The Development of the Adult Filial Closeness Scale (AFCS): An Investigation of the Relationship between Self-Reported Closeness with Parents and Happiness

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Abstract
A vital element of psychological well-being, or happiness, is a good relationship with one’s parents. This study explored the relationship between adult filial closeness and happiness. To measure adults’ closeness to their parents, the Adult Filial Closeness Scale (AFCS) was developed, and its reliability and construct validity were verified with a sample of 75 participants, aged 18 to 71 (61.3% female). Happiness was measured using the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ). Male and female scores did not differ significantly on the AFCS and OHQ. The hypothesis that there would be a positive correlation between the AFCS and OHQ measures was not supported for participants at both the younger and older ends of the age spectrum; however, it was supported for the main adult group. In line with previous research, this study emphasises the role a close relationship between children and their parents has on the happiness of the offspring and on the success in many life activities, ranging from academic endeavours to maintaining healthy behaviours. Suggested future research should focus on overcoming the limitations of the study related to sampling and order effects.

Keywords
Filial closeness, relationship with parents, Adult Filial Closeness Scale, Oxford Happiness Questionnaire, happiness, secure attachment

Positive psychology strives to understand and improve psychological well-being. This refers to positive emotions including happiness and hope, positive traits including resilience and courage and positive institutions that enable human flourishing and optimal function (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). A recent paper in the current issues rubric of the February 2016 issue of InPsych, the bulletin of the Australian Psychological Society, summarised a 32-year longitudinal study into what factors predict a positive and happy life trajectory (Sanson, 2016). The research found that childhood and adolescent development play an important role, and the relationship with parents and other authority figures is one of four major factors in this area. Numerous other studies have found that happiness strongly correlates with extroversion, social skills and self-esteem (Argyle, 2013; Argyle & Lu, 1990; Argyle & Martin, 1991; Argyle, Martin, & Crossland, 1989; Cheng & Furnham, 2003). Extroversion, social skills and self-esteem, in turn, are correlated with secure early attachment (Argyle & Lu, 1990; Cheng & Furnham, 2003; Lee, Hamman, & Lee, 2007). Therefore, happiness can be expected to correlate with secure early attachment.

Family relationships and attachment have been shown to be relatively stable over time (Claes, 1998; Lee et al., 2007), therefore early attachment is assumed to be at least partially approximated by how close an adult respondent is to their parent (i.e., adult filial closeness). In other words, a good present relationship with one’s parents would be indicative of secure early attachment, which, in turn, is related to happiness. Therefore it is expected that happiness is correlated with adult filial closeness, aligning with previous research that states that good relationships with one’s parents are vital for psychological well-being (Cheng & Furnham, 2003; Lee et al., 2007). The purpose of the present study is to investigate the relationship of...
happiness with adult filial closeness.

Closeness is vital to human beings and therefore critical to relationship research (Dibble, Levine, & Park, 2012). Measures are available for adolescent filial closeness, parental closeness and adult social closeness (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989; Claes, 1998; Dibble et al., 2012; Hook, Gerstein, Detterich, & Gridley, 2003; Lee et al., 2007), but no measurement is available to specifically measure adult filial closeness. Therefore, the present study developed and validated a measure of adult filial closeness, that is, a measure of how close an adult respondent is to their parents.

A useful measure of filial closeness needs to consider several important aspects. An obvious contributor to closeness is physical proximity, as exemplified by number and duration of contact, frequency and type of shared activities, frequency of personal conversations and level of self-disclosure (Claes, 1998). Furthermore, closeness embodies affective, cognitive and behavioural interdependence between two people (Dibble et al., 2012). This is represented by frequency, strength and diversity of interaction (Berscheid et al., 1989) and mutual impact (Dibble et al., 2012). A measure of closeness should also consider intimacy, which is characterised by support, self-disclosure and affection (Hook et al., 2003).

The Adult Filial Closeness Scale (AFCS) was developed for this study as a measure of an adult’s closeness to their parents. The draft contained 20 items that measure the following aspects of filial closeness: frequency and duration of contact, frequency of shared activities, frequency of personal conversations, level of parental and filial self-disclosure, perceived strength of the relationship from parental and filial points of view, affective, cognitive and behavioural dependence of the parent on the child and vice versa, frequency and strength of impact on the child and on the parent and peer perception. However, following feedback from five peer reviewers, four items (relating to affective and behavioural dependence of child on parent, strength of impact of parent on child and duration of contact) were removed, as they were judged to be irrelevant to the assessed individual’s affect or subject to possible misinterpretation. Moreover, several items were modified to avoid ambiguity, and four items were reversed to create a more balanced scale. Lastly, the order of items was randomised using a random-number generator. The result was a 16-item questionnaire (see appendix).

Participants had to rate their agreement with each item on a six-point Likert scale ranging from one (“strongly agree”) to six (“strongly disagree”). This scale was chosen as it has no neutral option, which encourages participants to express a preference. Total scores (factoring reverse scores) ranged from 27 to 96, with higher values indicating more filial closeness.

The present study examined adult filial closeness and happiness, and it was hypothesised that there would be a positive correlation between the two. However, there are possible age confounds at both ends of the age spectrum. A younger age correlates with more favourable life events (e.g., graduation, wedding, birth of child, etc.) and better health and, therefore, with increased happiness (Argyle & Lu, 1990). Conversely, happiness has also been shown to increase with old age (Argyle, 2013). Older people experience less negative affect and distress and highest levels of life satisfaction in most areas except health (Headey & Wearing, 1992). Therefore, it would be expected to see increased happiness at both ends of the age spectrum, regardless of other influences. To control for age-related confounds, the sample was blocked into three age ranges: young adults (less than 25 years, N=7), adults (26 to 50 years, N=59) and older adults (above 50 years, N=9). The hypothesis that filial closeness is positively correlated with happiness was tested on the three age ranges.
Method

Participants

Participants included psychology students of the University of New England, Armidale, Australia, and other participants recruited via email and social media (Facebook, 2015). Data were collected from 75 participants (61.3% female) aged 18 to 71 (\(M=38.75, SD=10.80\)).

Materials

Participants’ levels of happiness were measured utilising the OHQ (Hills & Argyle, 2002), which was distilled from the Oxford Happiness Inventory (Argyle et al., 1989). The OHQ contains 29 items (e.g., “I feel that life is very rewarding”), which are scored on a six-point Likert scale ranging from one (“strongly agree”) to six (“strongly disagree”). Hills and Argyle (2002) validated their scale with a sample of undergraduate students (\(N=172\)), demonstrating high scale reliability (\(\alpha=0.91\)), as well as convergent validity with a number of well-known published scales. The AFCS, as described above, was utilised to measure participants’ closeness to their parents.

Procedure

The Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of New England, Armidale, Australia, granted ethics approval for this study. Participants were invited via email and social networking (Facebook, 2015) to participate in the survey. An anonymous online survey (Qualtrics, 2015) was constructed, informing participants of their rights and seeking consent to participate. Demographics were collected (i.e., age and gender), followed by administration of the AFCS and OHQ measures. Participants were prevented from backtracking, but time limits were not imposed. Results were analysed using SPSS (IBM Corp., 2015) with \(\alpha=0.05\).

Results

Reliability analysis

When assessing internal consistency of the AFCS, all 16 items were acceptable (\(\alpha=0.94\), with no negative inter-item correlations. Item 3 (“I feel my parents value their relationship with me”) performed best, as it had the highest item-total correlation, \(r(73)=.82\), and removing the item would have decreased the scale’s internal reliability slightly (\(\alpha=0.93\)). Item 1 (“Things my parents do or say have an emotional impact on me”) performed worst, as it had the lowest item-total correlation, \(r(73)=.22\) and, when deleted, the internal consistency increased marginally (\(\alpha=0.94\)). However, even the worst performing item still exhibited acceptable characteristics; therefore, all items were retained. Subsequent analyses were based on participants’ responses to all 16 items. For a summary see Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measure</th>
<th>Male (M (SD)) ((N = 29))</th>
<th>Female (M (SD)) ((N = 46))</th>
<th>Total (M (SD)) ((N = 75))</th>
<th>Cronbach’s (\alpha)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AFCS</td>
<td>72.66 (13.28)</td>
<td>74.22 (17.96)</td>
<td>73.61 (16.23)</td>
<td>.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OHQ</td>
<td>125.62 (21.25)</td>
<td>127.24 (21.40)</td>
<td>126.61 (21.22)</td>
<td>.87</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Descriptive Information and Cronbach’s \(\alpha\) for the Adult Filial Closeness Scale (AFCS) and the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ).
There were no gender differences on the two scales. Independent-samples t-tests were conducted to compare AFCS and OHQ measures for male and female participants. For both analyses, Levene’s Test was non-significant, therefore equal variances could be assumed. The difference between male and female scores was non-significant and small for both, the AFCS \( t(73) = -0.40, p = .688, 95\% \text{ CI } [-9.28, 6.15] \) \( d = -0.10 \) and OHQ \( t (73) = -0.32, p = .750, 95\% \text{ CI } [-11.71, 8.47] \) \( d = -0.08 \); see Table 1 for means and standard deviations). Therefore, gender was not controlled for in further analyses.

**Correlation Analysis**

Correlation analyses were performed blocked by age: young adults (18 to 25 years, \( N = 7 \)), adults (26 to 50 years, \( N = 59 \)) and older adults (51 to 71, \( N = 9 \)). For the younger age block, the AFCS and OHQ exhibited a small non-significant correlation \( r(5) = -0.01, p = .978, r^2 = .02 \). For the older age block, the AFCS and OHQ exhibited a medium to large non-significant correlation \( r(7) = -0.43, p = .246, r^2 = .19 \), indicating that the hypothesis that there would be a positive correlation between the AFCS and OHQ measures was not supported at the outer edge of the age spectrum. For the main age block, the AFCS and OHQ exhibited a significant medium-to-large correlation \( r(57) = .33, p = .012, r^2 = .11 \). Therefore, the hypothesis that there would be a positive correlation between the AFCS and OHQ measures was not supported for participants at both outer ends of the age spectrum; however, it was supported for the main adult sample.

**Discussion**

This study explored the relationship between adults’ self-reported closeness to their parents and happiness. In the process, the AFCS was developed, pilot-tested and verified as an internally consistent measure. Male and female scores did not differ significantly on either the AFCS or the OHQ. The hypothesis that there would be a positive correlation between the AFCS and OHQ measures was not supported for participants at both outer ends of the age spectrum; however, it was supported for the main adult sample. This supports the premise that happiness is correlated with adult filial closeness and aligns with Cheng and Furnham’s (2003) findings that happiness is related to the quality of the relationship with one’s parents, except for participants at the outer ends of the age spectrum.

Limitations to the current pilot study included the small sample size and the gender imbalance towards female participants. Furthermore, the large age range rendered the study vulnerable to age-related confounds, as happiness is reported to increase at both outer ends of the age spectrum. Younger age correlates with more favourable life events and better health and therefore with increased happiness (Argyle & Lu, 1990). Conversely, happiness has also been shown to increase with old age (Argyle, 2013), as older people experience less negative affect and distress and highest levels of life satisfaction in most areas except health (Headey & Wearing, 1992). Therefore, it would be expected to see increased happiness at both ends of the age spectrum, regardless of the relation with one’s parents. It is suggested to replicate this study utilising a large sample with better gender balance and a narrower age range. Moreover, the study consistently administered the AFCS before the OHQ. This might have potentially caused order effects; for instance, respondents may have tired as the study progressed (Cozby & Bates, 2012) and become less diligent in their self-reports on the last administered OHQ compared to the first administered AFCS. Future research might attempt to replicate this study utilising a counter-balanced design to control for fatigue and other order effects.

Closeness to one’s parents, as a proxy for early attachment, is related not just to happiness, but
also to success in many life activities: Success in activities ranging from academic endeavours to maintaining health interventions depends on the initiation and sustainability of desired coping behaviours, which are strongly influenced by self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977); self-efficacy, in turn, is influenced by individual personality traits, such as extroversion (see Vollrath, 2006 for a review); extroversion, social skills and self-esteem, in turn, are correlated with secure early attachment (Argyle & Lu, 1990; Cheng & Furnham, 2003; Lee, Hamman, & Lee, 2007). This further emphasises the importance of familial closeness for many aspects of life. Therefore, it is suggested that more research should be conducted in establishing reliable measures that allow for estimating early attachment at a later stage in life. This study exemplified but one such measure.

In conclusion, this study linked happiness with adult filial closeness. In line with previous research (Cheng & Furnham, 2003; Lee et al., 2007), this emphasises the role that a closer relationship with one’s parents has on the life-long happiness of the offspring. In the process, the AFCS was developed, and its reliability and validity were verified. Suggested future research should focus on overcoming the limitations of the study related to sampling and order effects.

Acknowledgment: The author wishes to express profound gratitude to Dr Ian Price and Sue Jessop for their helpful feedback on the manuscript.

References


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Appendix

**Adult Filial Closeness Scale (AFCS)**

Please circle - M / F  
Please write your age: ____________

**INSTRUCTIONS:**
Please read the following statements and indicate how much you agree or disagree by circling the corresponding number next to each statement below.

1 = strongly disagree  
2 = moderately disagree  
3 = slightly disagree  
4 = slightly agree  
5 = moderately agree  
6 = strongly agree

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item #</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
<th>Moderately Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Disagree</th>
<th>Slightly Agree</th>
<th>Moderately Agree</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Things my parents do or say have an emotional impact on me.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I don’t have a good relationship with my parents.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>I feel my parents value their relationship with me.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>I can usually depend on my parents when I have a problem.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>I feel good about the relationship I have with my parents.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>My parents often share personal information with me.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>I usually can’t be bothered to help my parents.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>My relationship with my parents is important to me.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Living close to my parents makes me happy.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>I’d rather avoid sharing activities with my parents.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>I often have personal conversations with my parents.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>I don’t have much contact with my parents.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>My parents are very affectionate towards me.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>It is natural to have close relationships with one’s parents.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>I have strong affection for my parents.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>I often disclose my private thoughts to my parents.</td>
<td>1 2 3 4 5 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This scale measures the respondent adult's closeness with their parents.

**Hypothesis:** High scores on the Adult Filial Closeness Scale will be positively correlated with high scores on the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire.

**Scoring:** A higher score indicates more closeness and a lower score indicates less closeness between the respondent and their parents.

**Reverse-score items:** 2, 7, 10, and 12.