



Mother knows best? Inhibitory maternal gatekeeping, psychological control, and the mother–adolescent relationship

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ABSTRACT

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We used structural equation modeling to explore associations between inhibitory maternal gatekeeping attitudes, reports of inhibitory maternal gatekeeping behaviors, maternal psychological control, observed mother–adolescent warmth, and adolescent reports of maternal involvement. Our random stratified sample consisted of 315 mothers and their adolescents. Results revealed that inhibitory maternal gatekeeping attitudes were positively associated with reports of inhibitory gatekeeping behaviors. Psychological control fully mediated the relationship between inhibitory gatekeeping attitudes, reports of inhibitory gatekeeping behaviors, and adolescent reports of maternal involvement. Though gatekeeping attitudes and behaviors were not associated with observed mother–adolescent warmth, psychological control was negatively associated with observed mother–adolescent warmth. Thus, although prior research emphasized the negative effects of inhibitory gatekeeping on father–child relationships, the present research elucidates that in conjunction with psychological control, inhibitory gatekeeping negatively influences the mother–adolescent relationship. All findings are discussed in the context of family systems theory.

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It is clear that mother–adolescent relationship quality impacts adolescent development. For example, a positive mother–adolescent relationship is correlated with lower levels of internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Kim & Cicchetti, 2004), lower rates of risky sexual behaviors (Jaccard, Dittus, & Gordon, 1996), and higher levels of prosocial behaviors and hope (Day & Padilla-Walker, 2009). It is also clear that coparenting is an important predictor of parent–child relationship quality (Feinberg, 2002), with evidence suggesting that coparenting interactions have greater impact on child well-being than marriage does (McHale, 2009, pp. 77–94; Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). Yet coparenting interactions are not commonly explored as correlates of mother–adolescent relationship quality (Feinberg, Kan, & Hetherington, 2007).

One key coparenting construct is called maternal gatekeeping. Maternal gatekeeping includes elements of control, and reflects a mother's encouraging and/or discouraging regulatory attitudes and behaviors toward her partner (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Schoppe-Sullivan, Cannon, Brown, Mangelsdorf, & Sokolowski, 2008). For example, a mother may be gatekeeping her husband's fathering efforts when she re-does what he previously did, or when she decides *she* is the only one who can perform a particular task for her child. Prior research established that when inhibitory maternal gatekeeping is present in coparenting practices, father involvement and father–child relationship quality decrease (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Fagan & Barnett, 2003; McBride et al., 2005). Unfortunately, no research has explored the impact of maternal gatekeeping on the

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mother–child relationship. Further, understanding the mechanisms by which gatekeeping attitudes and behaviors might impact the mother–child relationship is also needed. We suggest that gatekeeping in the coparental subsystem may be associated with other controlling or regulatory behaviors in a mother's parenting, such as psychological control. Thus, in the present study, we expand the current parent–adolescent literature by exploring the relationship between inhibitory maternal gatekeeping, maternal psychological control, mother–adolescent warmth, and mother–adolescent involvement.

Literature review

Family systems theory

Family systems theory provides a valuable framework for understanding associations between gatekeeping, psychological control, and mother–adolescent relationship quality. Three family systems assumptions inform our current project. First, family systems theorists assert that a family is a unit of interdependent individuals (Broderick, 1993). Within this unit, the functioning of the individuals is related to the individuals themselves and to the system of behaviors between members of the family. Thus, the mother–adolescent relationship will likely be related to a mother's perceptions of her gatekeeping attitudes, the adolescent's perceptions of the mother's psychologically controlling behaviors, the adolescent's report of the mother–adolescent relationship, and observations of mother–adolescent interaction.

Second, the family system is composed of interdependent subsystems, such as the parent–adolescent relationship and the coparental relationship. Systems theorists stress that the functioning of one subsystem will influence the functioning of another (Lindsey & Caldera, 2006; Minuchin, 1974, 1985). Thus, based on the principles of family systems theory, the presence of maternal gatekeeping in the coparental subsystem will likely impact interactions in parent–adolescent subsystems as well. Current evidence supports this claim by establishing a significant association between gatekeeping and the father–child relationship (DeLuccie, 1995; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008), with findings that inhibitory gatekeeping is detrimental to the father–child relationship (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Fagan & Barnett, 2003). The present study expands this work by questioning whether or not the presence of maternal gatekeeping further impacts the mother–child relationship.

Third, family systems theory assumes that processes linking individual and relational characteristics within the family system reflect both direct and indirect pathways between constructs. Thus it is likely that the effects of gatekeeping on mother–adolescent relationship quality will be based not only on direct processes, but also on indirect processes. In the present study we explore whether or not a mother exercising regulatory control in the coparental dyad through her gatekeeping attitudes and behaviors will be related to exercising control in other aspects of her family interactions, such as displaying psychologically controlling behaviors with her adolescent. We hypothesize that associations between inhibitory gatekeeping and the mother–adolescent relationship will be mediated by maternal psychological control.

Maternal gatekeeping

Maternal gatekeeping has been explored over the past two decades (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; DeLuccie, 1995). Researchers frequently conceptualize maternal gatekeeping in terms of attitudes and behaviors, distinguish between inhibitory and facilitative dimensions of gatekeeping, and discuss gatekeeping in the context of a mother's desire for control or regulation of her partner's parenting efforts. Maternal gatekeeping attitudes consist of mothers' self-imposed standards and responsibilities, maternal identity confirmation, and differentiated gender roles (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). Maternal gatekeeping behaviors consist of the behaviors mothers use to restrict or facilitate fathers' access to their children (Fagan & Barnett, 2003).

Researchers have further identified important distinctions between inhibitory gatekeeping or gate closing (behaviors and attitudes that hinder a father's involvement in family work) and maternal facilitation or gate opening (behaviors and attitudes that encourage a father's involvement in family work) (Cannon, Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Brown, & Sokolowski, 2008; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008; Trinder, 2008). While researchers include both facilitative and inhibitory practices (Puhlman & Pasley, 2010; Sano, Richards, & Zvonkovic, 2008), the data reported here focus specifically on inhibitory gatekeeping and its influence on the mother–child relationship.

More recently, both inhibitory and facilitative gatekeeping have been conceptualized in the context of control. This conceptualization has emphasized that maternal gatekeeping is not simply an individual process; it is a dyadic one between mothers and fathers that stems from a mother's desire to regulate how she and her partner interact with their child (Adamsons, 2010). For instance, gatekeeping regulates fathers' active involvement with their children (Gaunt, 2008; Herzog, Umana-Taylor, Madden-Derdich, & Leonard, 2007; Sano et al., 2008; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008), fathers' parenting behaviors (Cannon et al., 2008; McBride et al., 2005), and fathers' accessibility to their children (McBride et al., 2005; Roy & Dyson, 2005). In these situations mothers regulate, or attempt to control the ways fathers are involved in families.

It is possible that the meaning and implications of maternal gatekeeping may change from childhood to adolescence. Whereas most coparenting research has focused on developmentally appropriate outcomes for infancy and childhood, over the past five years coparenting researchers have begun to establish that coparenting conflict increases adolescent risky behavior (Baril, Crouter, & McHale, 2007), increases adolescent anti-social behavior (Feinberg et al., 2007), increases parental negativity (Feinberg et al., 2007), but may produce smaller effects on adolescents than on children (Teubert & Pinquart, 2010).

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