Intergenerational Patterns: Breaking the Chain

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Abstract

This paper addresses the extent to which there is an intergenerational transmission of personality and character traits within families and the consequences that follow. Previous research has identified intergenerational influence in the areas of genetics, talents, culture, religion, marriage, cohabitation, gender roles, child-rearing, education, work ethic, eating habits, physical fitness, addiction, prejudice, abuse, conflict resolution, and divorce. Each of these areas is explored and the consequences of their perpetuation, discussed. A presentation given on intergenerational patterns is evaluated and suggestions to further initiate positive change are outlined.
Intergenerational Patterns: Breaking the Chain

In many different areas of life, positive and negative patterns of behavior are transmitted from generation to generation (Story, Karney, Lawrence, & Bradbury, 2004). Such intergenerational patterns are deeply, sometimes unconsciously, imprinted on future generations, destined to be repeated unless identified, modified or decidedly discontinued (Zosuls, Miller, Ruble, Martin, & Fabes, 2011). Such changes often take place because new generations are influenced by the modern social or political ideas of the time. Sometimes, however, a major change is made by a child who observes parental behavior, judges it to be undesirable, and rejects the pattern (Moen, Erickson, & Dempster-McClain, 1997). Even with such a decision, does this freedom to accept or reject the imprints of previous generations now make future descendants immune to their negative effects? In this paper, previous research on intergenerational influence is explored and a presentation given on the subject is evaluated.

Intergenerational Patterns

Many factors contribute to the development of a child’s interests, pursuits, attitudes, and overall personality (Kerr, Capaldi, Pears, & Owen, 2009). Such factors include the extended family, friends, and communities that provide the environment in which a child is raised. It is the immediate family, and more specifically a child’s parents, however, that primarily transmit the attitudes, interests, ideals and values to the next generation (Laghi, Pallini, & De Sclavis, 2012). Such values are imprinted upon a child, who is then likely to grow up to do the same with his or her own children, continuing the intergenerational pattern (Brown, Li, Danko & Budd, 2011).

The topic of Intergenerational patterns is important to psychology because most people, regardless of their current level of functioning, operate in a constant state of reconciliation between what they have been raised to do and, in contrast, what they choose to do (Powdthavee
& Vignoles, 2008). This internal struggle is ever present, whether those experiencing it are aware of it or not, and family patterns are often the primary reason for unhappiness in life and relationships (Keith & Finlay, 1988).

When people are able to recognize and understand intergenerational patterns in their lives, they can then begin the process of identifying which patterns are healthy and which patterns they would like to change (Brown & Pool, 1966). Breaking a behavioral chain can be difficult, however, and even though a decision to change can yield a positive outcome, without proper guidance and knowledge of the process, change can be slow and produce limited results. If pattern modification is not complete, it is also possible to create and pass on reactive patterns (Lauer & Lauer, 1991). An example of this would be a daughter of an alcoholic resolving never to drink and lecturing her children on the evils of alcohol. Thus, instead of passing on the behavioral pattern of alcoholism, it is possible for a pattern of prejudice, anger, or victimization to be created and passed to the next generation. Consistent with cases of alcoholism, evidence suggests that a person’s genetic predisposition may also influence the transmission of certain intergenerational patterns (Dick & Agrawal, 2008).

**Genetics, Abilities, and Talents**

The transmission of genetic markers is widely understood to be an intergenerational process (Duffy, 2010). Furthermore, components of an individual’s genetic makeup can remain dormant until activated by stimuli. For example, a predisposition towards a physical disease, like diabetes, can exist in a person's genes and may become activated when stimulated by a diet high in sugar and carbohydrates (Uusitupa et al., 2011). Likewise, a predisposition toward certain mental disorders can lay dormant, becoming activated by factors such as high levels of stress, maltreatment, or abuse. For instance, Gillespie, Phifer, Bradley, and Ressler (2009), found that
most adolescents who experience psychological disorders also demonstrate increased cortisol levels and depression.

Physiological and psychological tendencies are not the only genetic markers passed through generations (Moen, Erickson, & Dempster-McClain, 1997). Abilities, talents, and natural inclinations towards certain skills can be transmitted from parent to child as well. As children learn to navigate the world in which they live, they begin to identify personal strengths and weaknesses (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). A study conducted by Olszewski-Kubilius (2011) found that when a child demonstrates a talent or special ability that does not conform to the family’s traditional interests, the ability of the child to cultivate an outlying talent depends largely on the parents. Olszewski-Kubilius also determined that factors such as the ability to see each child as a unique individual and a desire to motivate and support the child to excel, is of crucial importance. Parental commitment to the growth of children may challenge family dynamics and require considerable energy but many parents are willing to make this extra effort if it will help their child succeed and contribute to their culture or community (Garn, Matthews, & Jolly, 2012).

Culture and Religion

Community involvement can heavily impact the development of a family and each family has its own unique culture and set of traditions that reinforce the intergenerational transmission of values and beliefs (De Moor, 2011). An individual family unit may also identify themselves as part of a larger cultural or regional community. Often these larger communities provide structure, social support, and a spiritual or religious component to its members. In addition, communities may also include large families of relatives who meet together often to eat, celebrate, and provide support to one another. In communities, where extended family is not
present, churches or community centers may become a means of support; providing families with opportunities for engagement in social activities and philanthropy (Sherman, 1999).

As the building block of such communities, the family can be viewed as a tiny, unique society in which a child is raised, taught and socialized (Dreikurs, 1990). It is within the family unit that habits, behaviors, values, and beliefs are modeled, cultivated, and reinforced during the activities of daily life (Helman, 1991). Across the globe, families share physical space and emotional bonds and religious affiliation often plays a tremendous role in shaping family relationships. In addition, religion can dictate a family’s attitudes about marriage, childbearing, parenting, divorce, conflict, and grief management (Mahoney, 2010). Among such values taught within the family, empathy has been identified as an effective, protective factor for those at risk for poor mental health (Dambrun, & Ricard, 2011). Children who are able to show empathy and engage in efforts to help others, develop advanced social skills and become better equipped at overcoming adversities in their own lives (Lietz, 2011).

**Marriage, Cohabitation and Gender Roles**

Religious belief can also influence family values on the subject of marriage and cohabitation. According to a study by Cunningham and Thornton (2005), children who come from homes with strong religious backgrounds are more likely to enter marriage without previously cohabitating than those from non-religious homes. In addition, children of divorced parents, afraid of repeating their parent’s outcome, are less likely to divorce if they choose not to cohabitate before marriage. Cunningham and Thornton also found that children of parents who have remarried are more positive in their attitudes toward divorce than those from broken or intact families. Furthermore, a study conducted by Ganong, Coleman, and Brown (1981) found that adult children of divorced parents are also deeply influenced in their attitudes toward
marriage and divorce by their mother’s attitude; exhibiting more positivity if she decided to remarry. The study (Ganong et al., 1981) also determined that when it came to overall attitudes about marriage, women were generally more positive than men in their outlook towards the institution of marriage and equality in marital role expectations.

Marital role expectations vary among different cultures but according to Georgas, Berry, Van de Vjiver, Kagitebasi, and Poortinga (2009), global modernization is slowly transforming the dynamics of the traditional family through advances in technology and access to information. Generally in most societies, however, traditional marriage and gender roles are adhered to; males acting as bread-winners and females assuming the majority of the homemaking and child-rearing responsibilities. It is within these constructs that a child is socialized; learning what it means to be a man or woman (Georgas et al., 2009).

**Gender Roles and Child-Rearing**

Even before the arrival of a new baby, parents are often eager to learn its gender (Crockett & Beal, 2012). After discovering the baby’s sex, parents immediately begin to prepare to socialize their child according to gender-specific behavior and thinking. The promptings and reactions of a child’s parents then influence the masculinity or femininity of the child (Zosuls, Miller, Ruble, Martin, & Fabes, 2011). Subsequently, parent-transmitted attitudes about gender roles, academics, relationships, future careers, and the perceived timing of these events become early predictors of the child’s educational attainment and future success (Moen, Erickson, & Dempster-McClain, 1997).

In a study by Brown, Li, Danko, and Budd (2011), researchers found that parenting attitudes and behaviors are modeled for a child throughout development and are transmitted to the child through repetition; becoming a blueprint for parenting the next generation. This does
not mean, however, that all parents perfectly adhere to the previous generation's methods (Gillespie, Phifer, Bradley, & Ressler, 2009). Often, a child will reject this parental blueprint and make a concerted effort to adopt a different parenting style (Glenn & Kramer, 1985). This is especially true if a child harbors negative feelings about his or her upbringing. These feelings, if unresolved, may then lead to depression, anger, or even delinquent behavior as the child ages (Hage & Nosanow, 2000).

According to research conducted by Kiriakidis (2010), two factors play a vital role in determining the likelihood of such delinquent adolescent behavior. The first is effective parenting in the home and the second is adolescent engagement in a supportive family environment. Kiriakidis discovered that although positive family functioning can shield against negative social influences, it is not in itself enough to ensure that adolescents will completely refrain from delinquent activity. Furthermore, Kiriakidis found that parents who allow others outside the family to exert influence upon their child are more likely to ensure proper adolescent psychosocial development. Interactions with others can lead to positive or negative behavioral influence but often parents can direct the outcome by guiding their child to socialize with people that support values important to the family (Kiriakidis, 2010).

**Education and Work Ethic**

Attitudes toward education and achievement are also handed down from parents to children (Bennett & Green, 2010). When achievement expectations are directly communicated to children and reinforced through parent modeling, children tend to deliver the expected results regardless of aptitude. Thus, attitudes towards achievement predict success better than intelligence scores (Dweck, 2000). Furthermore, when older children consider education and career options, they are motivated more by parents and friends than by any other direct social or
educational influence (Otto & A, 1985). A father’s example tends to have more influence on the work ethic of his child, while a mother’s education level and attitude towards higher education plays a significant role in whether or not her child will pursue a college degree (Ricco, McCollum, & Schuyten, 2003). According to Crockett and Beal (2012), parent modeling can also heavily influence a child’s progress toward adulthood. Adolescents who envision themselves entering adult family roles early in life are less likely to attain higher education and are more likely to experience divorce than those who see themselves taking on such roles later in life (Crockett & Beal, 2012).

**Eating Habits, Physical Fitness and Addiction**

Children also look to parents when developing physically and are heavily influenced by parent-modeled eating habits and physical activity (Nolan, Cottrell, & Dino, 2013). The amount of fruits and vegetables consumed and whether or not children engage in overeating, smoking, or drinking is also attributed to parent examples. Shared family traits, especially between mothers and daughters, have been similarly linked to body concerns and eating disorders (Steiger, Stotland, Trottier, & Ghadirian, 1996).

Substance abuse within the family is also something a child may experience during development. A significant portion of the population struggles with addiction to tobacco, alcohol, or other drugs (Wang, Kapoor, & Goate, 2012). Genetic predisposition plays a role in the likelihood of a person becoming an addict, as well as the influence of parent modeling and environmental factors. Addictions pose a threat to health; placing stress and added burdens on families, communities, and countries around the world (Dick & Agrawal, 2008). According to a study by Powdthavee and Vignoles (2008), a parent’s method of handling such stress can also be transmitted to their children. Results also indicate that children who observe parents modeling
positive coping behaviors in response to stress are more likely to express high levels of life satisfaction and well-being. Powdthavee and Vignoles also discovered, however, that children are more likely to experience poor physical and mental health symptoms when a parent’s stress level is high.

**Prejudice, Abuse and Conflict Resolution**

In a study by Lee, Lee, and August (2011), researchers found a correlation between stress, intergenerational patterns, and aggression. During times of hardship and financial strain, children can often behave in troubling and aggressive ways in reaction to their parent’s stress. Lee, Lee, and August also discovered that adolescent aggressive behaviors largely depend on the degree to which parents display marital discord, anger, or symptoms of depression. Traditional family values, prejudices, and political viewpoints can also contribute to aggressive behavior and become major predictors of the attitudes embraced by future generations (Callahan & Vescio, 2011). When prejudice and hatred is taught to children, it corrupts their moral development and may lead to violent speech or actions toward others (Katzman, 2005). Furthermore, children with progenitors who have endured violence through personal or political imprisonment or torture are at risk for the effects of such a trauma to be imprinted upon their own personalities even generations later (Viñar, 2012).

An example of this would be a child who experiences trauma, abuse, or neglect early in life, experiencing a shift in biological resources and physiological functioning in order to cope and survive. The child’s shift to survival mode can then cause a disturbance in normal psychological functioning during development and has also been linked to adolescent PTSD and depression (Neigh, Ritschel, & Nemeroff, 2010). Disturbed psychological functioning may also have a negative emotional impact on children who witness inter-parental violence; making them
more likely to experience violence in their own future relationships (Duggan, 1998).

Interestingly, this phenomenon is especially significant in males. According to Choice, Lamke, & Pittman (1995), boys who witness violence between their parents are more likely to engage in ineffective conflict-resolution and resort to wife-battering and abuse later in life.

**Divorce**

The intergenerational transfer of such violence and poor conflict-resolution skills can often lead to divorce, which is becoming increasingly common and occurs earlier than in previous generations (Cunningham & Thornton, 2005). Research indicates that there are many long-term, negative consequences experienced by children of divorced parents (Keith & Finlay, 1988). For instance, people from divorced families have a tendency to receive less education, marry younger, and have more unstable marriages than those from non-divorced families. According to a study by Glenn & Kramer (1985), children of divorce may also view their families of origin more negatively, describe themselves as less happy, and are twice as likely to seek out professional help, compared to those from non-divorced families.

According to Wallerstein and Lewis (2004), children of divorce also encounter difficulties in experiencing and expressing love, sexual intimacy, commitment to marriage, and parenthood. Related to relationship difficulties, evidence suggests that there can also be patterns of violence within families (Duggan, O'Brien, & Kennedy, 2001). In a study by Fite et al., (2008), researchers explore the significant association between parental conflict and successive romantic relationship conflict in their adult children. Results indicate that children who witness a significant amount of inter-parental conflict are at greater risk of experiencing later trauma symptoms. Moreover, these children exhibit more emotional distress and volatile behavior when provoked than children who have not witnessed parental conflict. Results also suggest that those
who witness violent domestic behavior as children often have fewer opportunities to witness successful non-aggressive problem-resolution skills in their lives. As a result, they may determine that violent behavior is the only way to end an argument.

In a related study conducted by Story, Karney, Lawrence, and Bradbury (2004), the correlation between gender differences and the legacy of divorce was examined. The researchers discovered that negative interpersonal processes are linked to the association between parental divorce and marital outcome. For instance, women indicated negative personal processes through verbal and physical aggression, while men indicated negative interpersonal processes by the expression of a series of negative attitudes and concerns. Story, Karney, Lawrence, and Bradbury also found that prolonging divorce provides little assurance that such strained marriages provide children with nurturing environments. Similarly, in a study created to test transference of marital problem-solving patterns in the family, researchers discovered associations between family conflict interaction patterns in multiple generations (Whitton et al., 2008). As predicted, findings revealed a lasting influence of parental communication patterns on offspring's ability to function positively in relationships.

As previously illustrated, there have been many studies that examine the negative effects of divorce. A study by Shulman, Scharf, Lumer, and Maurer, (2001), however, explores the positive aspects of divorce and the role played by resolution and positive perception. Results reveal that some children of divorce experience higher levels of friendship, enjoyment, and intimacy in their own relationships than children from non-divorced families. The authors of this study conclude that greater relationship satisfaction is experienced by children who have either witnessed an amicable split between their parents or the successful remarriage of one or both of their parents; lending a different perspective on the possibility for happiness after divorce.
Breaking the Chain

Progress toward such life satisfaction and happiness is a possibility for everyone (Dambrun & Ricard, 2011). A person’s family history may be an established blueprint for life, but a person is not doomed to repeat the past if he or she does not wish to (Dambrun & Ricard, 2011). One way to examine a family pattern is to create an intergenerational map on paper known as a genogram. Genograms are often utilized to reveal patterns in relationships and events in family histories (Friedman & Krakauer, 1992). Genogram maps outline a person’s pedigree but can also be used to document medical conditions, household compositions, life-cycle transitions, sibling constellations, traumatic life events, and patterns of functioning over several generations. Documented family dynamics can then be studied in order to identify intergenerational patterns, increase self-awareness, and illuminate areas for change (Rohrbaugh, Rogers & McGoldrick, 1992). An individual who recognizes his or her own ability to make such changes is also less prone to feel victimized or to negatively judge the choices of others (Glenn & Kramer, 1985). Moreover, a person who is able to learn from life decisions; developing empathy, is also inclined to achieve his or her goals and see life in a more positive and hopeful way (Brown & Pool, 1966).

By utilizing such positivity and empathy, it is possible for families, communities, tribes and nations to heal from traumatic histories (Clearing-Sky, 2007). Alfred Adler demonstrates this power of individual choice in his concept of “The Creative Self” (Adler, 1969). Adler asserts that each person has the ability to react in the way he or she chooses to the life circumstances he or she is born into. Because of this, not only does each child develop his or her own unique personality, but each child possesses an entirely different perspective with which to view the world (Adler, 1969). In short, life is indeed what a person makes of it. To illustrate this point,
Adler stated that in life, a person is “both the picture and the artist;” explaining that each person is free to create the subject, action, and environment he or she wishes to live in (Adler, 1969). As an individual increases his or her self-awareness, it becomes possible for greater control to be obtained, thus creating a life of intention instead of reaction (Oberst & Stewart, 2005).

The Adlerian concept of Social Interest also plays a part in positive intergenerational change (Adler, 1969). Social Interest is defined as interest in the interest of others and according to Adler, the degree to which a person thinks of others and engages in the community is directly correlated to the quality of his or her mental health (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). By engaging in Social Interest, focus is pulled away from the self and a person’s energy is instead devoted to helping others; often resulting in a greater sense of purpose and a more positive outlook on life. Such optimism often leads to further desires to be a positive influence and the process of change begins (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956).

If a person desires to successfully change a negative pattern of behavior before it can be imprinted on the next generation, logically this change must happen before parenthood (Kerr, Capaldi, Pears & Owen, 2009). Although a person’s development will continue to evolve over a lifetime, there exists a narrow window of time between adolescence and parenthood ideal for any necessary self-confrontation, pattern altering, and healing to occur (Kerr, Capaldi, Pears & Owen, 2009). The success of early intervention is demonstrated in a study conducted by Hage and Nosanow (2000) during which a psycho-educational group intervention was presented to adolescents on reducing isolation, establishing connectedness, and teaching communication skills, and assertiveness. Hage and Nosnow suggest that it is important to work with young adults regarding their perceptions of parental divorce, how to cope with the sense of loss, and arrive at a new and comprehensive understanding of the divorce and its role in their lives. Hage
and Nosnow’s findings indicate that adolescents who overcome such trauma can experience feelings of renewal in life and an increased sense of freedom.

Thus, it is proposed by the author of this paper, that if such negative intergenerational patterns can be identified during adolescence, allowing adequate time for the process of change to take place, positive outcomes for future generations are more likely to occur. To put this proposal into practice, information on mental health and intergenerational patterns was presented to an adolescent youth group. The intention of the presentation was to provide education that would increase adolescent self-awareness and to kindle desires to implement healthier practices that could then be passed on and become a legacy of progression and healing to future generations.

**Presentation**

A presentation was designed to provide information on mental health, self-care, and intergenerational patterns to female participants ages twelve to eighteen. A power point presentation provided visual illustration of the concepts outlined in this paper. It was presented during a youth group Mental Health Night in order to educate and encourage the self-awareness necessary for the process of change to begin. Preparations for the presentation included gathering information, preparing Power Point slides, locating media clips, formulating group discussion questions, and preparing flyers, evaluations, and handouts.

The presentation began with an introduction to the material and a brief overview of mental health and common psychological disorders. Ideas for good mental health practices were presented and stimulated a good deal of discussion among participants. Genetic predisposition toward disorders and behaviors was discussed and an example of a genogram was presented and explained. The topic of intergenerational patterns was then presented and positive and negative
influences were discussed. Upon presenting Adler’s Life Task wheel, participants were asked to rate themselves, on a one to ten point scale, according to self-assessed levels of life satisfaction. When finished, each participant was then challenged to write down at least one way to raise their satisfaction level in each area by one point. Participants were then encouraged to select one area to improve on in the coming week and were thanked for their attendance and participation. Each participant then filled out an evaluation form and was given handout materials.

**Evaluation**

Overall, the presentation went smoothly and according to plan. Some of the prepared media clips and other materials were skipped over, however, due to time constraints and in favor of further group discussion. Participants completed presentation evaluation sheets immediately after the presentation was given and results were compiled. The evaluation consisted of five yes or no questions and two fill-in-the-blank questions. Questions one through five were written as follows: Did the presentation increase your knowledge of Mental Health and Intergenerational Patterns? Was the information presented clearly with logical conclusions and adequate evidence? Did the presenter deliver the information in a professional, clear and audible tone? Was the presenter able to adequately answer questions and facilitate group discussion? Did the presentation inspire you to evaluate your own mental health and the role intergenerational patterns play in your life? Nineteen evaluations were handed in and nineteen answered yes to questions one through five.

Question six asked participants to list the presenter’s strengths. The combined evaluations listed strengths as: knowledgeable about topic, able to connect with and engage the audience, provides clear explanations, easy to understand, caters to differences, strong voice and positive good pace, enthusiastic, encouraged questions and discussion, good use of quotes, good use of
gestures and body movement, interactive, encouraged discussion, adapted message to audience, passionate about the topic, provided helpful information, answered questions clearly and thoroughly, comfortable with material, exhibited a confident and positive attitude. Question seven asked participants to list ways the presentation could be improved. Combined, participants listed: include more video clips, provide more information on the specific disorders of ADHD, Asperger’s, depression, learning disabilities, and incorporate more group participation.

**Conclusion**

Preparing for and carrying out this project was very helpful. It served as a means to create a basic public mental health presentation that can serve and provide education to many populations. The enthusiastic participation of the youth provided encouragement that the material was stimulating and that a connection with the audience was maintained. The evaluations the youth submitted provided good feedback for making performance improvements. When giving presentations in the future, the author plans to incorporate more media materials and to allow more time for group participation.

Opportunities to continue to share this presentation will be sought because the author believes that good mental health practices and knowledge about intergenerational patterns can benefit everyone. Not only does this presentation raise awareness, it provides hope. By providing education on Adlerian therapeutic techniques and encouraging Social Interest, individuals can learn to identify, modify, and perpetuate patterns that will positively influence generations to come.
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