

# Success, Social Comparison, and Self-Assessment: Parents' Midlife Evaluations of Sons, Daughters, and Self

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The literatures on sex-role socialization and social comparison theory were used to predict how parents would evaluate the life success of adult sons and daughters and how parents' assessments of themselves would be influenced by comparisons with these children. Although parents ( $N = 215$ ) did not report different levels of life success for 291 adult sons versus 251 adult daughters, parental well-being was more closely tied to assessments of sons' success. In addition, although parents reported that both sons and daughters had exceeded their own life success, the *parent-child comparison* with daughters was the better predictor of parents' well-being. Findings are discussed in terms of parents' individual development, family processes at midlife, and cohort differences between parents and their children.

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**KEY WORDS:** Parents; midlife evaluation; social comparison; self-assessment.

## INTRODUCTION

The tasks of adulthood include, for many, the raising and nurturing of children. As children grow up and emerge as adults in their own right, parents are confronted with the "products" of their early investments. The current study focused on this period in the adult life course, examining parents' reflections about how their grown children have "turned out" and parents' views of themselves in midlife. Our assumption was that parents' evaluations of their grown children include implicit assessments of their own nurturance and guidance. These endeavors may constitute part of the midlife challenge of guiding the next generation (Erikson, 1959) and, as such, may contribute to multiple aspects of parental well-being, including self-acceptance, purpose in life,

efficacy, and personal growth (Ryff, 1989a). Thus, among midlife parents, evaluations of grown children may be intertwined with evaluations of self.

Commensurate with this view, Ryff, Lee, Essex, and Schmutte (1994) observed that the better adult children turn out in their midlife parents' eyes, the more effectual and meaningful parents' lives seem to be. It is unclear, however, whether parents' well-being is equally enhanced by each child or whether parents bask in the glory of some children more than others. The purpose of the present investigation was to learn whether parents evaluate differently the accomplishments of adult sons versus daughters and whether parents' well-being is differentially predicted by these evaluations of adult sons and daughters. This investigation is guided by three conceptual frameworks: the prior research on parenting and its impact on the well-being of parents, the literature on sex-role socialization and parental expectations for sons versus daughters, and research on social comparison processes and the implications for how parents evaluate and are influenced by the life success of their children.

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### Parenthood and Its Influence on Parents' Well-Being

Sociological and psychological research linking parental status to adult psychological well-being (see Bell & Harper, 1977; McLanahan & Adams, 1987; Peterson & Rollins, 1987) has suggested that the effect of children on their parents is predominantly negative during the early years of parenting (Umberson, 1989; Umberson & Gove, 1989). However, the picture appears to improve as children enter adolescence (Silverberg & Steinberg, 1990) and subsequently "empty the nest" (Harkins, 1978; White & Edwards, 1990). These findings have suggested that there may be heightened benefits of parenting as children grow older.

Ryff *et al.* (1994) examined the relationship between parents' perceptions of their adult children's personal and professional success and perceptions of their own psychological well-being. The investigators found that parents' beliefs about their adult children's adjustment (i.e., happiness, self-confidence, interpersonal relations) predicted feelings of self-acceptance, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and depression among mothers and fathers. In keeping with the "American dream," the investigators also hypothesized that parents would experience improved well-being when children were perceived as doing better than they themselves had done. This relationship was not confirmed. Instead, adjustment comparisons favoring the children (i.e., "My child is doing better than I was as a young adult") were predictive of diminished well-being and higher depression among parents. Paradoxically, parents reported higher evaluations of themselves when they believed their children were doing well but, via social comparisons, also lower self-assessments when they believed their children's life success *exceeded their own*.

Ryff *et al.* (1994) collected data on multiple children within families but did not address variation among them. As children in a family may be different from one another (Plomin & Daniels, 1987), they may also exert different influences on parents' mental health and well-being. In the current study, we attempted to clarify the Ryff *et al.* findings by examining parents' views of their various children. We focused specifically on parents' differential assessments of sons versus daughters and on the relationship between these assessments and parents' well-being.

### Sex Differences, Socialization, and Expectations

Discussions of gender differentiation (see also Wiggins, 1991) have associated men and women, respectively, with the concepts of achievement identity versus intimate identity (Gilligan, 1982), instrumentality versus nurturance (Bem, 1974), and agency versus communion (Bakan, 1966), highlighting a distinction between the life tasks of "getting ahead" and "getting along" (Hogan, Jones, & Cheek, 1985). In the present formulation, getting ahead was linked with *attainment* success (educational and occupational) and getting along was linked with an *interpersonal* success. Two hypotheses arose from this gender-driven division of labor.

First, we predicted that parents would report sex-stereotypic differences between adult sons and daughters. Early parental and cultural mandates to "practice" sex-typical behaviors (e.g., Joffe, 1971; Langlois & Downs, 1980; Rheingold & Cook, 1975; Sternglanz & Serbin, 1974) may contribute to actual sex-differentiated abilities in adult sons and daughters. In addition, parents' beliefs that males and females are different may bias their judgments about sons' and daughters' skills (Eccles, Jacobs, & Harold, 1990) and may guide the attributions they make about their children's success (Yee & Eccles, 1988). In the current study, we predicted that parents would report greater career success in sons than in daughters and greater interpersonal success in daughters than in sons.

Second, we anticipated that parents' sex-role *expectations* for their children would have consequences for parental well-being. Prior research has found that parents hold different, sex-typical attainment expectations for sons and daughters (Aberle & Nagle, 1952; Huston, 1983), with fathers reporting, for example, that a son is expected to get a good job or be successful in his job whereas a daughter is expected simply to "do whatever she wants" (Intons-Peterson, 1985). These expectations, if unfulfilled, may have negative effects on parents' well-being because, as Carlsmith and Aronson (1963, p. 156) have observed, "the stronger the expectancy, the greater the negative affect following its disconfirmation." That is, if an adult son fails to obtain a respectable job or if an adult daughter seems cold and unfeeling, a basic parental expectation remains unmet, possibly resulting in lowered well-being. In the current study, we expected that parents' views about themselves and their past lives (self-accept-

tance), their sense of meaning and direction (purpose in life), and their own perceived ability to manage the surrounding world (environmental mastery) would be positively related to their evaluations of daughters' interpersonal success and to their evaluations of sons' attainment success. For a third domain called *adjustment* (i.e., happiness, life satisfaction, anxiety), which had no obvious links to sex-role socialization, we anticipated that assessments of sons' and daughters' success would be similarly related to parent well-being.

### Parents' Comparisons of Themselves with Their Grown Children

Ryff *et al.* (1994) found that parent well-being scores were lower when adult children's adjustment was perceived to exceed parents' adjustment at a similar age. This finding is congruent with upward comparison effects, whereby comparison with a more fortunate or successful other results in negative affect (see Major, Testa, & Bylsma, 1991; Wood, 1989) or decreased subjective well-being (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992). In contrast, in the attainment domain, Ryff *et al.* (1994) found fewer and more qualified links between parent-child comparisons and parents' well-being. In some instances, comparisons favoring children were predictive of higher well-being.

Among the researchers who have examined and discussed social comparison processes and effects (e.g., Festinger, 1954; Suls & Miller, 1977; Suls & Wills, 1991), Tesser (1986, 1991) has proposed a model of social comparison and self-evaluation maintenance. According to Tesser, when individuals compare themselves to others to evaluate themselves, the outcome of the comparison will have affective consequences (i.e., impact on well-being) that are mediated, in part, by the closeness or similarity of the comparer to the comparison other. For example, if a parent compares her performance to a "close" other (e.g., a child) on a self-relevant dimension and if the child displays superior performance, the parent's self-esteem will be threatened.

The inclusion of child gender in the current study allowed us to examine different levels of "closeness" in parent-child comparisons. Tesser (1986) has suggested that factors such as similarity, proximity, and kinship ties increase closeness by defining a clearer comparison unit. While all parent-

child dyads may be characterized as close according to Tesser, same-sex dyads (e.g., mother-daughter) may be closer than opposite-sex dyads (e.g., father-daughter). This is congruent with the finding that spontaneous, same-sex comparisons vastly outnumber cross-sex comparisons (Wheeler & Miyake, 1992). Accordingly, we expected that mothers' comparisons with daughters, not sons, would have a strong predictive influence on mothers' well-being, whereas fathers' comparisons with sons, not daughters, would have a strong predictive influence on fathers' well-being. Cross-sex comparisons were expected to have significantly less influence (due to reduced closeness) on parent well-being.

In summary, key hypotheses of the present study were that (1) parents would report greater getting-ahead success in adult sons than adult daughters and greater getting-along success in daughters than sons; (2) parents' own well-being would be significantly predicted by their perceptions of interpersonal success in daughters and attainment success in sons; and (3) fathers' well-being would be more strongly linked with social comparisons with grown sons whereas mothers' well-being would be more strongly tied to social comparisons with daughters. Underlying all analyses is the issue of whether parents' own psychological well-being influences how they construe their children's success. This issue will be addressed in our discussion of the current findings.

## METHOD

### Sample

The research was based on a probability sample of middle-aged men and women from a midwestern county who were under age 65 and who had at least one child over the age of 21. Respondents were contacted via random-digit dialing telephone procedures. Seventy percent of the persons meeting these selection criteria described above ( $N = 215$ ) agreed to participate in the study. The sample included 114 mothers and 101 fathers, none of whom were from the same families.

Demographic characteristics of the respondents are summarized in Table I. In terms of age, both mothers and fathers were in their early fifties ( $M = 53.7$ ,  $SD = 6.8$ ). Mothers were more likely than fathers to be divorced, separated, or widowed.

Table I. Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Item	Total (N = 215)		Mothers (n = 114)		Fathers (n = 101)	
	(N)	%	(n)	%	(n)	%
<b>Age</b>						
40-49	(75)	34.9	(47)	41.2	(28)	27.7
50-59	(86)	40.0	(39)	34.2	(47)	46.5
60-65	(54)	25.1	(28)	24.6	(26)	25.7
Average age	53.7	(6.8)	53.1	(7.2)	54.3	(6.2)
<b>Marital status</b>						
Married	(168)	78.1	(74)	64.9	(94)	93.1
Divorced	(32)	14.9	(25)	21.9	(7)	6.9
Separated	(3)	1.4	(3)	2.6	(0)	0.0
Widowed	(12)	5.6	(12)	10.5	(0)	0.0
<b>Religion</b>						
Protestant	(102)	47.4	(57)	50.0	(45)	44.6
Catholic	(63)	29.3	(29)	25.4	(34)	33.7
Jewish	(3)	1.4	(3)	2.6	(0)	0.0
Other	(23)	10.7	(16)	14.0	(7)	6.9
None	(24)	11.2	(9)	7.9	(15)	14.9
<b>Education</b>						
1: High school graduate or less	(57)	26.5	(36)	31.6	(21)	20.8
2: Technical school	(70)	32.6	(40)	35.1	(30)	29.7
3: College graduate	(50)	23.2	(24)	21.1	(26)	25.7
4: Advanced degree	(38)	17.7	(14)	12.3	(24)	23.8
Average education	2.3	(1.1)	2.1	(1.0)	2.5	(1.1)
<b>Income (\$ per year)</b>						
1: 0-10,999	(7)	3.3	(7)	6.1	(0)	0.0
2: 11,000-20,999	(19)	8.8	(13)	11.4	(6)	5.9
3: 21,000-30,999	(42)	19.5	(31)	27.2	(11)	10.9
4: 31,000-40,999	(41)	19.1	(24)	21.1	(17)	16.8
5: 41,000-44,999	(17)	7.9	(10)	8.8	(7)	6.9
6: 45,000 and above	(89)	41.4	(29)	25.4	(60)	59.4
Average Income	4.4	(1.5)	3.9	(1.5)	5.0	(1.3)

Fathers reported significantly higher educational and income levels than mothers.

Demographic data for the children are summarized in Table II. In total, the parent respondents reported on 291 sons and 251 daughters ranging in age from 21 to 44 years with an average in the late twenties ( $M = 28.9$ ,  $SD = 5.4$ ). There was no significant difference in age between sons and daughters. In addition, there were no mean level differences between sons and daughters in terms of average educational attainment, occupation, marital status, parenting status, or proximity to parents.

## Measures

### *Child Attainment, Interpersonal Relations, and Adjustment*

Children's educational attainment and current occupational status were combined to provide an index of professional achievement called *attainment*. Educational attainment was operationalized as the highest level of education that had been completed by the child. Occupational attainment was assessed by asking parents about the child's work, principal activities/duties, and the kind of business or industry

Table II. Demographic Characteristics of Children

Item	Total (N = 542)		Daughters (n = 251)		Sons (n = 291)	
	(N)	%	(n)	%	(n)	%
<b>Age</b>						
21-29	(308)	56.8	(148)	60.0	(160)	55.0
30-39	(215)	39.7	(96)	38.2	(119)	40.9
40-44	(19)	3.5	(7)	2.3	(12)	4.1
<b>Education</b>						
1: High school graduate or less	(124)	22.9	(50)	19.9	(74)	25.4
2: Technical school	(214)	39.5	(102)	40.6	(112)	38.5
3: College graduate	(128)	23.6	(74)	29.5	(54)	18.6
4: Advanced degree	(76)	14.0	(25)	10.0	(51)	17.5
<b>Occupation</b>						
1: Unemployed	(21)	4.1	(16)	6.4	(5)	1.7
2: Skilled/unskilled trade	(133)	42.5	(49)	19.5	(84)	28.9
3: Clerical/technical/sales	(172)	31.7	(90)	35.9	(82)	28.2
4: Manager	(51)	9.4	(23)	9.2	(28)	9.6
5: Professional	(98)	21.0	(44)	17.5	(54)	18.6
Currently married	(268)	49.4	(129)	51.4	(139)	47.8
Children of own	(202)	37.3	(105)	41.8	(97)	33.3
<b>Proximity</b>						
1: Live with parents	(59)	10.9	(23)	9.2	(36)	12.4
2: Less than 1/2 hour away	(200)	36.9	(99)	39.4	(101)	34.7
3: Less than 1 hour away	(44)	8.1	(20)	8.0	(24)	8.2
4: More than 1 hour away	(239)	44.1	(109)	43.4	(130)	44.7

the work was in. These responses were coded according to an 8-point scale derived from modifications of Featherman and Steven's (1982) index of occupational status. The categories ranged from unemployed/homemaker (1) to high-status professional (8). The two measures were significantly correlated ( $r = .73, p < .01$ ) and thus were combined to comprise the attainment index.

Questions concerning the child's interpersonal relations (See Appendix, Note 1) with both casual and close others included, on the positive side, whether the child was well liked by others, a caring friend to others, fun to be with, and had developed lasting relationships with others. Parents also assessed the extent to which each child had experienced problems or difficulties in close relationships. The response format was a 1 (*not at all*) to 4 (*very*) point scale. This index of interpersonal success had an internal consistency coefficient of .70.

Questions concerning the child's personal adjustment involved positive and negative aspects of

functioning. Items included ratings of how happy, satisfied with life, self-confident, down or discouraged, frustrated, tense, and anxious parents found each child. Two additional items inquired about the extent to which the child was "making the most" of himself or herself and living by sound morals and values. Parents responded to each question using a 1 (*not at all happy, satisfied, etc.*) to 4 (*very happy, satisfied, etc.*) scale. This index of adjustment had an internal consistency coefficient of .83.

#### Parent-Child Comparisons

Parents were asked to "Think back to when you were the same age as your child; how well do you think your child compares with you when you were that age?" for selected measures in the three achievement domains described above. Parents rated each child as (5) *a lot better* to (1) *a lot worse* than themselves on each measure.

### *Parent well-being and Depression*

Parents completed a self-report inventory designed to measure six dimensions of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1989a; Ryff & Essex, 1992) derived from the literatures on life span development, mental health, and personal growth (Ryff, 1989b). The six dimensions included self-acceptance, environmental mastery, purpose in life, positive relations with others, personal growth, and autonomy. Items from the scales were mixed to produce a single self-report inventory that respondents answered according to a 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 6 (*strongly agree*) response format.

Each well-being dimension was operationalized with a 14-item scale of positively and negatively phrased items that were selected from a larger 20-item scale on the basis of their fit with the larger scale (based on item-to-scale coefficients) and coverage of the guiding theoretical definition of each dimension. Alpha coefficients for the 14-item scales ranged from .82 to .90. Correlations of the 14-item scales with the 20-item scales (see Ryff, 1989a) ranged from .97 to .98. Prior work with the 20-item scales demonstrated test-retest reliability over a 6-week period that ranged from .81 to .88 and showed that the scales correlated positively with prior measures of life satisfaction, affect balance, and self-esteem and negatively with measures of depression and external control. Age analyses revealed a differentiated picture of well-being across the life span (Ryff, 1989a, 1991).

Depression was assessed using the Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression scale (Radloff, 1977). This 20-item self-report scale was designed to assess depressive symptomatology in the general population. Twenty statements of pathology (e.g., "I felt sad") are rated on a 4-point scale of frequency for the past week. This scale was chosen because it measures current levels of symptomatology with an emphasis on depressed mood, has few somatically based items, and has demonstrated reliability and validity. Alphas of .85 and .90 have been reported for community and patient samples, respectively. Concordance with other depressive measures, discriminant validity, and utility as a screening scale have been demonstrated (Radloff, 1977).

### **Procedure**

Prior to a face-to-face interview in the subject's home, each subject completed a self-administered psychological well-being scale, the CES-D

depression scale, and a questionnaire regarding current health. These instruments were sent to study participants via mail and were collected by interviewers. During the interview, which lasted approximately 1 hour, parents were asked to provide information about their experience as parents and about each of their adult children over the age of 21. Data were collected on the first six children over the age of 21. Participants were paid for their participation.

## **RESULTS**

### **Intrafamilial Correlations**

The first set of analyses examined parents' reports about children in the same family. Ratings of personal adjustment and social relations for child 1 through child 6 were intercorrelated to confirm that parents' subjective appraisals of their different children reflected individual differences among those children (i.e., that parents did not rate all of their children alike). The resulting correlation coefficients are presented in Table III. Cross-child correlations for personal adjustment are presented above the diagonal; cross-child correlations for interpersonal relations are presented below the diagonal. Among the 15 coefficients that were of interest in each life domain, 80% did not reach statistical significance ( $p < .05$ ). Further, the pattern of significant coefficients failed to reveal any systematic similarities among the intrafamily ratings. These data provide empirical support for the claim that, within the same family, parents evaluate different children differently.

### **Mean Level Differences**

The next set of analyses examined mean level differences in parents' evaluations of sons and daughters. The analyses indicated no significant differences between parents' ratings of sons and daughters on professional attainment, interpersonal skill, or personal adjustment (see Table IV). These findings were contrary to the prediction that parents would report greater attainment success for sons and greater interpersonal success for daughters. Note that standard deviations reported in Table IV indicate greater variability among parents' ratings of sons' personal adjustment and attainment

Table III. Correlations Among Parents' Reports About Children in the Same Family<sup>a</sup>

	Child 1	Child 2	Child 3	Child 4	Child 5	Child 6
Child 1		.15 (158)	.09 (85)	.17 (47)	-.05 (20)	.08 (10)
Child 2	.05 (156)		.13 (85)	.45 <sup>c</sup> (46)	.23 (20)	.35 (10)
Child 3	.23 <sup>b</sup> (87)	.21 (86)		.30 <sup>b</sup> (47)	.03 (20)	-.29 (10)
Child 4	.02 (47)	.31 <sup>b</sup> (45)	.37 <sup>b</sup> (47)		-.13 (20)	.44 (10)
Child 5	-.17 (20)	.17 (19)	.15 (20)	-.32 (20)		.11 (10)
Child 6	-.03 (10)	-.26 (10)	.50 (10)	.87 <sup>b</sup> (10)	.36 (10)	

<sup>a</sup>The number of cases used to compute each coefficient is presented below the coefficient.

<sup>b</sup> $p < .05$ .

<sup>c</sup> $p < .01$ .

Table IV. Parent Ratings of Sons and Daughters<sup>a</sup>

	Sons			Daughters		
	Mean	SD	Range	Mean	SD	Range
Personal Adjustment (8-item scale)	26.0	4.5	8-32	26.2	3.8	13-32
Social Relations (5-item scale)	17.3	2.3	8-20	17.5	2.2	8-20
Education (9-point scale)	4.6	2.2	1-9	4.6	1.9	1-9
Occupation (8-point scale)	3.9	1.9	1-8	3.7	1.8	1-8
Parent-Child Comparisons						
Adjustment comparison (4-item scale)	12.9	2.8	4-20	13.0	3.1	4-20
Interpersonal comparison (2-item scale)	6.3	1.3	3-10	6.4	1.3	3-10
Attainment comparison (2-item scale)	7.0	2.2	2-10	7.2	2.0	2-10

<sup>a</sup>Each item on the Personal Adjustment scale and Interpersonal Relations scale was rated using a 1 to 4-point Likert-type format with higher scores indicating higher levels of success. Each item on the parent-child comparison scales was rated using a 5-point Likert-type format, with higher scores indicating that the child's performance had exceeded the parents' performance.

in comparison to daughters. A chi-square analysis confirmed that sons' educational attainment ratings reflected greater variability than daughters' ratings [ $\chi^2(8) = 17.07, p < .05$ ].

Mean level differences for the measure of parent-child comparisons are also presented in Table IV. Parents reported that both sons and daughters had, on average, exceeded their own young-adult accomplishments in all three life domains. There were, however, no significant differences between sons and daughters on these comparison measures.

### Regression Analyses

The final set of analyses consisted of hierarchical regressions to determine whether parents' assessments of sons and daughters have differential predictive influence on parents' well-being. To clarify the variance in parent well-being that was accounted for by sons versus daughters, the dataset was first partitioned into a "son sample" and a "daughter sample." To test for differences in the regression slopes for sons versus daughters, the entire

dataset was subsequently employed. First-order interactions of each predictor with child sex, scored dichotomously, were of central interest in these analyses. For both the partitioned and the complete dataset, the predictor variables were (a) the parents' rating of the children's success and (b) the parents' comparison of themselves with their children in three separate life domains (attainment, interpersonal relations, personal adjustment).

Child's age was entered as a control variable in the first step of all analyses. In interaction analyses, child sex was also entered in step 1. Step 2 included the child's success rating in one of three life domains. Step 3 included the parent-child comparison outcome in the corresponding life domain. Interaction analyses were examined in step 4 using the product term of child sex with child success or parent-child comparison. To reduce the risk of multicollinearity, each interaction term was included in a separate analysis.

### Child Success as a Predictor of Parent Well-Being

Figure 1 provides a graphic summary of the results of analyses in which parents' ratings of sons' and daughters' success were used to predict parents' well-being. Along the horizontal axes are the criterion measures of parent well-being. The vertical axes indicate the variance in well-being that was explained by children's perceived success. The visual summaries of main effects include *only statistically significant* ( $p < .01$ ) increments in explained variance (see Appendix, Note 2); absent bars are indicative of nonsignificant effects. Because separate analyses were performed for each life domain (attainment, interpersonal, adjustment), the three domains are represented by separate bars.

In the *attainment* domain, assessments of sons' educational and occupational success contributed small but significant increments in explained variance ( $R^2$  change = 3% to 5%) in parents' feelings of self-acceptance and purpose in life. Assessments of daughters' educational and occupational success did not add significant increments to variance explained in any dimension of parental well-being.

In the *interpersonal* domain, assessments of sons' success with interpersonal relationships contributed moderate increments in explained variance ( $R^2$  change = 9% to 12%) in parents' feelings of self-acceptance and purpose in life. Sons' interpersonal success also explained variance ( $R^2$  change =

5% to 7%) in parents' depression, environmental mastery, and positive relations with others. Daughters' interpersonal success contributed small but significant increments in explained variance ( $R^2$  change = 3% to 4%) in parents' self-acceptance, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth. This represents a narrower range in explained variance than was observed for sons.

In the *personal adjustment* domain, assessments of sons' success in achieving personal happiness and self-confidence explained moderate increments in variance ( $R^2$  change = 9% to 13%) in parents' depression, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and purpose in life (see Appendix, Note 3). Assessments of daughters' adjustment success explained variance ( $R^2$  change = 3% to 7%) for all well-being outcomes except personal growth and autonomy. Again, these increments in  $R^2$  were smaller than the increments observed in the analyses of sons.

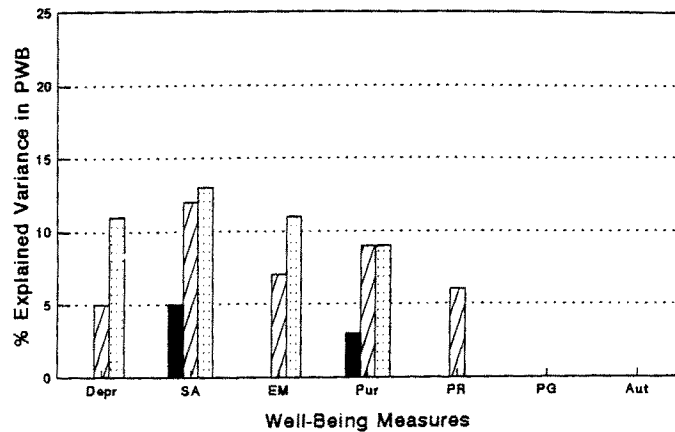
Interaction analyses for the combined dataset yielded no significant effects in the attainment and personal adjustment domains. However, significant interaction effects between child's sex and the success rating were observed for the *interpersonal* domain. The regression of parents' self-acceptance on children's perceived interpersonal success revealed a significant difference [ $R^2$  change = .01,  $F(1, 491) = 7.40$ ,  $p < .01$ ] in the regression slopes for sons ( $b = 2.50$ ) and daughters ( $b = 1.35$ ). As shown in Fig. 2, which was generated by plotting predicted values from the regression equation using unstandardized  $b$  coefficients (see Aiken & West, 1991), variation in parents' self-acceptance scores was more strongly linked with assessments of sons' interpersonal success than daughters'. Interactions with the same pattern were also obtained for parents' sense of autonomy [ $R^2$  change = .01,  $F(1, 491) = 5.06$ ,  $p < .05$ ; not shown] and purpose in life, which approached significance [ $R^2$  change = .01,  $F(1, 491) = 3.09$ ,  $p = .08$ ; not shown]. For the outcome of depression, regression slopes for sons ( $b = -1.45$ ) and daughters ( $b = -0.71$ ) were also significantly different [ $R^2$  change = .01,  $F(1, 491) = 5.85$ ,  $p < .05$ ]. Like the well-being outcomes, parents' depression scores were more strongly tied to perceptions of sons' interpersonal success than daughters'.

### Parent-Child Comparisons and Parental Well-Being

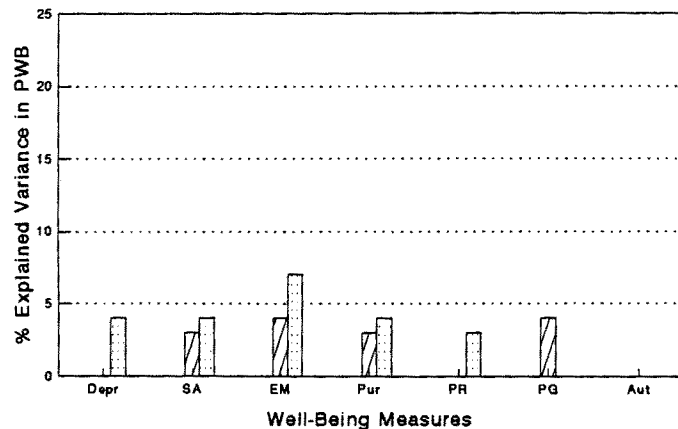
The second set of regression analyses involved the parents' assessment of "who's doing better" by



Sons' Success



Daughters' Success



■ Attainment ▨ Interpersonal Skill ▩ Personal Adjustment

Note. Depr = Depression; SA = Self-Acceptance; EM = Environmental Mastery; Pur = Purpose in Life; PR = Positive Relations with Others; PG = Personal Growth; Aut = Autonomy

Fig. 1. Children's success and parent well-being (PWB).

comparing themselves to their adult children in each of three life domains. We predicted that same-sex comparisons would have greater impact on parents' well-being than cross-sex comparisons. Because our research question required differentiation of parent sex as well as child sex, the analyses were conducted separately for mothers and fathers.

*Mother-Child Comparisons*

Figure 3 graphically summarizes the results of the analyses in which comparisons with sons and daughters were used to predict mothers' well-being. *Attainment* comparisons with sons' educational and occupational success did not add significant incre-

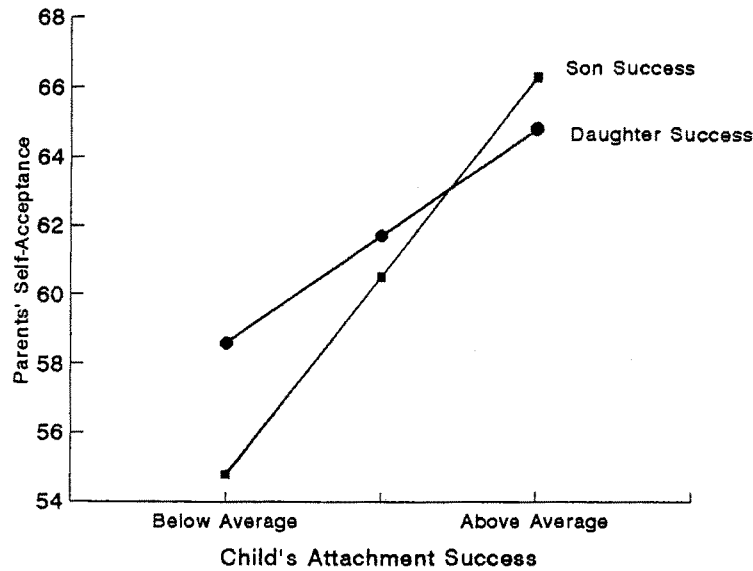


Fig. 2. Son versus daughter attachment as a predictor of parents' self-acceptance.

ments to variance explained in any dimension of mothers' well-being. In contrast, attainment comparisons with daughters contributed a moderate increment in explained variance ( $R^2$  change = 9%) in mothers' depression. The direction of the effect was positive: Mothers who reported that their daughters had done better than themselves also reported higher levels of depression.

In the *interpersonal* domain, mothers' comparisons with sons contributed moderate increments in explained variance ( $R^2$  change = 8% to 11%) in mothers' depression and positive relations with others. Interpersonal comparisons with sons also explained variance ( $R^2$  change = 5%) in mothers' self-acceptance. Among daughters, mothers' comparisons of interpersonal success contributed a sizable increment in explained variance ( $R^2$  change = 17%) in mothers' depression as well as moderate increments ( $R^2$  change = 9% to 10%) in mothers' self-acceptance and autonomy. In addition, mother-daughter comparisons in the interpersonal domain explained variance ( $R^2$  change = 4% to 5%) in mothers' sense of purpose in life and personal growth.

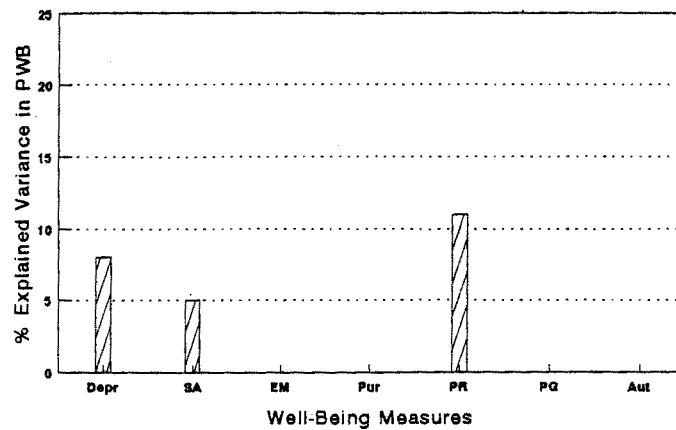
In the *personal adjustment* domain, mothers' comparisons with sons failed to explain any dimension of mothers' well-being. In contrast, comparisons with daughters yielded sizable increments in explained variance ( $R^2$  change = 19% to 26%) in mothers' de-

pression and self-acceptance. Additionally, comparisons with daughters explained variance ( $R^2$  change = 5% to 7%) in mothers' positive relations and autonomy. Throughout these findings, the direction of the social comparison effects was negative.

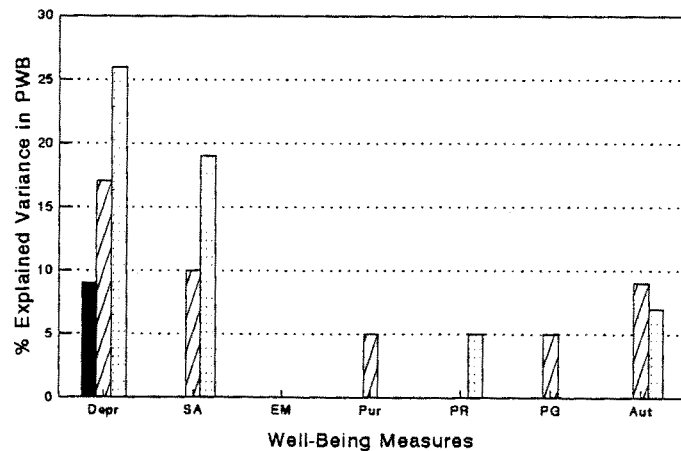
Significant interaction effects between the child's sex and the mother-child comparison were observed for both the attainment domain and the personal adjustment domain. As shown in Fig. 4, mothers who reported that their daughters' *attainment* success had exceeded their own were less self-accepting [ $R^2$  change = .03,  $F(1, 214) = 6.00$ ,  $p < .05$ ]. A similar relationship was observed between mother-daughter comparisons and environmental mastery [ $R^2$  change = .02,  $F(1, 214) = 4.75$ ,  $p < .05$ ; not shown]. For sons, followup simple slope tests revealed that the neither the regression slope of mothers' self-acceptance ( $b = 0.29$ ) nor environmental mastery ( $b = 0.41$ ) on sons' attainment was significantly different from zero. Interactions for mothers' purpose in life, positive relations with others, and depression were not statistically significant ( $p < .14$  to  $.16$ ) but were in the same direction: Attainment comparisons with daughters, not sons, better predicted mothers' well-being.

A similar pattern of results emerged for the adjustment domain. Mothers who reported that their daughters' *adjustment* success exceeded their

Comparison with Sons



Comparison with Daughters



■ Attainment ▨ Interpersonal Skill □ Personal Adjustment  
 Note. Depr = Depression; SA = Self-Acceptance; EM = Environmental Mastery; Pur = Purpose in Life; PR = Positive Relations with Others; PG = Personal Growth; Aut = Autonomy

Fig. 3. Parent-child comparisons and mothers' well-being (PWB).

own were less self-accepting than mothers who reported exceeding their daughters, whereas mothers' self-acceptance showed less variation as a function of comparisons with sons' adjustment success [ $R^2$  change = .01,  $F(1, 261) = 3.87$ ,  $p = .05$ ]. However, the difference between regression slopes for daughters ( $b = -1.84$ ) versus sons ( $b = -0.97$ ) was smaller than the difference for attainment comparisons. Results for mothers' depression were marginally significant [ $R^2$  change = .01,  $F(1, 261) =$

$3.27$ ,  $p = .07$ ] and showed the same pattern — that of being more depressed when daughters' adjustment exceeded their own but less variation linked to comparisons with sons.

Father-Child Comparisons

Figure 5 graphically summarizes the results of the analyses in which comparisons with sons and

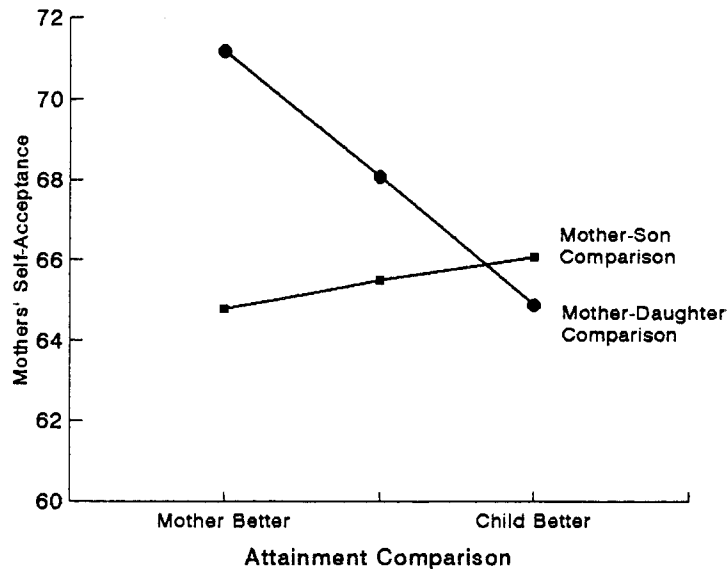


Fig. 4. Attainment comparisons with sons versus daughters as a predictor of mothers' self-acceptance.

daughters were used to predict fathers' well-being. In the *attainment* domain, neither comparisons with sons nor comparisons with daughters predicted any dimension of fathers' well-being.

In the *interpersonal* domain, fathers' comparisons with sons contributed moderate increments in explained variance ( $R^2$  change = 6% to 7%) in fathers' depression, self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and positive relations with others. Comparisons with daughters' contributed moderate increments ( $R^2$  change = 9% to 11%) in fathers' self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and positive relations. Additionally, father-daughter comparisons in the interpersonal domain explained variance ( $R^2$  change = 6%) in fathers' sense of purpose in life.

In the *personal adjustment* domain, fathers' comparisons with sons did not explain variance in any well-being dimension. In contrast, comparisons with daughters yielded moderate increments in explained variance ( $R^2$  change = 9% to 13%) in fathers' self-acceptance, environmental mastery, and purpose in life.

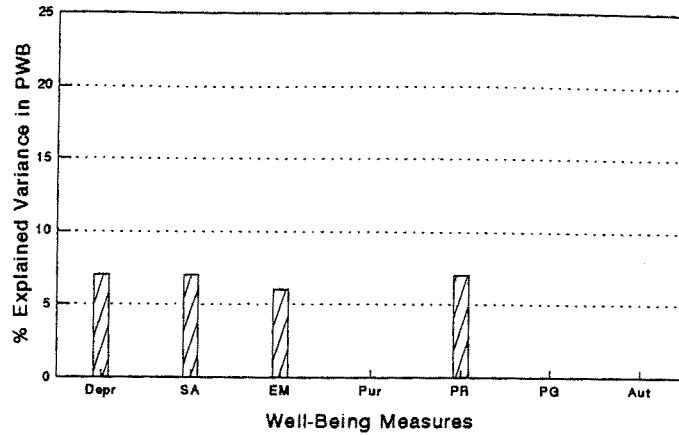
No Sex  $\times$  Comparison interactions emerged for fathers. However, in both the interpersonal and personal adjustment domains, the interaction results for fathers' self-acceptance and purpose in life ( $p < .11$  to .16) conformed to the pattern of results obtained

for mothers: Fathers whose daughters exceeded themselves had lower well-being than fathers who exceeded their daughters, but less variation was linked with comparisons with sons.

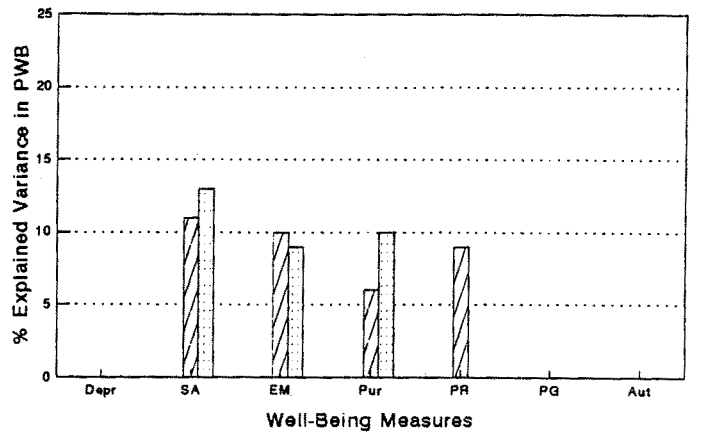
### Summary of Results

We predicted that parents would report greater attainment success in sons and greater interpersonal success in daughters. However, sons and daughters were considered to be equally well adjusted and equally adept in relationships, and had achieved roughly equivalent levels of education and occupational status. We also predicted that sons' attainment success and daughters' interpersonal success would predict parents' well-being. In fact, sons' attainment success predicted multiple parental well-being outcomes whereas daughters' attainment success failed to predict any. However, in the interpersonal and personal adjustment domains, sons' success tended to explain larger proportions of the variance in parents' well-being than was explained by daughters' success. Finally, we predicted that mothers' well-being would be more strongly linked to comparisons with daughters and that fathers' well-being would be more strongly linked to comparisons with sons. We ob-

Comparison with Sons



Comparison with Daughters



■ Attainment ▨ Interpersonal Skill □ Personal Adjustment

Note. Depr = Depression; SA = Self-Acceptance; EM = Environmental Mastery; Pur = Purpose in Life; PR = Positive Relations with Others; PG = Personal Growth; Aut = Autonomy

Fig. 5. Parent-child comparisons and fathers' well-being (PWB).

tained the hypothesized connections between mother-daughter comparisons and mothers' well-being. The connections were particularly strong for mother-daughter comparisons in the attainment domain. However, fathers' comparisons with daughters tended to explain larger proportions of the variance in parents' well-being than was explained by comparisons with their sons.

DISCUSSION

Prior studies have identified connections between midlife parents' views of their adult children and of themselves. The present investigation explored these connections, focusing on parents' evaluations of adult sons versus daughters. We speculated that parents' different expectations for sons versus

daughters might influence their assessments of children's success, and that these assessments would have differential linkages with parents' views of their own well-being.

### Evaluations of Children's Success

The hypothesis that parents would report different "success stories" for sons and daughters was not supported by the data. Instead, parents' success ratings for their sons and daughters were notably similar. While the absence of sex differences may arise from a variety of causes, one likely explanation is that times are changing. The sons and daughters in the current study represent a birth cohort that enjoyed achievement opportunities in *both* masculine and feminine domains as evidenced, in part, by their comparable levels of educational and occupational attainment. In addition, researchers have observed that contemporary parents report more similarities than differences between their sons and daughters than were reported by parents of earlier eras (Aberle & Nagle, 1952; Intons-Peterson, 1985). Thus, changing times may make parents less likely to view their children through sex-stereotypic lenses.

Despite these reports of similarities in the life success of sons and daughters, gender differences remain a part of this story. Although parents reported comparable achievement levels for their children, parental well-being was differentially related to evaluations of sons' versus daughters' success. Specifically, the data revealed that assessments of sons' success accounted for more variance in parent well-being not only in the attainment domain, as was predicted, but also in the other life domains. Interaction analyses further clarified that parents' well-being was more strongly tied to sons' than to daughters' perceived interpersonal relations.

Why was sons' *sex-atypical* success more closely linked with parents' well-being? We indicated earlier that *disconfirmation* of expectations has been shown to have greater affective consequence than confirmation (e.g., Carlsmith & Aronson, 1963). However, disconfirmation is not limited to failures to meet expectations; it may also involve exceeding expectations. For example, in the interpersonal domain, where daughters are expected to excel and sons are expected to "get by," parental expectations may be disconfirmed when daughters do poorly *or* when sons do very well. In the current study, we observed that parents rated their sons and daughters as having

comparable — and generally high — levels of interpersonal success. These ratings may reflect what was expected for daughters but may constitute a "pleasant surprise" for sons. Hence, the stronger linkage between sons' interpersonal success and parents' well-being may reflect the psychological benefits of seeing a child turn out better than expected. Additional data regarding parents' actual expectations for the life success of sons versus daughters are needed to confirm this interpretation.

It is also possible that daughters' achievement in the attainment domain exceeded parental expectations. Our data did show that daughters did as well as sons in years of education completed and in occupational status. However, no interaction effects were obtained between daughters' attainment and parents' well-being. A possible explanation is that parents were not asked to indicate how well or poorly their children had done in the attainment domain, but rather only to indicate years of education completed and the child's job responsibilities. Had parents provided more evaluative assessments of children's attainment (e.g., "How well has your daughter done in getting an education?"), as was done in the other life domains, ratings of daughters may have revealed a greater positive disconfirmation effect.

### Parent-Child Comparisons and Parental Well-Being

As predicted, social comparisons favoring adult children over their midlife parents were related to lower levels of well-being and higher levels of depression for both mothers and fathers in comparisons with both sons and daughters. In addition, gender-differentiated patterns of effects appeared to be linked to (a) the life domain in which the parent-child comparison was drawn and (b) the gender composition of the parent-child comparison dyad.

#### *Comparison Domains*

Comparisons with sons and daughters in the domains of personal adjustment and interpersonal relations predicted both mothers' and fathers' well-being. Paradoxically, however, attainment comparisons predicted mothers' well-being but failed to predict fathers' well-being.

Why were attainment comparisons salient for mothers' but not fathers' well-being and why were

interpersonal and adjustment comparisons salient for fathers' well-being when attainment comparisons were not? One explanation invokes theories of individual development at midlife. Jung (1933) and Neugarten and Gutmann (1968) have discussed the idea of gender crossover at midlife whereby men begin to identify with their nurturant sides and women begin to identify with their agentic sides. Thus, for midlife men, self-evaluations in the interpersonal domain may be particularly salient as are self-evaluations in the attainment domain for midlife women. Prior socialization and role responsibilities may prohibit efforts to develop these other sides earlier in life. The midlife push for self-evaluation coupled with possibly low levels of perceived competence in these newly important life domains may make men and women particularly vulnerable to unfavorable social comparisons. The fact that mothers had significantly lower educational and income levels than fathers and that fathers reported significantly lower levels of positive relations with others than mothers (see Ryff *et al.*, 1994) adds to this possible explanation.

#### *Same-Sex Comparisons*

We hypothesized that parent-child comparisons in same-sex dyads would better predict parent well-being than comparisons in cross-sex dyads. These same-sex comparison effects were, in fact, observed for mother-daughter dyads but not for father-son dyads. Specifically, in the attainment domain, mothers' reported self-esteem and environmental mastery were negatively related to the comparison outcome with daughters. That is, when they believed that they had exceeded their daughters' success, mothers' well-being was higher, yet when mothers believed that daughters had outdone themselves, they reported lowered well-being. In contrast, there was no relationship between mothers' well-being and the comparison outcome in mother-son dyads.

This finding may be related to differences in women's career opportunities for the mother and daughter cohorts. Demographic characteristics of the parent sample revealed that the mothers in this study were significantly less educated and had significantly lower income levels than the fathers, which is consistent with sex-role patterns for that cohort. In contrast, among the children, sons and daughters were virtually equivalent in terms of educational and occupational success. Thus, these moth-

ers may have watched their daughters grow into adulthood in an era quite different from their own early adulthood. While increased opportunities for women represent positive social change, such advances may leave older cohorts of women regretful about their own missed opportunities and, hence, vulnerable to negative self-evaluations when comparing themselves to their daughters.

In the interpersonal and adjustment domains, comparisons with daughters also explained more variance in mothers' well-being than comparisons with sons. Interaction analyses showed that mothers who perceived their daughters' adjustment was better than their own had lower levels of self-acceptance and a trend toward higher depression. No such differences between sons and daughters were obtained in the interpersonal domain, perhaps because mothers' own competence in the realm may have left less room for unfavorable comparisons.

On the paternal side, little support was found for the prediction that comparisons with sons would have greater predictive influence on the well-being of fathers. Neither comparisons with the attainment of sons nor daughters explained any variance in fathers' ratings of themselves. When comparisons were made in the interpersonal and adjustment realms, significant effects were obtained but here it was comparisons with daughters, not sons, that tended to explain more paternal variance. These outcomes may reflect, as described above, the heightened salience of these life domains for midlife fathers. They may also be tied to multiple meanings of the closeness construct in the self-evaluation maintenance model (Tesser, 1986).

Our original assumption was that same-sex dyads would constitute closer—and, thus, more salient—comparison units. It may be, however, that there are other salient meanings of closeness among midlife parents. For example, prior research has found that adult daughters, not sons, tend to maintain their attachments to parents. That is, daughters feel emotionally closer to their parents (Cicirelli, 1983), maintain kinship ties (Hagestad, 1987), and provide comfort (Aldous, Klaus, & Klein, 1985) and later-life care for their parents (Bankoff, 1983; Brody & Lang, 1982). Married adult sons, on the other hand, often have more frequent contact with their parents-in-law than with their own parents (Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Thus, comparison with daughters may loom larger in the well-being of both mothers and fathers because it is daughters to whom

parents are closer in the sense of emotional ties, frequency of contact, and proximity.

### Can Parents Provide Objective Reports About Their Children?

Because parents were the sole source of information about their children and themselves, it is possible that their own well-being could have biased their perceptions of children's success. Ultimately, time-ordered data are required to unravel this issue but other data from the current cross-sectional inquiry challenge this interpretation.

The premise of this research is that parents' *perceptions* of their adult children, accurate or not, will be related to perceptions of self. Nonetheless, it is important that parents' reports have some basis in reality and be somewhat accurate. Thus, we turned to their spouses, who shared similar information about adult children's lives, to assess the validity of the target parents' reports. As reported in Ryff *et al.* (1994), spouses were interviewed about their children approximately 1 year after the initial data collection. Correlation coefficients revealed a strong correspondence between target parents and spouses in their reports about children's personal adjustment, interpersonal relations, and educational attainment despite low correspondence between spouses' own levels of depression and psychological well-being. Such outcomes are inconsistent with the view that parents' own well-being determines how they see their children.

In the current study, parents' reports further revealed that children in the same family were viewed as separate and distinct individuals. That is, assessments of children in the same family were not highly and pervasively correlated with one another, as would be expected if parents' well-being had uniformly biased their reports. Similarly, in the current analyses, we found that the relationship between views of children's functioning and parent well-being *differed* as a function of a systematic difference among the children (i.e., gender). These findings are consistent with a recent meta-analysis by Richter (1992), which showed no evidence of distortion in depressed mothers' assessments of their own children. In combination, these different sources of evidence do not support the view that parents' well-being drives how they will perceive their children.

### Conclusions

In sum, we observed similarities in how parents evaluated sons and daughters, although sons' success proved a better predictor of parental well-being, particularly in the interpersonal and adjustment domains. Parent-child comparisons with daughters also showed strong predictive effects, especially for mothers' well-being.

Overall, our findings bring together broad issues of individual development, self and social processes, and, implicitly, social change. Parents' development may occur in tandem with children's. Thus, as parents advance through adulthood, life domains that were previously unimportant may become salient, making self-evaluations in these domains suddenly more challenging and consequential for well-being. In addition, family life must be viewed as an interdependent network of individuals who concurrently protect their individual interests while maintaining family ties. Current social psychological theory rarely addresses this intrafamilial complexity. Our findings call for a reconsideration of both the rules and expected outcomes for social processes and their affective consequences when applied to family relationships. Finally, discrepant opportunities from one cohort to the next, such as mothers' and daughters' different attainment prospects in the current study, may have implications for the well-being of older cohort members, who must accept that their own opportunities may have been limited. This observation underscores the need for attending to the historical context in which parents raise their children and simultaneously traverse the course of adulthood.

### APPENDIX

#### Note 1

In Ryff *et al.* (1994), adjustment combined measures of children's interpersonal and personal success. In the current formulation, these facets of adjustment were kept separate to sharpen the links to the sex-role socialization literature.

#### Note 2

Because interaction effects are statistically more difficult to detect than main effects (see



McClelland & Judd, 1993), we used the standard alpha level of .05 to identify significant interactions.

### Note 3

As we previously indicated, sons' adjustment ratings were significantly more variable than daughters' ratings, which may have inflated correlations between sons' adjustment and parents' well-being. To equate statistically both the ranges and variances for sons' and daughters' adjustment, we omitted the four lowest adjustment ratings for sons and found that variance explained by sons' adjustment ratings dropped only slightly (from 9–13% to 7–11%). This was still notably higher than the variance explained by daughters' adjustment ratings.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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