–son dyads. To be sure, both parent gender and child gender have numerous implications for how parents and children interact with and view one another throughout their lives (Raley & Bianchi, 2006; Russell & Saebel, 1997).

The associations between positive relationship quality and well-being may be particularly salient within father–son relationships. Fathers generally spend more time with and are more invested in sons than daughters during their offspring's childhood and adolescence, perhaps partly due to gendered similarities in father–son experiences and perspectives (Raley & Bianchi, 2006). Accordingly, fathers are believed to play a major role in the long-term social and emotional development of their sons (Mallers et al., 2010; Raley & Bianchi, 2006). When sons are grown, father–son relationships remain important but are often emotionally complicated. Theoretical and empirical work indicates that father–son ties tend to be weak and/or strained, which may be a result of traditional masculine stereotypes that encourage emotional distancing in these relationships (Miller, 2013). This work mirrors widespread societal and cultural depictions of father–son ties, from the Bible's Old Testament and *Oedipus Rex* to modern literature (e.g., *Death of a Salesman*) and movies (e.g., the *Star Wars* series). Given the likely history of complex or distant relationships between aging fathers and middle-aged sons, positive aspects of the father–child tie may be highly consequential for both men's well-being.

Prior work suggests that negative relationship quality, however, may be more strongly linked to well-being within father–daughter dyads. Compared with adult sons' parent–child ties, adult daughters' relationships with parents typically involve more intense interpersonal tensions (Birditt et al., 2009; Fingerman, 2001). Women also report greater emotional distress in reaction to interpersonal problems than do men, which may be related to women's tendency to ruminate about these problems and their higher expectation for maintaining harmony in their relationships (Antonucci, 2001; Birditt & Fingerman, 2003). Hence, the heightened emotional intensity of negative interactions between older fathers and their daughters may have especially harmful consequences for each party's well-being.

The Present Study

We examined dyadic associations between aging fathers' and middle-aged children's perceptions of positive and negative aspects of their current relationship and their reports of depressive symptoms, life satisfaction, and self-rated health. For fathers and children, we predicted that one's own and the other party's reports of more positive qualities would be associated with better well-being. Conversely, we predicted that one's own and the other party's reports of more negative qualities would be associated with worse well-being. We further predicted that the links between positive relationship quality and well-being would be most salient for father–son dyads, whereas the links between negative relationship quality and well-being would be particularly strong within father–daughter dyads.

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of middle-aged children and their fathers drawn from Wave 1 of the Family Exchanges Study (FES; Fingerman et al., 2011). In 2008, FES recruited a target sample of 633 adults aged 40 to 60 years who had at least one living child aged 18 years or older and at least one living parent. Middle-aged participants were identified through random digit dialing within the Philadelphia Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area (urban, rural, and suburban), which comprises five counties in Southeastern Pennsylvania and four counties in New Jersey.

Middle-aged participants completed a 1-hour long Computer Assisted Telephone Interview regarding relationships with adult children and aging parents. Participants also provided contact information for their adult children and parents.

Among the 633 middle-aged participants, 280 (44%) had one or two parents who also completed similar interviews. Of the 337 parents who participated in the study, 234 mothers were excluded from the present analysis, resulting in a total of 103 father–child dyads (62 father–daughter dyads and 41 father–son dyads) from different families.

Among grown children, 96% reported a biological relationship with their father. The remaining children reported that they had an adoptive father (2%) or a stepfather (2%). Table 1 presents background characteristics for the 103 father–child dyads as well as means and standard deviations for fathers' and children's scores on key variables.

Measures

Depressive symptoms

Depressive symptoms were measured with five items from the Brief Symptom Inventory (Derogatis & Melisaratos, 1983). On a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*),

Table 1. Sample Characteristics of Fathers and Children ($N = 103$ Dyads)

Characteristic	Fathers	Children
	M (SD)	M (SD)
Age in years	77.88 (6.23)***	49.92 (4.86)
Positive relationship quality ^a	4.37 (0.67)*	4.16 (0.70)
Negative relationship quality ^b	1.66 (0.84)	1.83 (0.91)
Depressive symptoms ^c	1.44 (0.66)	1.41 (0.54)
Life satisfaction ^d	7.94 (1.99)*	7.48 (1.49)
Self-rated health ^e	3.18 (1.14)**	3.59 (0.88)
Proportions		
Gender (male)	1.00	.40
Minority status ^f	.31	.26
Marital status		
Married	.61	.72
Remarried	.07	.06
Cohabiting	.03	.03
Single	.00	.06
Divorced	.08	.11
Separated	.03	.02
Widowed	.18	.01
Work status		
Employed full-time	.05	.70
Employed part-time	.09	.04
Retired	.84	.02
Education		
High school graduate	.38	.31
Some college	.18	.29
College graduate	.17	.20
Post graduate	.14	.18

Notes: ^aMean of two items rated from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*).

^bMean of two items rated from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*).

^cMean of five items rated from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*).

^dOne item rated from 1 (*not at all satisfied*) to 10 (*completely satisfied*).

^eOne item rated from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*).

^fRacial/ethnic minority = 1, non-Hispanic White = -1.

*Indicates a significant difference between fathers' and children's scores at $p \leq .05$.

**Indicates a significant difference between fathers' and children's scores at $p \leq .01$.

***Indicates a significant difference between fathers' and children's scores at $p \leq .001$.

participants reported how distressed or bothered they were over the past week by symptoms of depression (e.g., feeling lonely and feeling no interest in things). Alpha reliabilities were .82 for fathers and .78 for children.

Life satisfaction

Life satisfaction was assessed with one item adapted from a single-item measure used in previous research (Diener, Gohm, Suh, & Oishi, 2000). Participants rated their overall life satisfaction from 1 (*not at all satisfied*) to 10 (*completely satisfied*).

Self-rated health

Self-rated overall physical health was measured with one item ranging from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*). This measure is commonly used in survey research and is strongly correlated with objective physical health status (Jylha, 2009).

Father–child relationship quality

Positive relationship qualities were assessed with two items that indicate feelings of care and intimacy within the father–child tie. Participants rated (a) how much they felt loved and cared for by their father/child and (b) how much they felt understood by their father/child from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*) (Fingerman et al., 2011; Umberson, 1992). Spearman–Brown reliability coefficients were .53 for fathers and .65 for children. Negative relationship qualities were assessed with two items reflecting negative interactions within the father–child tie. Participants rated (a) how much criticism they receive from their father/child and (b) how much demands their father/child makes on them from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*) (Birditt et al., 2009; Umberson, 1992). Spearman–Brown estimates were .69 and .76 for fathers and children, respectively. Some of the reliability coefficients appear low; but two-item scales often have lower reliability (Eisinga, Grotenhuis, & Pelzer, 2013), and similar estimates have been reported in previous research using similar relationship quality scales (e.g., Birditt, Tighe, Fingerman, & Zarit, 2012; Fingerman et al., 2008).

Child gender

We considered child gender (1 = *son*, -1 = *daughter*) to determine whether the associations in this study significantly differed between father–daughter and father–son dyads.

Control variables

Models controlled for each party's marital status (1 = *currently married or remarried*, -1 = *not currently married*) and years of education (Table 1).

Statistical Analysis

To account for the nonindependence in dyadic data, we used the actor–partner interdependence model (APIM; Kenny, 1996) with the mixed model procedure in SPSS

Version 22. The APIM pairs a conceptual model of relational interdependence with statistical techniques that facilitate the examination of each party's influence within the dyad. Hence, we were able to simultaneously evaluate the influence of fathers' and children's perceptions of father-child relationship quality on their own well-being (actor effect) and on the other party's well-being (partner effect). Whereas traditional models (e.g., regressions) consider the person as the unit of analysis and would estimate separate models for fathers and children, the APIM considers the dyad as the unit of analysis and estimates actor and partner effects in the same model. A core assumption of the APIM is that, within dyadic relationships, each person's reports are likely to be more similar to (or more different from) people who do not share the same dyad. This approach contrasts with regression models, which would assume that fathers and their children are not interdependent. Consequently, a major advantage of the APIM over regression models in analyzing dyadic data is that it permits each party's predictor variables to be correlated, thus accounting for the interdependence within dyads.

We estimated separate intercepts for fathers and children within the same model using generation as a distinguishing variable (1 = *father*, -1 = *child*; Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006). This enabled us to assess actor and partner effects for fathers and children. Continuous predictors and covariates were grand mean centered (Kenny et al., 2006). Effect coding (i.e., 1, -1) was used for binary variables (child gender and marital status) so that parameter estimates specify the deviation of each level of the variable from the grand mean of each well-being indicator.

Reports of positive and negative relationship qualities were analyzed separately as predictors in two hierarchical models for each of the three well-being outcomes, resulting in a total of six separate models. To examine direct associations between relationship quality and well-being, we

entered own and partner reports of relationship quality and covariates (own and partner years of education and marital status) in the first step of the model. We also included child gender. In the second step, we added an interaction term to determine whether actor and partner effects differed significantly on the basis of the child's gender (e.g., Own positive relationship quality × Child gender).

Results

In preliminary analyses (Table 1), fathers reported higher positive relationship qualities than children ($t(102) = 2.28, p = .03$). Fathers also had greater life satisfaction ($t(102) = 2.09, p = .04$) and worse self-rated health ($t(102) = -3.16, p = .002$).

Table 2 presents bivariate associations among key variables. Reports of negative qualities were correlated with reports of positive qualities relationship for children ($r = -.28, p = .004$) but not for fathers ($r = -.11, p = .26$). Within dyads, fathers' and children's reports were correlated for negative qualities ($r = .20, p = .04$) but not for positive qualities ($r = .08, p = .41$).

APIM parameter estimates with models examining how fathers' and children's reports of positive and negative relationship quality predict each party's well-being are presented in Table 3. Main effects of relationship quality are presented from the first step of each model and the moderating effects of child gender are presented from the second step of each model.

Positive Father-Child Relationship Quality and Well-Being

Fathers' well-being

Fathers' reports of higher positive relationship quality were not directly associated with their well-being. But the association between fathers' reports of positive qualities and

Table 2. Pearson Correlations Among Key Variables for Fathers and Children ($N = 103$ Dyads)

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
1. Father positive relationship quality ^a									
2. Child positive relationship quality ^a	.08								
3. Father negative relationship quality ^b	-.11	-.12							
4. Child negative relationship quality ^b	-.28**	-.28**	.20*						
5. Father depressive symptoms ^c	-.05	-.004	.24*	.01					
6. Child depressive symptoms ^c	-.13	-.14	.09	.24**	.08				
7. Father life satisfaction ^d	.04	.15	.07	.07	-.27**	-.13			
8. Child life satisfaction ^d	.01	.09	-.03	-.29**	-.22*	-.58***	.18†		
9. Father self-rated health ^e	.15	.01	-.17	-.07	-.27**	-.11	.17	-.06	
10. Child self-rated health ^e	.11	.03	-.01	-.07	-.20*	-.11	.22*	.27**	.18†

Notes: ^aMean of two items rated from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*).

^bMean of two items rated from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*a great deal*).

^cMean of five items rated from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*).

^dOne item rated from 1 (*not at all satisfied*) to 10 (*completely satisfied*).

^eOne item rated from 1 (*poor*) to 5 (*excellent*).

† $p < .07$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

Table 3. Associations Between Fathers' and Children's Perceptions of Father-Child Relationship Quality and Well-Being (N = 103 Dyads)

Effect	Fathers' well-being						Children's well-being					
	Model 1			Model 2			Model 1			Model 2		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Depressive symptoms												
Father relationship quality	.03	.09	.03	.19**	.07	.28	-.10	.08	-.11	.03	.06	.05
Child relationship quality	-.02	.09	-.02	-.09	.07	-.13	-.11	.08	-.13	.15**	.06	.22
Child gender	-.03	.06	-.04	-.03	.06	-.04	.07	.06	.12	.08	.06	.14
Father relationship quality × Child gender	-.03	.10	-.04	.01	.07	.01	-.09	.08	-.11	-.05	.07	-.07
Child relationship quality × Child gender	-.13	.09	-.15	.06	.07	.09	.21**	.08	.24	.03	.06	.04
Life satisfaction												
Father relationship quality	-.002	.30	-.001	.15	.24	.07	-.10	.22	-.04	.03	.17	.01
Child relationship quality	.43	.29	.17	.23	.23	.11	.24	.21	.09	-.44**	.16	-.22
Child gender	.07	.21	.04	.18	.21	.10	-.13	.15	-.07	-.16	.15	-.09
Father relationship quality × Child gender	-.33	.32	-.13	-.26	.25	-.13	-.13	.23	-.05	.18	.18	.09
Child relationship quality × Child gender	-.26	.30	-.10	.22	.24	.11	-.11	.22	-.04	.04	.17	.02
Self-rated health												
Father relationship quality	.18	.16	.12	-.21	.13	-.18	.07	.13	.05	-.01	.10	-.004
Child relationship quality	.004	.15	.003	.01	.12	.01	.05	.12	.04	-.02	.10	-.01
Child gender	.06	.11	.06	.05	.11	.04	-.07	.09	-.07	-.06	.09	-.06
Father relationship quality × Child gender	.36*	.17	.24	.06	.13	.05	-.03	.14	-.02	.06	.11	.05
Child relationship quality × Child gender	.09	.16	.06	-.17	.12	-.14	-.03	.13	-.02	.18†	.10	.15

Notes: Model 1 = positive father-child relationship quality predictors. Model 2 = negative father-child relationship quality predictors.
†p ≤ .07. *p ≤ .05. **p ≤ .01.

self-rated health was moderated by child gender ($B = .36, \beta = .24, p = .04$). Counter to prediction, Figure 1 shows that fathers' reports of more positive qualities in the father-child tie were linked to their own better self-rated health among fathers of daughters ($B = .45, \beta = .26, p = .03$) but not fathers of sons ($B = -.24, \beta = -.19, p = .41$). Children's reports of positive relationship quality were not linked to fathers' well-being.

Children's well-being

Similarly, children's reports of higher positive relationship quality were not directly associated with their well-being. The association between children's reports of positive qualities and depressive symptoms, however, was moderated by child gender ($B = .21, \beta = .24, p = .01$). As shown in Figure 2 and consistent with prediction, reports of more positive qualities in the father-child tie were associated with lower depressive symptoms for sons ($B = -.25, \beta = -.33, p = .003$) but not for daughters ($B = .13, \beta = .14, p = .32$). Fathers' reports of positive relationship quality were not linked to children's well-being.

Negative Father-Child Relationship Quality and Well-Being

Fathers' well-being

In line with the hypothesis, fathers' reports of higher negative qualities were associated with their elevated depressive symptoms ($B = .19, \beta = .28, p = .01$). Fathers' reports of negative relationship quality were not associated with their life satisfaction or self-rated health. Children's reports of negative relationship quality were not linked to fathers' well-being.

Children's well-being

In accord with prediction, children's reports of higher negative relationship quality were associated with their elevated depressive symptoms ($B = .15, \beta = .22, p = .01$)

and lower life satisfaction ($B = -.44, \beta = -.22, p = .01$). But children's reports of negative relationship quality were not associated with their self-rated health. Fathers' reports of negative relationship quality were not linked to children's well-being.

Post Hoc Tests

It is possible that perceptions of relationship quality reported by one's father/child may buffer or exacerbate the links between one's own reports of relationship quality and well-being, or vice versa (Kenny & Cook, 1999). Therefore, an actor-partner interaction term was examined in a third step for each model (e.g., Own positive relationship quality \times Partner positive relationship quality). Three-way interactions with child gender were then considered in a separate fourth step (e.g., Own positive relationship quality \times Partner positive relationship quality \times Child gender). To evaluate the nature of significant interactions, the statistical significance of associations between relationship quality and well-being was evaluated at 1 SD above and below the grand mean of the relationship quality measures to represent high and low scores, respectively (Aiken & West, 1991).

One significant interaction was found. The actor-partner interaction of negative qualities was moderated by child gender for fathers' depressive symptoms ($B = .18, \beta = .23, p = .02$). The actor-partner interaction was significant for fathers of daughters ($B = .30, \beta = .27, p = .04$) but not for fathers of sons ($B = -.07, \beta = -.11, p = .33$). Specifically, the association between fathers' reports of negative qualities and depressive symptoms was exacerbated when daughters' reports of negative qualities were high ($B = .27, \beta = .34, p = .03$) but not low ($B = -.17, \beta = -.21, p = .39$).

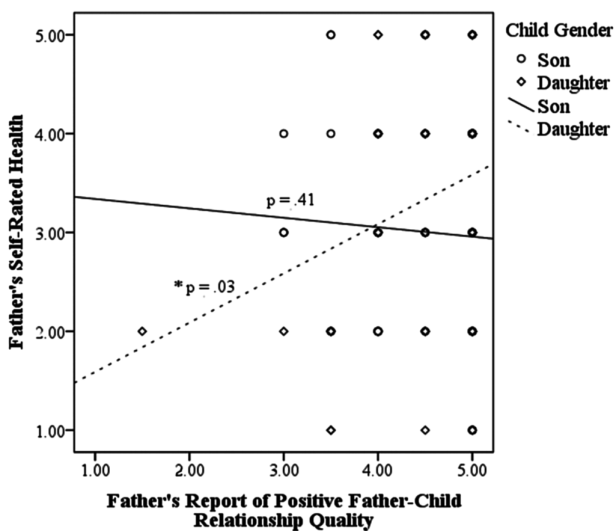


Figure 1. Significant moderating effect of child gender on the association between fathers' reports of positive relationship quality with their child and fathers' self-rated health.

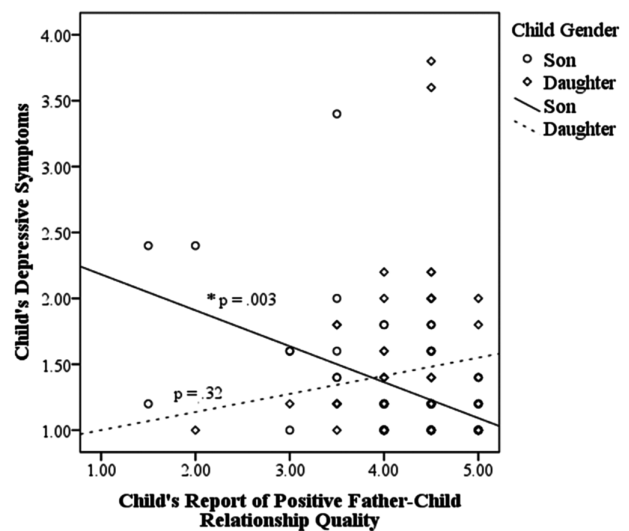


Figure 2. Significant moderating effect of child gender on the association between children's reports of positive relationship quality with their father and children's depressive symptoms.

Discussion

Guided by life course perspectives on the enduring implications of family ties for individual development, the present study demonstrates that the quality of the relationship between aging fathers and middle-aged children is significantly associated with the subjective well-being of both parties. This study builds upon prior research by evaluating bidirectional influences within father–child dyads in later life. Findings indicate that one’s own perceptions of negative qualities within the father–child tie were linked to heightened psychological distress for fathers and children. Perceptions of positive qualities within these ties, however, may have protective benefits for each party’s well-being that depend in part on the child’s gender.

Positive Father–Child Relationship Quality and Well-Being

Child’s gender played a key role in the associations between positive qualities in the father–child relationship and well-being for aging fathers and middle-aged children. We predicted that positive qualities of father–son relationships may be especially salient to both men’s well-being because these ties tend to be somewhat tenuous and/or emotionally distant (Miller, 2013). Counter to prediction, however, fathers had better self-rated health when they reported more positive qualities in their relationships with daughters but not with sons. Positive aspects of social ties may enhance health through a number of pathways, including increased social support (Rook, 2015). Compared with middle-aged sons, middle-aged daughters give more frequent social support to their parents (Kahn et al., 2011; Raley & Bianchi, 2006). Additionally, relative to adult sons, fathers report having more peer-like relationships with adult daughters in which they communicate with each other as equals (Proulx & Helms, 2008). Thus, positive relationships with daughters may be a more satisfying and consistent source of social support that brings protective benefits for aging fathers’ health.

Turning to middle-aged children, reports of more positive qualities in the father–child tie were linked to lower depressive symptoms for sons but not for daughters. This finding is in line with the hypothesis and suggests that sons may place greater value than daughters on having a more positive relationship with their father. Several other factors may also contribute to this gender difference. First, fathers are generally closer to, spend more time with, and invest more heavily in sons than in daughters during their offspring’s childhood and adolescence (Raley & Bianchi, 2006). Given the greater centrality of fathers earlier in their lives, perceptions of positive ties with fathers in midlife may be more consequential for sons’ psychological well-being. Second, relationships with fathers appear to have an important influence on men’s ability to cope with daily stressors and navigate life problems. Retrospective reports

of higher quality bonds with fathers during childhood have been associated with less emotional reactivity to stressors in adulthood for sons but not for daughters (Mallers et al., 2010). Relatedly, fathers report giving more advice to adult sons than to adult daughters (Proulx & Helms, 2008). Positive qualities in the relationship with their father during midlife may therefore buffer the harmful impact of stressors on sons’ psychological well-being. Third, compared with women, men tend to have fewer sources of emotional support (Antonucci, 2001). Consequently, men may benefit more than women from having a highly positive relationship with their father. While more research is needed to explore potential mechanisms for this finding, the current study suggests that positive ties with fathers are a critical source of support for middle-aged men that may shield them from the experience of elevated depressive symptoms.

For both sons and fathers of daughters, their own reports of positive qualities in the father–child relationship mattered for well-being but the other party’s reports did not matter. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this suggests that one’s own perceptions of positive relationship quality are most salient to well-being. Furthermore, preliminary analyses revealed that fathers’ and children’s reports of positive qualities were uncorrelated, which implies that each person’s positive feelings toward their relationship may not be in agreement with the other party. Consideration of the other person’s perspectives strengthens the associations in this study, however, because it demonstrates the independent role of one’s own perceptions of relationship quality in shaping well-being while accounting for the influence of the other party’s views (Kenny & Cook, 1999).

Negative Father–Child Relationship Quality and Well-Being

Consistent with the hypothesis, fathers and children had elevated depressive symptoms when they reported more negative qualities in their relationship. Children who perceived more negative relationship quality with their father also had lower life satisfaction. In line with prior research (Umberson, 1992), these findings demonstrate that negative qualities in father–child relationships may have a more pervasive influence than positive qualities on well-being among adult daughters and sons. This study also suggests that more negative father–child ties may be a source of strain for middle-aged men and women that diminishes their life satisfaction and heightens emotional distress. The present findings extend previous studies showing that poorer quality ties with fathers during childhood (e.g., Flouri, 2004; Morgan et al., 2012) and young adulthood (e.g., Amato, 1994; Barnett et al., 1991, 1992) have harmful implications for adult children’s mental health. Moreover, this study proposes that current tensions in the father–child relationship are a meaningful contributor to offspring’s well-being at midlife.

In addition, the present findings imply that more negative relationships with middle-aged daughters or sons may play a part in the development and maintenance of depressive symptoms among older men. Within father–daughter dyads, post hoc tests revealed that the association between fathers' reports of negative qualities and depressive symptoms was exacerbated when daughters reported high levels of negative qualities. In other words, more negative ties with daughters may be particularly detrimental to fathers' psychological well-being when both parties perceive high levels of negativity within their relationship. This finding demonstrates the interdependence between fathers and daughters in later life and raises the possibility that negative interaction patterns within these ties may intensify fathers' emotional distress. In an observational study, fathers and adult children who reported more negative relationship quality both displayed more conflict engagement behaviors (e.g., pressuring, blaming, and criticizing), which suggests that perceptions of negative qualities may predispose each party to engage in and escalate conflict (Cichy, Lefkowitz, & Fingerman, 2013). Relationships with adult daughters tend to be more emotionally intense than ties with adult sons (Birditt et al., 2009; Fingerman, 2001). Hence, father–daughter ties that are viewed by both parties as highly negative may be especially likely to involve arguments that have a deleterious impact on aging fathers' mental health. Of course, given the relatively small sample size in the current study, it is possible that this finding reflects a Type 1 error; that is, it may be a false positive. Considering the serious consequences of elevated depressive symptoms in late life, including increased disability, higher healthcare utilization, greater suicidal ideation, and heightened risk of major depression (Meeks, Vahia, Lavretsky, Kulkarni, & Jeste, 2011), future research should use larger samples to further explore the role of father–child relationships in older men's experience of depressive symptoms.

Interestingly, contrary to prediction, negative relationship qualities were not more strongly linked to well-being within father–daughter dyads as compared with father–son dyads. We expected that women's more intense emotional reactions to interpersonal difficulties (Birditt & Fingerman, 2003) and greater tensions in their relationships with aging parents (Birditt et al., 2009; Fingerman, 2001) would magnify these linkages for fathers and daughters. Findings instead highlight the powerful implications of negative father–child relationship quality for the well-being of both generations, regardless of child gender.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

Strengths of this study include the examination of father–child ties in later life, the assessment of relationship quality and well-being from fathers and children, consideration of positive and negative relationship qualities, and dyadic methods to account for mutual influences within father–child dyads. We also examined how the associations

between relationship quality and well-being differ between father–daughter and father–son dyads. Models controlled for fathers' and children's sociodemographic characteristics, suggesting the unique and robust role of father–child relationship quality in contributing to each party's well-being.

In light of these attributes, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, causal inferences cannot be made regarding the cross-sectional associations found in this study. People who have elevated depressive symptoms, for instance, may interpret their interactions more negatively and also tend to elicit negativity in their relationships (Sacco, 1999). Second, the sample size was somewhat small; however, the sample was of sufficient size to evaluate reciprocal influences within dyads (Kenny, Kashy, & Bolger, 1998). Third, fathers in this study had low rates of functional disability. Consequently, findings may not generalize to father–child dyads in which aging fathers have intensive support needs and children provide caregiving assistance. Fourth, most fathers and children were non-Hispanic White, middle class, and had biological relationships. As such, findings may not generalize to more diverse types of father–child dyads. Finally, most fathers were married or widowed. Divorced fathers may be comparatively less involved with their adult children (Umberson et al., 2010), and so future research should examine how fathers' marital status may moderate the associations in the present study. Despite these limitations, this study lays groundwork for future research to gain greater insight into how positive and negative qualities of the father–child tie may contribute to well-being among fathers and children in the later years of their relationship.

Another important consideration for future research is the role of amount of interaction between aging fathers and middle-aged children in determining the links between relationship quality and well-being. Along with relationship quality, frequency of contact and support exchanges between parents and children are two defining components of intergenerational solidarity (Bengtson et al., 2002). Both of these components likely affect opportunities for father–child relationship quality to influence well-being. Fathers and children who have more frequent contact or support exchanges, for example, may be more emotionally reactive to the quality of their relationship. Exploring the ways in which qualitative and quantitative aspects of father–child relationships interact to shape the well-being of each party would further enhance understanding of the emotional implications of these ties in later life.

The father–child relationship is one of the most long-lasting and salient social ties. The present findings indicate that perceptions of relationship quality between aging fathers and middle-aged children have implications for both parties' subjective well-being. This study underscores the value of taking a life course view on father–child relationships and considering the reciprocal influences between fathers and children.

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