

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

The association between parental images and satisfaction in intimate relationships in a Northern Finland sample

Annukka Auni Inkeri Kiviniemi^{1,2}, Ole Wasz-Höckert¹, Leila Kaarina Seitamo¹, Leena Orvokki Joskitt^{1,2}, Hanna Pauliina Heikkinen³, Irma Kaarina Moilanen^{1,2}, Hanna Elina Ebeling^{1,2}

¹Department of Child Psychiatry, Institute of Clinical Sciences, University of Oulu, Oulu, Finland

²Clinic of Child Psychiatry, University Hospital of Oulu, Oulu, Finland

³Department of Mathematical Sciences / IT Administration Services, University of Oulu, Oulu, Finland

Received 4 June 2010; Accepted 9 December 2010

ABSTRACT

Objectives. Experiences in one's family of origin, especially the relationship to one's parents, supposedly form the basis of relationships in adulthood. The connection between traumatic childhood events and later life has been studied intensively, whereas average childhood growth experiences have been given less attention. The aim of this study was to find out the association between images of the mother and father and the psychosocial well-being of young adults from the perspective of satisfaction in intimate relationships.

Study design. Cross-sectional study.

Methods. The research is a part of the Oulu University Hospital "Mother-Child Follow-up Study 1971–1972". The follow-up data were collected from the young adults (n=337) in 2000 by way of mailed questionnaires, which included 17 questions about the participants' images of their parents and 18 questions about their intimate relationship satisfaction. In this study we used attachment theory as a theoretical frame of reference.

Results. Mental images of dominating parents were associated with quarrelsome intimate relationships, and the image of a dominating father, with repressive/submissive and less balanced relationships. Mental images of diligent and sociable parents were associated with a loving and balanced relationship, and the image of supportive parents, with a balanced relationship. Parental diligence was associated with a less quarrelsome relationship.

Conclusion. The young adults' mental images of their parents were associated with their intimate relationship satisfaction. Positive mental images of the father, in particular, seemed to protect young adults from a quarrelsome and repressive/submissive intimate relationship.

(*Int J Circumpolar Health* 2011; 70(2):215-227)

Keywords: family of origin, attachment, parent-child relationship, parenthood, marital satisfaction, mental representation, mental image, intimate relationship

INTRODUCTION

The association between experiences in one's family of origin and early interaction with well-being in adulthood has been well covered in research during the last 2 decades. For the most part, the research has explored the relationship between traumatic childhood events and subsequent life. Domestic violence and victimization have been connected to subsequent behaviour problems, social maladjustment and aggressiveness (1). The association between divorce and the child's externalizing and internalizing behaviour has been suggested to be partially mediated by depressive/withdrawn parenting (2). Parental depression has been associated with depression in childhood or adolescence (3); parental alcohol or drug addiction, with externalizing or depressive disorders in childhood or adolescence (4); and the death of 1 or both parents, with the child's depression and alcohol or other substance abuse (5). In addition, experiences of domestic violence and physical punishment have been connected to trouble in future intimate relationships (6), as has childhood sexual abuse (7).

Falke, Wagner and Mosmann (2008) used questionnaires to study the connection between family-of-origin experiences and the marital adjustment of 542 middle-class Brazilians. They found that favourable family-of-origin experiences and a positive opinion of their parents' relationships was connected to better quality in the participants' own marital relationships. However, experiences in the participants' families of origin explained only 10.8% of the quality of their marital relationships (8–10). Sabatelli and Bartle-Haring (2003) studied how both spouses' experiences of their own families of origin uniquely affected their experiences of their marital relationship. For both husbands and wives, well-

functioning models in their families of origin were notable factors in better marital adjustment, and vice versa (11–13).

An individual's own developmental history is regarded as 1 factor affecting mating and marital satisfaction. Here an adult's attachment is considered to relate comprehensively, and mainly unconsciously, to one's way of living in an intimate relationship (14–16). John Bowlby (1907–1990), a child psychiatrist and psychoanalyst and the creator of attachment theory, raised the importance of a child's growing environment to her/his development. He emphasized how separation from one's mother and the loss of a mother's love can threaten child development. Bowlby also proposed that children continuously internalize their nursing experiences in such a way that early attachments will shape later extra-familiar relationships (17–19). After Bowlby, many researchers have been interested in how experiences of early childhood are transferred into the mind as memory models of oneself and others, which later in life will guide perceptions, expectations and interpretations – and consequently behaviour – in different situations and interactive relations (16,20–23). As well, many studies based on attachment theory have examined whether the types of attachment formed in childhood correspond to the types of attachment formed in adulthood, especially those created in intimate relationships (14,24–29).

Previous studies indicate the association between traumatic events in childhood and problems in adulthood (30–32), but less evidence has been collected on the effect of various normal growth experiences on adult well-being. The association between experiences in the family of origin and marital satisfaction from anything wider than a problem-based perspective has been studied somewhat (8,11) but, as far as we know,

not in the circumpolar area. Circumstances in the North are somewhat different. Nature is more severe and rapid urbanization attracts the young to the cities, thus young people's contact with their own family may remain distant. This creates special challenges for the well-being of families in the circumpolar region. It is therefore justified to investigate whether experiences in northern youths' families of origin remain in their minds as internal representations, and whether these are associated with subsequent relationships and intimate relationship satisfaction. Internal representations may be particularly important for circumpolar people who live in sparsely populated areas, where young adults often have to leave their families of origin and their growing environments at a very young age to find work or to begin their studies.

In this study, we wanted to examine the association between normal childhood experiences and well-being in adulthood using data collected from the homogeneous population of a Nordic democratic welfare country. The data from "The Mother-Child Follow-up Study 1971–1972" offer the possibility to examine the association between one's mental images of one's parents and intimate relationship satisfaction from a northern Finnish perspective – and add the possibility of comparing the results with other studies.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The data of this study are a part of the longitudinal study, "The Mother-Child Follow-up Study 1971–1972," conducted in northern Finland by the Clinic of Child Psychiatry of the University and University Hospital of Oulu. The participants of the study were women who had come to Oulu University Hospital during 1971–1972 to give

birth to their healthy first or second child (33). The actual study was preceded by a pilot study in the 1960s, which included 63 post-partum mothers. When their children had reached the age of 5, a pilot follow-up study was conducted that included 50 mothers (33–35). The actual study examined the physiological reactions of 491 healthy post-partum mothers to a child's cry. The number of children was 495, including 4 pairs of twins. Of the mothers, 310 were primiparous and 181 were biparous, and their mean ages were 22.2 and 25.6 years, respectively (Fig. 1, Phase 1) (33,36).

The first follow-up study was conducted in 1978–1979 (Fig. 1, Phase 2), in which 353 mothers returned the questionnaires concerning 354 children (1 pair of twins) (34). The sample used in this study consisted of the grown-up offspring born in 1971–1972 who attended the second follow-up study in 2000 (Fig. 1, Phase 3). At that time, the questionnaires were sent to 472 participants of which 337 young adults responded, which equals 68.1% of the initial sample. Twelve of them came from single-parent families. The participants' marital statuses, levels of education and work situations are shown in Table I. The unmarried individuals are divided into those who answered the relationship questions ($n=41$) and those who did not answer ($n=36$); the questionnaire asked that currently single participants answer on the basis of their most recent intimate relationships.

The aim of this study was to find out how participants' mental images of their mothers and fathers were associated with the participants' psychosocial well-being, from the perspective of marital or intimate relationship satisfaction. The mental images of the participants' parents were assessed by asking, "How did you perceive your childhood father/mother?" The participants were asked to grade 17 different traits of their parents

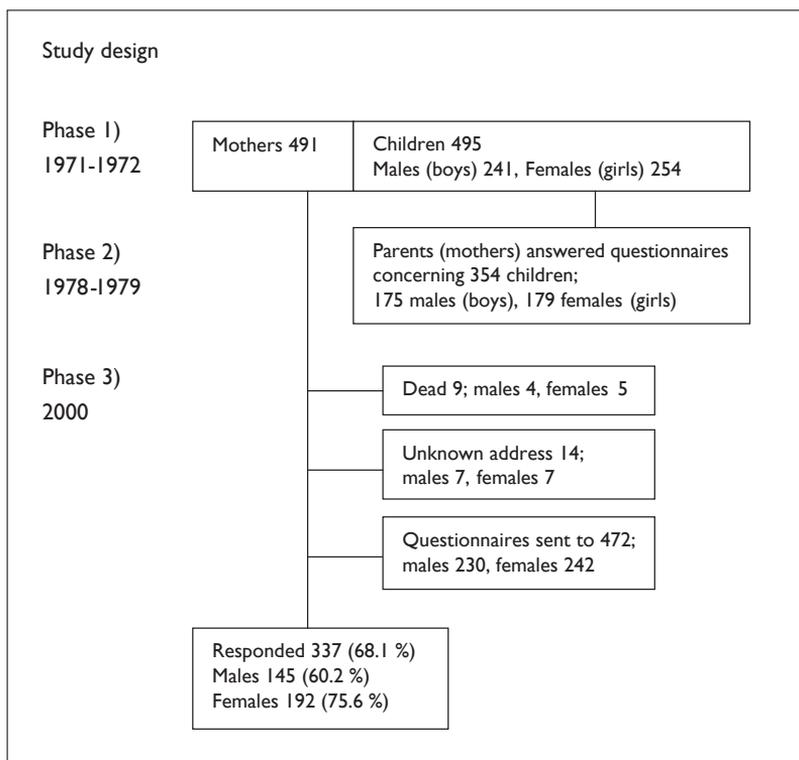


Figure 1. The data in the different phases of the study.

Table 1. Description of the participants.

Marital status	n	%	Education	n	%	Work situation	n	%
Married	121	35.9	University	53	16.0	Working full-time	194	57.9
Cohabiting	132	39.2	Polytechnic	26	7.8	Working part-time	12	3.6
Unmarried, answered ^a	41	12.1	College level	77	23.3	Self-employed/ entrepreneur	20	6.0
Unmarried, did not answer ^b	36	10.7	Secondary	96	29.0	Student	29	8.7
Separated/divorced	5	1.5	Incomplete	51	15.4	Maternity/paternity leave	44	13.1
Widowed	1	0.3	No vocational educ.	28	8.5	Unemployed/laid off	28	8.3
Unknown	1	0.3				Retired	2	0.6
						Other	6	1.8
Total	337	100.0	Total	331	100.0	Total	335	100.0
NA	–		NA	6		NA	2	
Total	337		Total	337		Total	337	

^a Unmarried, answered the relationship questions on the basis of an earlier intimate relationship.

^b Unmarried, did not answer the relationship questions.

NA=A few participants did not answer every question.

as they experienced them during their growing years, using a 5-level scale analysed in the following order: 1=*never*, 2=*seldom*, 3=*sometimes*, 4=*fairly often*, 5=*very often*. The questions about participants' mothers were posed separately from questions about their fathers (Tables II and III). To evaluate intimate relationship satisfaction, the following study question was chosen: "How do you grade the following aspects of your intimate relationship?" Here the participants were asked to grade their intimate relationship satisfaction using 18 different items on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1=*hardly or not at all*, 2=*a little*, 3=*somewhat*, 4=*pretty much*, 5=*very much* (Table IV).

The study question was approached from the perspective of attachment theory. The statistical methods used were principal component analysis (PCA) and the Mann-Whitney U-test. The principal component analyses were done using Varimax rotation separately for the mental image items of mothers, fathers and intimate relationships. Paying attention to the skewedness of the data, the reliability of the PCA solution was assured by running a number of requisite control analyses. The obtained (PCA) components were interpreted and named after the rotation by the most strongly loaded variables (37–39). The PCA gave 4 components describing participants' mental images of their mothers and fathers: 1. *supportive*; 2. *dominating*; 3. *sociable*; and 4. *hard-working*. Four different components describing intimate relationship experiences were also obtained: 1. *quarrelsome*; 2. *loving*; 3. *balanced*; and 4. *repressive/submissive*. Using the results of the PCA, sum variables were drawn for both the mental images and the relationship variables, and the variables were accepted to the sum if their factor loading was 0.45 or more. The absolute value of the sum variables was divided by the number of variables included, thus the range of the ratio scale became

1–5. After that, the mental images of mothers and fathers were treated as continuous variables. The intimate relationship components were divided by the means into 2 classes: class zero (0), which included 75% of the cases representing positive relationship experiences, and class one (1), which included 25% of cases representing negative relationship experiences. In addition, those with missing intimate relationship responses were analysed.

RESULTS

Communality values describe how much of the variation of a single perceived variable can be explained using the principal components of the PCA solution (max 1.0). If the values do not fit under the limit of 0.5, they measure each principal component fairly reliably. Cronbach's alpha is a coefficient of consistency and measures how well a set of variables or items measures a single, unidimensional, latent construct. Alpha can take values between negative infinity and 1 (37,38). In this study, a limit value of 0.6 was used. Communality values for the PCA solution of the mother images ranged between 0.432–0.754 and the Cronbach's alpha values for component reliability were between 0.361–0.857 (Table II). The communality values for the PCA solution of the father images ranged between 0.476–0.756 and the Cronbach's alpha values were between 0.598–0.852 (Table III). The communality values for the PCA solution of the intimate relationship variables ranged between 0.409–0.800 and the Cronbach's alpha values were between 0.680–0.900 (Table IV).

The PCA solution of the mother image variables gave 4 components (Table II). The PCA solution of the father image variables gave 5

components, in whose solution the dominating component was split into 2 components. For the analogy, the father image solution was forced into a 4-component solution (Table III). Altogether, the principal components described 59.9% of the variation in the mother image variables and, correspondingly, 61.1% of the variation in the father image variables. The variable “domestic” loaded on different components in the mother and father image solutions, getting a low communality value in both of them; therefore it was left out of the sum variables. Thus, mainly analogous solutions were brought out for each of the 4 components describing images of the participants’ mothers and fathers. The images of mothers and fathers were named by the essence of the components (1) *supportive*, (2) *dominating*, (3) *sociable* and (4) *hard-working*. However, because of the low Cronbach’s alpha value of the mothers’ “hard-working” component,

we decided to use the single variables “Committed to work” and “Diligent” instead of a common sum variable for both the mother and father images to facilitate comparison.

The attributes of supportive parenthood included respect for the child and warm interaction. This was linked to support in schoolwork, participating in the child’s hobbies, acknowledgement and praise, arranging nice surprises and being tender and warm. Emphasizing one’s authoritarian state and crossing the child’s borders – for instance, by being authoritative, punishing and demanding – were features of dominating parenthood, and some of these parents might also hit their children or become violent when angry. In addition, these parents were linked to coldness, insensitiveness and incoherency. The typical traits of sociable parenthood were happiness, talkativeness and spontaneity in relationships.

Table II. Solutions of principal component analysis (PCA) of mother image variables.

	Components				Communalities
	Supportive	Dominating	Sociable	Hard-working ^b	
% of variance (total 59.9%)	22.3	15.8	14.3	7.6	
Eigenvalue	5.64	2.05	1.31	1.19	
Cronbach’s alpha	0.857	0.780	0.641	0.361 ^b	
Mother image variables	n=335	n=328	n=326	n=334	
Supported, took part in hobbies	0.813	-0.062	0.123	0.086	0.688
Supported with schoolwork	0.801	-0.088	0.191	0.095	0.696
Gave acknowledgement, praise	0.760	-0.135	0.290	-0.007	0.680
Arranged nice surprises	0.704	0.016	0.005	-0.052	0.498
Warm, tender	0.680	-0.229	0.388	0.004	0.665
Demanding	0.144	0.806	0.026	0.131	0.687
Punished	-0.052	0.760	-0.126	-0.148	0.618
Authoritative	-0.166	0.741	0.029	0.126	0.593
Hit when angry, was violent	-0.388	0.521	-0.067	-0.160	0.453
Cold, insensitive	-0.450	0.510	-0.437	0.128	0.670
Incoherent, erratic and unpredictable	-0.454	0.462	-0.219	-0.029	0.468
Talkative	0.160	0.043	0.765	0.030	0.614
Happy	0.444	-0.238	0.672	-0.013	0.705
Spontaneous in relationships	0.034	0.011	0.656	0.003	0.432
Domestic ^a	0.146	-0.104	0.522 ^a	0.091	0.313
Committed to work ^b	-0.108	0.075	-0.101	0.852	0.754
Diligent ^b	0.278	-0.056	0.364	0.660	0.648

Extraction method: Principal component analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

^a Excluded from component because of low communality.

^b “Committed to work” and “Diligent” were used as variables instead of Hard-working component, because of low Cronbach’s Alpha.

Table III. Solutions of principal component analysis (PCA) of father image variables.

	Components				
	Supportive	Dominating	Sociable	Hard-working ^b	
% of variance (total 61.1%)	20.9	16.9	13.5	9.9	
Eigenvalue	5.25	2.37	1.58	1.19	
Cronbach's alpha	0.852	0.764	0.735	0.598	Communalities
Father image variables	n=319	n=319	n=315	n=321	
Supported, took part in hobbies	0.818	0.011	0.095	-0.022	0.679
Supported with schoolwork	0.843	-0.066	0.091	0.115	0.737
Gave acknowledgement, praise	0.814	-0.112	0.237	-0.021	0.732
Arranged nice surprises	0.620	-0.060	0.289	0.061	0.476
Warm, tender	0.603	-0.242	0.433	-0.035	0.611
Demanding	0.191	0.657	0.009	0.326	0.574
Punished	-0.006	0.736	-0.036	-0.005	0.543
Authoritative	-0.077	0.743	-0.059	0.331	0.671
Hit when angry, was violent	-0.185	0.650	0.012	-0.332	0.568
Cold, insensitive	-0.426	0.540	-0.378	-0.091	0.625
Incoherent, erratic and unpredictable	-0.292	0.623	-0.118	-0.215	0.534
Talkative	0.262	0.018	0.817	-0.008	0.736
Happy	0.394	-0.228	0.739	0.053	0.756
Spontaneous in relationships	0.099	0.037	0.733	0.064	0.553
Domestic ^a	0.301 ^a	-0.281	0.149	0.008	0.192
Committed to work ^b	-0.186	0.152	0.092	0.774	0.665
Diligent ^b	0.225	-0.125	0.007	0.820	0.738

Extraction method: Principal component analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

^a Excluded from component because of low communality.

^b "Committed to work" and "Diligent" were used as variables instead of Hard-working component, for comparison with mother image variables.

Table IV. Solutions of principal component analysis (PCA) of intimate relationship variables.

	Components				
	Quarrelsome	Loving	Balanced	Repressive/submissive	
% of variance (total 63.18%)	24.57	15.31	13.92	9.38	
Eigenvalue	7.327	1.618	1.371	1.056	
Cronbach's alpha	0.900	0.821	0.680	0.707	Communalities
Relationship variables	n=299	n=294	n=294	n=298	
Quarrels	0.846	-0.086	0.029	0.060	0.727
Disagreements	0.767	-0.079	-0.133	0.038	0.613
Bitterness towards each other	0.731	-0.254	-0.143	0.072	0.624
Jadedness	0.653	-0.389	-0.194	0.066	0.620
Pouting, "silent treatment"	0.652	0.041	-0.187	0.226	0.512
Dependence on each other	0.030	0.744	-0.021	0.184	0.588
Togetherness	-0.280	0.671	0.165	-0.221	0.606
Working together	-0.188	0.614	0.379	-0.216	0.603
Feeling of fellowship	-0.435	0.558	0.414	-0.011	0.672
Understanding each other	-0.596	0.492	0.255	-0.063	0.667
Love	-0.521	0.490	0.399	-0.037	0.672
Mutual trust	-0.568	0.383	0.438	-0.047	0.663
Ease of approaching each other	-0.477	0.353	0.498	-0.075	0.605
Feeling that life has a purpose	-0.227	0.207	0.715	-0.140	0.626
Willingness to forgive	-0.358	0.049	0.689	0.105	0.615
My striving to deal with disagreements by discussing together	0.065	0.088	0.629	-0.043	0.409
My submission to my spouse's will	0.263	-0.148	0.009	0.812	0.750
My spouse's submission to my will	-0.012	0.061	-0.087	0.888	0.800

Extraction method: Principal component analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

Table V. Connection between maternal and paternal images and the participant's experiences in an intimate relationship.

Type of relationship	Quarrelsome				Loving				Balanced				Repressive / submissive				Intimate																									
	No ^a	Yes ^b	n	Mean SD	Yes ^a	No ^b	n	Mean SD	Yes ^a	No ^b	n	Mean SD	Yes ^b	No ^c	n	Mean SD	Yes ^c	No ^c	n	Mean SD	Mean SD	p																				
Mother/ Father image variables	n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD	n	Mean	SD	p																				
Mother																																										
Supportive	219	3.5	0.8	79	3.3	0.8	ns	232	3.5	0.8	61	3.3	0.8	213	3.6	0.8	80	3.2	0.7	<0.001	182	3.5	0.8	115	3.5	0.7	ns	298	3.5	0.8	37	3.6	0.7	ns								
Dominating	214	2.3	0.6	80	2.5	0.5	0.037	227	2.3	0.6	62	2.5	0.6	209	2.3	0.6	80	2.4	0.6	ns	179	2.3	0.6	114	2.4	0.6	ns	294	2.3	0.6	34	2.1	0.6	0.014								
Sociable	215	3.9	0.7	76	3.8	0.7	ns	225	3.9	0.7	61	3.7	0.7	0.036	209	3.9	0.7	77	3.6	0.7	0.002	176	3.8	0.7	114	3.8	0.7	ns	291	3.8	0.7	35	3.9	0.7	ns							
Diligent	219	4.6	0.7	79	4.4	0.8	0.015	231	4.6	0.8	62	4.3	0.8	0.012	214	4.6	0.6	79	4.3	0.8	<0.001	183	4.6	0.7	114	4.5	0.7	ns	298	4.5	0.7	36	4.4	0.7	ns							
Committed to work	219	3.3	1.2	80	3.6	1.0	ns	232	3.4	1.2	62	3.5	1.0	214	3.4	1.2	80	3.5	1.1	ns	183	3.4	1.2	115	3.4	1.2	ns	299	3.4	1.2	37	3.0	1.1	0.042								
Father																																										
Supportive	208	3.2	0.8	75	2.9	0.8	0.009	223	3.2	0.8	55	2.9	0.9	0.014	204	3.2	0.8	74	2.8	0.7	0.001	170	3.2	0.8	112	2.9	0.9	0.001	283	3.1	0.8	36	3.2	0.8	ns							
Dominating	208	2.4	0.6	75	2.7	0.7	0.017	222	2.4	0.6	56	2.6	0.7	ns	204	2.4	0.6	74	2.6	0.7	0.021	172	2.4	0.6	110	2.7	0.7	<0.001	283	2.5	0.7	36	2.3	0.8	ns							
Sociable	207	3.4	0.8	72	3.1	0.8	0.039	218	3.4	0.8	56	3.1	0.8	0.012	204	3.4	0.8	70	3.1	0.8	0.008	166	3.5	0.8	112	3.1	0.7	0.001	279	3.3	0.8	36	3.4	0.8	ns							
Diligent	209	4.5	0.8	75	4.2	0.9	0.018	224	4.5	0.8	55	4.2	0.9	0.044	205	4.5	0.8	74	4.2	0.9	0.015	171	4.5	0.8	112	4.3	0.9	ns	284	4.4	0.8	37	4.3	0.7	ns							
Committed to work	211	4.1	1.0	75	4.0	0.9	ns	225	4.1	1.0	56	3.8	0.9	0.021	207	4.1	1.0	74	4.0	0.8	ns	173	4.1	1.0	112	4.0	1.0	ns	286	4.1	1.0	37	3.9	1.0	ns							

P-value Mann-Whitney U-test.

^a Including 75% of cases representing positive relationship experiences.

^b Including 25% of cases representing negative relationship experiences.

^c Is/Has been = those who answered the relationship questions on the basis of a present or earlier intimate relationship.

^d Did not answer the relationship questions.

Scale 1-5.

The principal component solution of the intimate relationship variables produced 4 components that were named according to the nature of the component as follows: (1) *quarrelsome*; (2) *loving*; (3) *balanced*; and (4) *repressive/submissive*. On the whole, the principal components of the intimate relationship variables described 63.2% of the variation in the variables (Table IV). Characteristic of a quarrelsome relationship was a negative emotional charge towards each other, which included disagreements, jadedness and "silent treatment." In addition, it was linked to low willingness to understand each other. Love and mutual trust were not characteristic of a quarrelsome relationship. By contrast, loving relationships emphasized dependence on each other, togetherness and working together, and there were feelings of fellowship, love and mutual trust, as well. Willingness to forgive and a feeling that life has a purpose were characteristic of a balanced relationship. Additionally, "ease of approaching each other" and "striving to deal with disagreements by discussing together" were also felt in a balanced relationship. A repressive/submissive relationship was characterized by themes of command and submission.

The connection between maternal and paternal images

and intimate relationship satisfaction is shown in Table V. Positive images of one's parents were associated with intimate relationship satisfaction, whereas negative parental images were associated with negative experiences in the intimate relationship. Parental domination was found suggestively in the background of a quarrelsome relationship (mother, $p=0.037$ and father, $p=0.017$) as was, suggestively, low diligence in both parents ($p=0.015$ and $p=0.018$). A supportive father was associated with a less quarrelsome relationship ($p=0.009$), as was, suggestively, a sociable father ($p=0.039$). A loving relationship was suggestively related to parental sociability ($p=0.036$, $p=0.012$) and diligence ($p=0.012$, $p=0.044$), as well as to the image of a supportive ($p=0.014$) and hard-working ($p=0.021$) father. A balanced relationship was associated with the image of supportive ($p<0.001$, $p=0.001$) and sociable parents ($p=0.002$, $p=0.008$) and with parental diligence ($p<0.001$, $p=0.015$), as well as, suggestively, with low paternal domination ($p=0.021$). Scarce paternal supportiveness and sociability ($p=0.001$) and paternal domination ($p<0.001$) appeared in the background of a repressive/submissive relationship. The parental images of those participants who did not respond to the intimate relationship questions are also presented in Table V. Because the questionnaire asked participants that were not currently in an intimate relationship to respond on the basis of a previous relationship, the participants that did not answer the relationship questions are considered to be single in Table V. On the basis of their answers, the lack of any intimate relationship had a suggestive association with low maternal domination ($p=0.014$) and scarce maternal commitment to working ($p=0.042$). Since it is impossible to know with certainty the marital status of the non-respondents, this result should be viewed with caution.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we wanted to examine the association between normal childhood experiences and well-being in adulthood from the perspective of satisfaction in intimate relationships, using the data collected from a homogeneous population of a Nordic democratic welfare country. In the data, the participating young adults assessed their images of their parents and their own contentment with their intimate relationships. The results are consistent with the hypothesis and earlier studies in that recollections of one's parents from one's growing years and experiences in one's childhood family did have an effect on later relationships, especially intimate relationships (14,16,21,23,24,28,39). Earlier studies have mainly contemplated the association between traumatic events and trouble in intimate relationships (6,7). In this study, images of parental features are examined from a wide perspective, not only from the perspective of trouble.

The components of the maternal and paternal images found in this study – *supportive*, *dominating* and *sociable*, as well as the variables *committed to work* and *diligent* – are also valid in describing different contemporary parental characteristics. Appreciating and respecting the child by supporting with schoolwork, participating in hobbies, giving positive feedback and arranging nice surprises are pronounced in supportive maternal and paternal images. These images seem to build well-functioning inner models that are carried forward into the child's future intimate relationships, which are experienced as balanced. Tenderness and warmth are also important features in supportive parenthood. These childhood experiences and parenthood characteristics seem to be reflected particularly in balanced relationships, which are characterized by an ease in approaching

each other, a feeling that life is purposeful, a willingness to forgive and striving for discussion when disagreements appear. Paternal supportiveness also seems to be reflected in loving relationships, in which dependence on each other, togetherness, fellowship, understanding and love are experienced. Also important are the social traits of the parents, such as happiness, talkativeness and spontaneity in relationships; these are reflected in loving and balanced intimate relationships. Parents' – and especially the mother's – diligence seems to be reflected in both loving and balanced relationships, whereas the father's commitment to work had positive consequences in this respect.

This study's results are parallel with the results of the study by Falke, Wagner and Mosmann (2008), in which favourable experiences in the participant's family of origin and a positive view of their parents' relationship were associated with better quality in the participant's own intimate relationship (8). According to attachment theory, a child's first object of attachment is his caretaker, first and foremost his own mother. An attachment relationship is formed with another person to ensure a feeling of security. A child in a secure attachment relationship learns to regard his caretaker as his secure base where he seeks to maintain closeness and contact while exploring his surroundings (40). Approached from the perspective of attachment theory, especially in the supportive but also in the sociable parenthood, a mother and father can succeed in creating a secure, autonomic attachment between themselves and their child by interacting actively with the child. This secure attachment appears to have an effect on the child's satisfaction in intimate relationships later in adulthood. According to the study by Nauha and Silvén (2000), among others, it is most common within couples for both parties to be either autonomously or non-autonomously (i.e., insecurely) attached.

Autonomously attached adults lived together more commonly than predicted, the reason being that the expectations of being securely attached in the intimate relationship were already matched up at the time of their meeting (15). A securely attached adult attracted another securely attached one, which, according to Hazan and Shaver (1987), was manifested in their relationship as mutual intimacy and satisfaction in sexuality. Autonomically attached spouses described their most important experiences in love as happy and confidential. They also accepted their loved ones despite their faults (27,28).

Dominating parenthood can be characterized by coldness, insensitivity and incoherency, and the parent's authoritarian state in this kind of parenthood is pronounced by means of authoritativeness, punishment and demands, which may also include hitting and violence. According to our results, this kind of parenting appears to especially predispose children to quarrelsome future relationships. Dominating paternity is pronounced on the basis of an unbalanced and repressive/submissive relationship in particular, whereas supportive and sociable paternity would appear to protect the child from a repressive/submissive intimate relationship. These images reflect the father and the father-child relationship of the 1970s. Society has changed, and we are increasingly interested in the presence of fathers in the child's life. It is also possible for a child to form a secure attachment with their father even if there were difficulties in the child's attachment relationship with their mother.

A child in an insecure attachment relationship has learned not to use his parent as his secure base. The child has noticed that his parent is not available in the way that he needs and does not react to signals that reveal his internal distress. The child is left alone, particularly with his negative feelings, whereupon he needs to resort to other

ways of controlling his emotional state that he is able to come up with at his level of development (40). According to attachment theory, dominating mothers and fathers do not create an environment and attachment secure enough for their child, which may predispose these children to insecure attachments in adulthood as well. Insecure models of attachment are developed during childhood to protect against frustration and helplessness, which may cause anxiety and sadness (28). According to Holmes (1997), insecure attachment in an intimate relationship can be seen as a defensive compromise, where either autonomy or emotional proximity is sacrificed to save physical proximity. Defensive exclusion can occur due to painful events in the past; for example, someone who has often been abandoned may “hasten” to abandon their spouse to prevent further abandonment of him or herself (22,28). These basic mechanisms of attachment and their significance to satisfaction in an intimate relationship seem to fit the results of this study.

Typical characteristics of a quarrelsome intimate relationship are quarreling, disagreement, bitterness, pouting, “silent treatment,” and weariness. Few feelings of fellowship, love and mutual trust are experienced. Further, there is less of an understanding of each other and approaching each other is seen to be difficult. This study reinforces the results of Cast et al. (2006), among others, which have shown abuse in childhood to predispose adults to social inability and, especially, to problems in intimate relationships in adulthood. Accordingly, physical punishment teaches the use of aggressive and controlling problem-solving strategies and hinders the development of important problem-solving skills in relation to others. These strategies and skills become a part of the individual’s problem-solving tools later in life, including in their marriage. Adults who have been physically punished in childhood are more likely

to use physical or verbal violence towards their spouse and control them, and they have a weaker ability to look at things from their spouse’s point of view (6).

We could not find a coherent component for evaluating parents’ attitude towards work, and so we used 2 variables instead. It also seems that one’s father’s and mother’s commitment to work was perceived differently, which can especially be understood from the perspective of a small child, as the mother is most often experienced as the first attachment figure. Accordingly, paternal commitment had more positive results in terms of loving relationships in the offspring, whereas diligence of both parents had positive results in terms of loving, balanced and less quarrelsome relationships in the offspring. However, when comparing the parental images of those who answered the questions about intimate relationships with the images of those who didn’t answer, work-committed and dominant motherhood was surprisingly less common in the non-responding group. Perhaps it is possible to suppose that scarceness of dominance and hard work in the maternal image is associated with some kind of precaution in the relationship, assuming that those who did not respond to the relationship questions had not had any experience in intimate relationships.

The aim of this study was to examine whether young adults’ images of their mothers and fathers were connected with satisfaction in their intimate relationships. The results point out those positive images of the mother and father as being consistently connected with intimate relationships that are considered loving and balanced, whereas negative images are connected with quarrelsome and repressive/submissive intimate relationships. Additionally, images of the father emerge as factors influencing an intimate relationship even more extensively than images of the mother. A positive

image of the father and of his active presence – or the lack of it – is of significance.

The results indicate that experiences in childhood in which the child is allowed to grow and develop under the protection of present parenthood are reflected in the basis of adult well-being and satisfaction in intimate relationships. Learned well-functioning models of interaction appear to be carried forward into later relationships, especially intimate relationships. Although research on the significance of the father image has recently been on the rise (41–43), the results of this study present a challenge to pay more attention to the meanings of fatherhood. Further, this study gives some indication of what we should pay attention to in the developmental environment so that experiences in a child's family of origin can be positively carried forward into the basis of that child's own adulthood, the well-being of their intimate relationships and the development base of the new generation. This is particularly important in the circumpolar regions, where one often has to leave his/her own growth environment at a very young age for study and job opportunities that may be very far from home.

Limitations and strengths

In examining the results of this study, critical attention should be paid to the possibility that, when asking about a participant's memories and experiences, that participant's present mood may reflect on how their childhood is remembered. If the participant is balanced and happy with their life at the time of the study, they are more likely to remember their childhood as being bright than a participant who is discontent at the time of the study. It has to be seen as a strength of this study that the data were collected from the population of a Nordic democratic society in pursuit of the study's aim to investigate issues associated with the

well-being of average families, children and adults, and to find answers to what we should pay attention to in the developmental environment so that the objective of a parenthood that supports the growth of a child and satisfaction in future intimate relationships would be achieved.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the Gyllenberg Foundation for the financial support of this study, granted to Hanna Ebeling.

Conflict of interest statement

The study was approved by the Ethical Committee of Oulu University Hospital, Finland and there are no conflicts of interest.

REFERENCES

1. Litrownik AJ, Newton R, Hunter WM, English D, Everson MD. Exposure to family violence in young at-risk children: a longitudinal look at the effects of victimization and witnessed physical and psychological aggression. *J Fam Violence* 2003;18(1):59–73.
2. Wood JJ, Repetti RL, Roesch SC. Divorce and children's adjustment problems at home and school: The role of depressive/withdrawn parenting. *Child Psychiatry Hum Dev* 2004;35(2):121–142.
3. Weissman MM, Wickramaratne P, Nomura Y, Warner Y, Pilowsky D, Verdelli H. Offspring of depressed parents: 20 years later. *Am J Psychiatry* 2006;163(6):1001–1008.
4. Hill SY, Shen S, Lowers L, Locke-Wellman J, Matthews AG, McDermott M. Psychopathology in offspring from multiplex alcohol dependence families with and without parental alcohol dependence: a prospective study during childhood and adolescence. *Psychiatry Res* 2008;160(2):155–166.
5. Brent D, Melhem N, Donohoe MB, Walker M. The incidence and course of depression in bereaved youth 21 months after the loss of a parent to suicide, accident, or sudden natural death. *Am J Psychiatry* 2009;166(7):786–794.
6. Cast AD, Schweingruber D, Berns N. Childhood physical punishment and problem solving in marriage. *J Interpers Violence* 2006;21(2):244–261.
7. Walker E, Holman T, Busby D. Childhood sexual abuse, other childhood factors, and pathways to survivors' adult relationship quality. *J Fam Violence* 2009;24(6):397–406.
8. Falcke D, Wagner A, Mosmann CP. The relationship between family-of-origin and marital adjustment for couples in Brazil. *J Fam Psychother* 2008;19(2):170–186.
9. Rust J, Bennun I, Crowe M, Golombok S. The GRIMS. A psychometric instrument for the assessment of marital discord. *J Fam Ther* 1990;12(1):45–57.
10. Melchert TP. Testing the validity of an instrument for assessing family of origin history. *J Clin Psychol* 1998;54(7):863–875.

11. Sabatelli RM, Bartle-Haring S. Family-of-origin experiences and adjustment in married couples. *J Marriage Fam* 2003;65(1):159–169.
12. Anderson SA, Sabatelli RM. The differentiation in the family system scale (DIFS). *Am J Fam Ther* 1992;20(1):77–89.
13. Sabatelli RM. The marital comparison level index: a measure for assessing outcomes relative to expectations. *J Marriage Fam* 1984;46(3):651–662.
14. Cohn DA, Silver DH, Cowan CP, Cowan PA, Pearson J. Working models of childhood attachment and couple relationships. *J Fam Issues* 1992;13(4):432–449.
15. Nauha S, Silve'n M. Puolisoiden varhaiset kiintymyssuhteet: viehättääkö samanlaisuus? [Early attachment of spouses: does similarity attract?]. *Psykologia: tiedepoliittinen aikakauslehti* 2000;35(1):71–81. [in Finnish]
16. Männikkö K. Adult attachment styles: a person-oriented approach. *Jyväskylän yliopisto, kasvatustieteen laitos*; 2001. 142 p.
17. Bowlby J. The making and breaking of affectional bonds. I. Aetiology and psychopathology in the light of attachment theory. An expanded version of the Fiftieth Maudsley Lecture, delivered before the Royal College of Psychiatrists, 19 November 1976. *Br J Psychiatry* 1977;130(3):201–210.
18. Bowlby J. The making and breaking of affectional bonds. II. Some principles of psychotherapy. The Fiftieth Maudsley Lecture (expanded version). *Br J Psychiatry* 1977;130(5):421–431.
19. Bowlby J. Attachment and loss. *Anxiety and anger*. Volume 2, Separation. London: Hogarth Press; 1973. 444 p.
20. Bartholomew K, Horowitz LM. Attachment styles among young adults: a test of a four-category model. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 1991;61(2):226–244.
21. Hazan C, Shaver PR. Attachment as an organizational framework for research on close relationships. *Psychol Inq* 1994;5(1):1–22.
22. Holmes J. Attachment, autonomy, intimacy: some clinical implications of attachment theory. *Br J Med Psychol* 1997;70(3):231–248.
23. Main M, Kaplan N, Cassidy J. Security in infancy, childhood, and adulthood: a move to the level of representation. *Monogr Soc Res Child Dev* 1985;50(1–2):66–104.
24. Bartholomew K. Adult attachment processes: individual and couple perspectives. *Br J Med Psychol* 1997;70(3):249–263.
25. Feeney JA. Attachment, marital interaction, and relationship satisfaction: a diary study. *Pers Relationship* 2002;9(1):39–55.
26. Hazan C, Shaver PR. Love and work: an attachment-theoretical perspective. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 1990;59(2):270–280.
27. Hazan C, Shaver P. Romantic love conceptualized as an attachment process. *J Pers Soc Psychol* 1987;52(3):511–524.
28. Kuusinen T, Lintunen L. Parisuhde ja kiintymyssuhdeteoriat (Intimate relationship and attachment theory). *Psykologia: tiedepoliittinen aikakauslehti* 2000;35(1):83–90. [in Finnish]
29. Senchak M, Leonard KE. Attachment styles and marital adjustment among newlywed couples. *J Soc Pers Relat* 1992;9(1):51–64.
30. Crittenden PM, Dallos R. All in the family: integrating attachment and family systems theories. *Clin Child Psychol Psychiatry* 2009;14(3):389–409.
31. Afifi TO, Boman J, Fleisher W, Sareen J. The relationship between child abuse, parental divorce, and lifetime mental disorders and suicidality in a nationally representative adult sample. *Child Abuse Negl* 2009;33(3):139–147.
32. Jumper SA. A meta-analysis of the relationship of child sexual abuse to adult psychological adjustment. *Child Abuse Negl* 1995;19(6):715–728.
33. Seitamo L. The roots and consequences of early mother-child relationship: a multilevel model of evaluation. Paper presented at the Meeting of the World Association for Infant Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines, Stockholm, Sweden; August 3–7, 1986.
34. Seitamo L, Wasz-Höckert O. Early mother-child relationship in the light of infant cry studies. *Acta Paedopsychiatrica* 1981;47(4):215–222.
35. Wasz-Höckert O, Seitamo L, Vuorenkoski V, Partanen T, Lind J. Maternal response to newborn baby's cry. Abstract in: 13th Int Congr Padiat. Wien; 1971. p. 85–86.
36. Seitamo L, Lammi A, Wasz-Höckert O. Mother's response to her newborn baby. In: Carenza L, Zichella L, editors. *Emotion and reproduction*. 5th Int. Congr. Psychosom. Obstet. Gynecol., Rome 1977, vol. 20 B. London: Academic Press; 1979. p. 1177–1183.
37. Comrey AL, Lee HB. A first course in factor analysis. 2nd ed. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum; 1992. 430 p.
38. Tabachnick BG, Fidell LS. Using multivariate statistics. 5th ed. Boston: Pearson / Allyn and Bacon; 2007. 980 p.
39. Bowlby J. Developmental psychiatry comes of age. *Am J Psychiatry* 1988;145(1):1–10.
40. Ainsworth MDS, Waters E, Wall S. Patterns of attachment: a psychological study of the strange situation. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 1978. 416 p.
41. Lamb ME, Lewis C. The development and significance of father-child relationships in two-parent families. In: Lamb ME, editor. *The role of the father in child development*. 5th ed. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.; 2010. 656 p.
42. Palkovitz R. Involved fathering and child development: Advancing our understanding of good fathering. In: Tamis-LeMonda CS, Cabrera NJ, editors. *Handbook of father involvement: multidisciplinary perspectives*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates; 2002. p. 119–140.
43. Paquette D. Theorizing the father-child relationship: mechanisms and developmental outcomes. *Hum Dev* 2004;47(4):193–219.

Annukka Kiviniemi
 Papinniityntie 17
 13210 Hämeenlinna
 FINLAND
 Email: annukka.kiviniemi@pp.inet.fi