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# Intergenerational transmission of interpersonal strengths: The role of parent gender, family processes, and child characteristics

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## ABSTRACT

Interpersonal strengths are important positive traits of human beings. This study investigated the phenomenon and mechanisms of the intergenerational transmission of interpersonal strengths. A total of 992 fourth- to ninth-grade children (48.1% boys,  $M_{\text{age}} = 12.63$ ) and both mothers and fathers in China were involved in the present study. The results showed that fathers' (but not mothers') interpersonal strengths were directly associated with children's interpersonal strengths. Different transmission mechanisms of mothers and fathers were found: mother-child relationships and fathers' parenting styles explained the association between parents' and children's interpersonal strengths and between marital relationships and children's interpersonal strengths. Consistent transmission effects and mechanisms were found across child grade, gender, and sibling status. The findings of the current study provide evidence of intergenerational correlations for both parents regarding interpersonal strengths. Parents (especially fathers) with interpersonal strengths can raise children with corresponding strengths through particular family processes regardless of child characteristics.

## 1. Introduction

Interpersonal strengths involve traits and behaviors of “tending and befriending” others (Taylor et al., 2000). Peterson and Seligman (2004) revealed that kindness, love, and social intelligence are the three worldwide interpersonal strengths that are important positive traits of human beings (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and benefit individuals' social adjustment, life satisfaction, and well-being (Park & Peterson, 2006). As the intergenerational transmission perspective indicates, parents' characteristics (including attitude, values, personality, and behavior) can transfer to their children (Bowles, Gintis, & Groves, 2009). Thus, children may acquire interpersonal strengths from their parents. In addition, studies have examined the possible mechanisms that account for transmission (e.g., Anger, 2012; Bowles et al., 2009; Brenning, Soenens, Braet, & Bal, 2012; Schofield et al., 2012). Some family processes (e.g., marital relationship, parent-child relationship, parenting) may play an important role in the transmission process (e.g., Brenning et al., 2012; Schofield et al., 2012).

Given the above, the current study investigates the associations between parents' and children's interpersonal strengths (i.e., kindness, love, and social intelligence). We examine whether mothers' and fathers' interpersonal strengths are differentially related to children's interpersonal strengths and (or) whether this occurs via different ways on the basis of their different roles in child development. Do child characteristics (i.e., age, gender, sibling status) influence the transmission processes? By addressing these issues,

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we can identify the influence of parents on a child's interpersonal strengths and the path to shape these strengths, and assist children in acquiring these strengths to better adapt to society.

### 1.1. Intergenerational transmission and the role of parent gender

Intergenerational transmission refers to the phenomenon in which parents' characteristics (such as values, personality, and behavior) can transfer to their children (Bowles et al., 2009). Social learning theory indicates that children learn from their parents by observing the parental model, directly interacting with parents, or being coached by parents (Crittenden, 1984). Therefore, parents with particular characteristics may raise children with similar characteristics.

Extensive evidence has demonstrated intergenerational associations regarding attitudes, values, personality, behaviors, and social emotions. (e.g., Anger, 2012; Barni, Alfieri, Marta, & Rosnati, 2013; Brenning et al., 2012; Dogan, Conger, Kim, & Masyn, 2007; Dohmen, Falk, Huffman, & Sunde, 2012; Schofield et al., 2012). However, far less evidence has concentrated on the transmission of interpersonal strengths, despite some relevant studies that examined parents' and children's associations in social skills or interpersonal characteristics. For instance, Okumura and Usui (2014) discovered that parents' social skills were associated with their children's sociability based on the U.S. National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79) data. Boehnke (2015) reported the highest intergenerational correlations for three interpersonal problems. Meeus (2016) found that parental interpersonal behavior (i.e., conflict resolution styles) and empathy preceded and drove the same aspects of adolescents. Thus, parents who have interpersonal strengths may raise children with the same strengths.

In addition, parent gender may have an effect on intergenerational transmission (e.g., Bowles et al., 2009; Dohmen et al., 2012). For example, some studies found a stronger mother-child than father-child transmission effect (e.g., Dohmen et al., 2012; Oliver, Guerin, & Coffman, 2009), some studies resulted in the opposite outcomes (e.g., Clair, 2012; Costigan & Dokis, 2006), and several studies even indicated that maternal and paternal characteristics were equally related to offspring's characteristics (e.g., Barni et al., 2013; Schofield et al., 2012). However, studies have seldom explored differences in the association of parent-child interpersonal strengths between mothers and fathers. Only one relevant study investigating intergenerational risk and trust attitude transmission found that mothers tended to be more important than fathers for trust transmission (Dohmen et al., 2012), but this finding could not be extended to the subject of the current study. Given the above, this study explores the differences in the transmission of interpersonal strengths between mothers and fathers.

### 1.2. The Mediating role of family processes in intergenerational transmission

Some researchers have identified potential mechanisms that can account for intergenerational transmission (e.g., Bowles et al., 2009; Brenning et al., 2012; Schofield et al., 2012). In these studies involving intergenerational associations of personality, behaviors, and social emotions, family processes (e.g., parenting, parent-child relationship) have been found to play a substantial role in the associations (e.g., Brenning et al., 2012; Dogan et al., 2007; Schofield et al., 2012). According to the social selection perspective, individuals' traits and dispositions influence their social circumstances, emotions, and behaviors (e.g., McLeod & Kaiser, 2004). Thus, parents' characteristics, especially interpersonal characteristics, may affect family processes, such as relationships with the spouse and children and parenting styles and, in turn, child development (Conger, Conger, & Martin, 2010). Tavakol, Nasrabadi, Moghadam, Salehiniya, and Rezaei (2017) indicated that factors including personality traits, interpersonal relationships, communication and intimacy, and emotional intelligence were related to marital quality by reviewing 80 studies. Prinzie, Stams, Deković, Reijntjes, and Belsky (2009) revealed that agreeable and extraverted parents showed more positive interactions with their children. McLanahan and Percheski (2008) noted that children of parents with poor interpersonal skills experienced a lower quality of parenting. Each of the above-mentioned family processes is closely associated with children's social development (Cox & Paley, 1997; Parke, 2004). Thus, we speculate that parental interpersonal strengths are related to family processes (i.e., marital relationship, parent-child relationship, parenting style), which, in turn, are associated with children's interpersonal strengths.

In addition, family systems theory suggests interrelations among different family processes (Cox & Paley, 1997). In particular, as the origin of family relationships, marital relationships have demonstrated a strong correlation with parent-child relationships (Cox, Paley, & Harter, 2001). The spillover hypothesis explained that marital disorder spilled over into parent-child relationships and disrupted interactions between parents and children. Likewise, a negative marital relationship also spills over into parenting practices and leads to less sensitive and responsive parenting (Erel & Burman, 1995; Kitzmann, 2000; Krishnakumar & Buehler, 2000). On the other hand, positive, supportive, and satisfying marital relationships are associated with higher-quality parent-child relationships and parenting (Erel & Burman, 1995). Based on these theories and findings, we examine whether parent-child relationships and parenting styles play a mediating role in the association between marital relationships and children's interpersonal strengths.

The transmission mechanism may also differ across parent gender. However, few studies have explored differences in the transmission mechanism between mothers and fathers. It is unclear whether mothers and fathers display different mechanisms in the transmission of interpersonal strengths. The present study will explore this issue.

### 1.3. Role of child characteristics in intergenerational transmission

Child characteristics may have an effect on intergenerational transmission. For example, the degree of similarity in values between parents and their children may vary across children's developmental stages (e.g., Barni et al., 2013; Grolnick, Deci, & Ryan, 1997). The transmission effects may also vary by child gender (Filler & Jennings, 2015; Kwong, Bartholomew, Henderson, & Trinke,

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