Family Relationships, Leaving Home, and Adjustment to Military Service

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ABSTRACT. Associations between family relationships and individual adjustment were studied within a sample of 19-year-old soldiers during their first weeks of basic training. Results showed that family relationships partly explained soldiers' closeness to best friends, number of social nominations, and commanders' ratings of soldiers' military and social competence. In addition, family relations explained soldiers' perceived social competence as assessed via closeness to best friends and number of sociometric nominations. Together, the results reiterate the role played by the family and attitudes toward offspring leaving home and toward their adjustment to military service.

ACHIEVEMENT OF AUTONOMY within an atmosphere of a positive relationship with parents is recognized as a salient task of adolescence (Collins, 1990). Numerous studies have documented the role of the family in adolescents' adaptability. For example, Grotevant and Cooper (1985) found that parental respect for, and sensitivity to, adolescents' ideas and expressions of differences were related to higher levels of adolescent self-identity. Similarly, Shulman and Klein (1983) found that adolescents belonging to families supportive of individual views and capable of balancing between those views and the family's needs to coordinate actions and feel close to one another revealed higher levels of differentiation and assertion.

A family atmosphere that combined the achievement of autonomy with the maintenance of relatedness with parents predicted adolescent positive psychosocial development over a period of 2 years (Allen, Hauser, Bell, & O'Connor,

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1994). Together, when the family is sensitive and supportive of the developmental needs of offspring, the family may then serve as a "facilitating environment" for adolescent attainment of developmental tasks such as differentiation from the family and the establishment of a consolidated identity.

Most of the aforementioned studies were conducted among families with youngsters in early and middle adolescence living with their parents. The current study explores the role of the family in the adaptation of individuals at a later stage, more specifically focusing on youngsters during the transition into army service, living away from their parents.

During late adolescence and the transition to adulthood, parent-adolescent relationships undergo changes characterized by two psychosocial issues. The first issue is that adolescents leave the parental home and attain control over their own destiny (Williamson & Bray, 1988). The second issue is that they nevertheless stay connected to and maintain intimacy with their parents (Williamson & Bray, p. 366). Studies focusing on college students have shown that relationships with parents still play a role in levels of adjustment. Rice, Cole, and Lapsley (1990) found that positive separation feelings as well as an atmosphere of family cohesion were positively related to the adjustment of college students. Results of a study by Hoffman and Weiss (1987) indicated that college students can be adversely affected by conflictual relationships within the family even when they are physically separated from their family at school. Distress among family members interfered with students' capability to separate emotionally from the family, reflected in an increased level of problems recently experienced.

Snarey's (1993) longitudinal study on early adulthood adjustment points to two factors that support the attainment of stage-related tasks. The first is the sense that a "firm bridge to the family" still exists; the second is the encouragement given by parents toward achieving a degree of physical and emotional separation from the family (p. 185). All these studies recall Stierlin's (1974) theory suggesting that the mode in which adolescents separate from their parents determines the quality of their adaptation. When, within a mode of acceptance, parents respect and support their adolescent's movement toward individuation, adolescents are more confident about pursuing their own path. In contrast, when parents either oppose or delegate their doubts regarding the adolescent's ability to individuate, the adolescent's attainment of developmental tasks may be undercut.

The present study is an examination of the possible linkages between family relations and attitudes toward separation and adaptation of Israeli soldiers during the first weeks of basic training. During basic training, soldiers are assigned to groups of eight individuals, each group under a single commander. The daily routine is very intense, from dawn until late at night. Most of the soldier's activities take place within the group of the eight, with all group members sleeping in the same room. Competence in military matters as well as the quality of a soldier's social relationships are considered the best indicators of adjustment to military service.
Our first assumption in this study is that patterns of relationships combining an atmosphere of acceptance and respect for individual growth will be related to higher levels of adjustment to military life, both in domains of soldiering competency as well as in the relational domain. In addition, the quality of the separation process, accelerated by enlistment, will also predict the adaptation of youngsters during the phase of basic training. Soldiers whose parents convey a realistic and confident perception of the enlistment—separation process will be more competent soldiers and more socially involved with their peers.

Method

Participants

Seventy-two soldiers in the Israeli Army were contacted during the 3rd week of their basic training—about 4 or 5 weeks following their enlistment. All were men (mean age, 18.6; range, 18.1 to 19.2 years old) who had completed their high school education; they represented broad social strata, from lower class to upper middle class. Soldiers were recruited by their own agreement to participate; all signed consent forms. On one of their weekend leaves (every 3rd weekend a soldier was entitled to be with his family), soldiers were asked to give both parents questionnaires to be completed at home. Forty-eight soldiers returned questionnaires completed by both parents, and these 48 individuals constituted the sample for this research. No demographic differences, such as level of education and socioeconomic background, existed between soldiers who returned completed questionnaires and those whose parents did not reply.

Procedure and Instruments

Three sources of information were used to evaluate soldiers' military and social competence: reports by the soldiers themselves, reports by their commanders, and sociometric nominations. Parents' questionnaires requested information pertaining to family atmosphere, parental coping, and parents' perceptions of their son's enlistment. The quality of a soldier's competence was derived from the following measures:

1. Military competence: This construct was measured by four items: level of physical ability, competence of weapons control, theoretical knowledge of military matters, and shooting accuracy. Soldiers were asked to rate themselves on a scale ranging from low (1) to high (5) on the four items. The Cronbach alpha for the scale was .83. Each group commander also completed this instrument for each soldier in his group. The Cronbach alpha for commanders' ratings was .79.

2. Social competence: This construct was measured by three items: being a part of the group, having a close relationship with another member of the group, and being able to handle group pressures. Soldiers were asked to rate themselves
on a scale ranging from low (1) to high (5) on the three items. The Cronbach alpha for the scale was .73. Each group commander also completed this instrument for each soldier in his group. The Cronbach alpha for commanders’ ratings was .81.

3. Social nominations: Each soldier compiled a list of other members in his group whom he liked and with whom he felt close. The range of nominations for each group member was being named by none of the group members (1) or by all of them (8).

Closeness to best friend was patterned on Armsden and Greenberg’s (1987) Inventory of Adolescent Attachments. Using this self-report device, soldiers rated (on a scale of 1 to 4) the quality of their relationship to their closest friend in the group. In previous studies, the Hebrew version of this instrument yielded one factor, reflecting the availability and support of the significant other, in this case the closest friend. The Cronbach alpha for the whole scale was .79.

The Family Environment Scale (FES; Moos & Moos, 1976) was used to measure parental perceptions of family climate. The instrument consists of 10 subscales that comprise three general dimensions: relationships, defined as the extent to which closeness, support, and low conflict characterize the family; personal growth, defined as the extent to which the family emphasizes and respects the individual growth of its members; and system maintenance, defined as the extent to which the family emphasizes control and organization. The instrument has been widely used in Israel (for a review of its psychometric properties, see Shulman, Seiffge-Krenke, Levy-Shiff, Fabian, & Rotenberg, 1995).

Each parent was asked to rate (on a scale of 1 to 4) to what extent certain statements described their family. For this study, only dimensions of relationships and personal growth were entered into the data analysis.

The Inventory of Parental Launching of Children into the Army was developed by Lomerantz (1987) and consists of 57 statements measuring how parents cope with the fact of children leaving home to enter the army. In this study, 41 statements with two dimensions were included—cognitive aspects (“I think that my son is capable of being away from home”) and emotional aspects (“I am capable of coping with the worries of our son’s not being at home”)—of separation from the child. Each parent was asked to rate (on a scale of 1 to 4) to what extent a statement described his or her perception of and feelings toward the son’s joining the army. The Cronbach alpha for the two dimensions were .72 and .68, respectively. Lomerantz found that parental coping with a son’s enlistment was correlated with the son’s self-reported level of well-being.

Results

We evaluated associations of family relationships and competence for the 48 soldiers whose parents had both returned completed questionnaires. Associations between mothers’ and fathers’ perceptions of the family and attitudes toward
TABLE 1

Pearson Correlations Between Family Relationships and Soldiers’ Social Relations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Family atmosphere</th>
<th>Parental launching</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Closeness</td>
<td>Personal growth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closeness to best friend</td>
<td>.39**</td>
<td>.26*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social competence/ soldier</td>
<td>.17</td>
<td>.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military competence/ soldier</td>
<td>-.09</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social competence/ commander</td>
<td>.35**</td>
<td>.43***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military competence/ commander</td>
<td>.29*</td>
<td>.35**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociometric nominations</td>
<td>.18</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

their sons’ enlistments ranged from .48 to .67. In addition, patterns of association between parental variables and soldiers’ competence were similar among fathers and mothers and were therefore combined. A series of correlations revealed significant associations between parents’ and soldiers’ indices of military and social competence (see Table 1).

We conducted hierarchical regression analyses to assess the relative contributions of parental variables to soldiers’ competence. Parental variables were entered into the regression equation assuming a possible order of impact. The first variable entered was parents’ perceptions of family closeness and support for personal growth, hypothesized to moderate soldiers’ competence and relationships. The second variable entered was parental attitudes toward their sons’ enlistments, which could be considered more specific to the condition of having a son who serves in the military, conveying the extent to which parents are at ease with the enlistment.

We conducted six hierarchical regression analyses (see Table 2). Of the three measures reported by soldiers, only one was accounted for by family relations. Twenty percent of the variance of soldiers’ closeness to best friend was explained by a family atmosphere that combined close relationships with support for personal growth. Parental attitudes toward their sons’ enlistments did not make an additional significant contribution, and self-perceived levels of military and social competence were not explained by family relationships.

Commanders’ ratings of soldiers’ military competence were explained by family relationships that combined closeness and respect for personal growth (15%). An additional 9% was explained by parents’ emotionally adaptive coping
### TABLE 2
Family Relationships and Soldiers' Social Relations: Hierarchical Regressions, F Values, Beta Weights, and Significance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Step 1: Family atmosphere: Close relationships and personal growth</th>
<th>Step 2: Parental launching: Cognitive/emotional</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>$r^2$</td>
<td>$F$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closeness to best friend</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>5.16**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social competence/soldier</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military competence/soldier</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social competence/commander</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>3.75*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Military competence/commander</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>5.90**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociometric nominations</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>.78</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. In the $\beta$ column, under Step 1, the first number refers to close relationships and the second number refers to personal growth. In the $\beta$ column, under Step 2, the first number refers to cognitive and the second number refers to emotional.

*p < .05. **p < .01.

With their sons' enlistments, Commanders' rating of soldiers' social competence was explained by family relations (22%) and particularly by a family atmosphere that encouraged personal growth. Soldiers' sociometric nominations were accounted for by parents' emotionally adaptive coping with the sons' enlistments (17%). In sum, Commanders' ratings of soldiers' military and social competence as well as the number of social nominations were explainable by family relations. However, as mentioned before, family relations contributed to only one of three measures reported by the soldiers themselves.

To inspect possible indirect effects of family relationships on the soldiers' perceived competence, we constructed and tested two structural models (LISREL). The first structural model consisted of one dependent variable—soldiers' perceived social competence; three endogenous variables—closeness to best friend, sociometric nominations, and level of social competence as perceived by the commander; and four exogenous variables—family atmosphere, close relationships and personal growth, and parental cognitive and emotional launching of their son. Results suggested that this model provided an excellent fit to the data.

Soldiers' perceived competence was explained by the level of closeness to best friend in the group (27%), which was explained in turn by a family atmos-
sphere that supports personal growth (28%). In addition, soldiers' perceived social competence was explained by the number of social nominations in the group (36%), which was explained in turn by parental emotions regarding launching of the son (33%; see Figure 1, which presents the trimmed model). Our testing of a second structural model, in which soldiers' perceived military competence was the dependent variable, did not yield a significant fit to the data.

**Discussion**

Several features of the present findings deserve further attention. As found in the research previously described here, this study shows that parents who described a family atmosphere emphasizing closeness and personal growth, and who coped well with their son's enlistment, had sons who showed higher levels of adjustment in their first weeks of military training. However, although parents' perceptions were directly related to evaluations made by commanders and fellow soldiers, this finding explained soldiers' perceived military and social competence only indirectly.

Self-perceived competence in the army is probably viewed by the soldier as belonging to a different domain than the family and is therefore less likely to be directly affected by patterns of relationships within the family. As individuals become less involved with family, extrafamilial sources of reference and support become more dominant (Bryant, 1985). This is especially relevant during army
service, when significant close relationships are established and become central in the life of the individual. Weiss (1982) suggested that the bonds between army recruits, established under sustained proximity and stressful conditions, can be described as attachments. Partners seek proximity to each other, they give care and protection to each other, each feels more secure when with the other, and separation or threat of separation arouses anxiety.

Nevertheless, the role of family relationships cannot be dismissed. Family relationships are thought to "lay the basic foundation" for adjustment, with extrafamilial relationships making an additional contribution (Furman & Wehm er, 1994, p. 173). Results of the structural model analysis support this speculation. Perceived social competence was partly explained by two factors: closeness to best friend in the army and number of social nominations received by army peers; yet both of these, in turn, were partly explained by parental variables.

In spite of this theoretical probability, it would be incorrect to claim that the influence of family models halts at the army threshold. The number of sociometric nominations was explained by parental adaptive emotional coping with the son's enlistment. In addition, commanders' ratings of soldiers' military and social competence were partly explained by a family atmosphere supporting personal growth and coping with the son's enlistment.

It is not clear exactly how parental perceptions contributed to commanders' and fellow soldiers' social perceptions of the sons. It is obvious that both a soldier's commander and peers are not familiar with a soldier's parents. We could not suggest that parental perceptions were mediated through closeness to the best friend, as this model did not fit the data. We speculate that we may have evinced what Bronfenbrenner (1979) termed as the interface between systems—the mesosystem—in which two systems affect each other.

Some of these results need further explanation and represent the experience of Israeli young people. However, despite these limitations, the present results, drawn from four different sources—soldiers, commanders, parents, and peers—provide a basis for future research on the role of parents in the adaptation of offspring upon leaving home.

REFERENCES


Collins, W. A. (1990). Parent–child relationships in the transition to adolescence: Conti-


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