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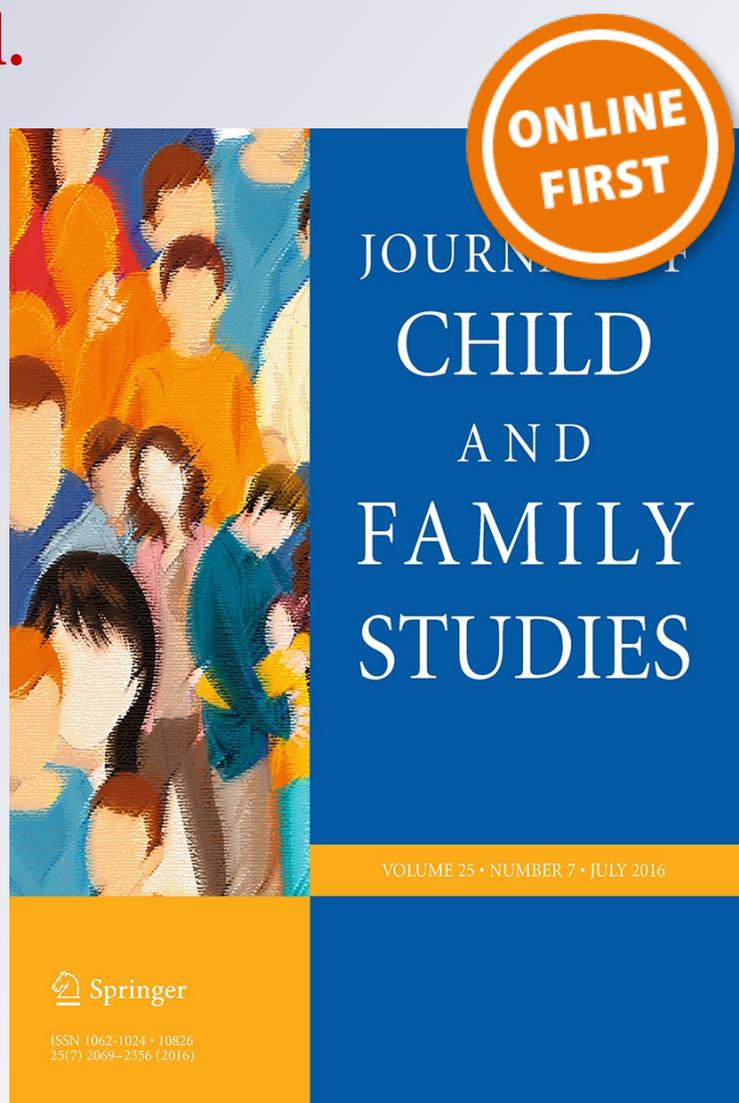
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Gender Differences in Parental Images and Intimate Relationships: A Northern Finland Sample

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Abstract One of the most important components of the developmental environment is the emotional atmosphere. Childhood experiences and perceptions of parental roles and behavior result in memory models and images, which may affect the children's relationships in adulthood. In the present study, the cross-sectional associations between childhood parental images and the quality of current intimate adult relationships were studied in a sub-study of a mother-child follow-up in northern Finland. The data were collected with a questionnaire mailed to 28–29-year-old adults, with a total of 337 replies. The present study included those respondents ($N = 253$) who were married or cohabiting (153 women, 100 men). Since offspring can be affected by gender-specific parenting patterns, the analyses were made separately for both genders. In women, supportiveness in both maternal and paternal images was associated with a balanced intimate relationship, the latter also being associated with a loving relationship and providing protection against quarrelsome and repressive-

submissive aspects of the relationship. In men, maternal supportiveness was linked with a balanced and loving intimate relationship and protected against a quarrelsome relationship. Paternal domination was associated with repressive-submissive relationships regardless of gender. In conclusion, the qualities of recalled childhood parenting are important to adult well-being in intimate relationships in a gender-specific manner. The specific importance of the father to the children's later life was also observed. This would indicate that supporting the relationship of the child with both parents is equally important for professionals working with children and families.

Keywords Gender differences · Family-of-origin experiences · Parent-child relationship · Parental images · Intimate relationship

Introduction

Life satisfaction, an important indicator of subjective well-being, is strongly linked with close relationships (Diener 2000; Diener et al. 2003). Contentment in adult relationships may stem from a positive atmosphere in the early family-of-origin (Conger et al. 2000). However, inconsistent results have been reported in previous studies on gender differences regarding contentment and intimate relationship as the root of emotional well-being, probably partly due to different study settings and cultural backgrounds (Fowers 1991; Ng et al. 2009; Shek 1995).

The importance of the child's growth environment and parent-child relationships for subsequent social relationships is stressed by many theories. The attachment theory emphasizes the quality of the child-caregiver relationship and the ability of caregivers to respond sensitively to a

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child's needs, suggesting their profound impact on a child's developing personality and perceptions of others and self (Bowlby 1977). Bowlby (1973) and Ainsworth et al. (1978) proposed that children continuously internalize their nursing experiences, resulting in an early attachment pattern which shapes later relationships with moderate similarities (Welch and Houser 2010). According to social learning theory, parenting that includes positive attention and praise reinforces positive behavior in a child (Matias et al. 2014; Patterson 1982), and an individual's behavior is learned in childhood by observing parents, especially in emotionally significant situations (Topham et al. 2005). These internalized important childhood impressions (Main et al. 1985) later guide interpretations and life expectations and affect the ways in which a person relates to others and finds satisfaction (Männikkö 2001).

In a previous Finnish longitudinal study (from age 8 to 36), emotional atmosphere—the child's experience rather than the parents' description—was the most important aspect in the growth environment (Pulkkinen 1996, 1994). Parents setting adequate boundaries, encouraging, helping, advising and being interested in their child, created a supportive growth environment. In general, taking into account a child's developmental needs enables secure attachment (Bowlby 1973, 1977), which has been linked with adult well-being and good social interactions and satisfying intimate relationships (Kiviniemi et al. 2011; McCarthy and Maughan 2010). On the other hand, a dominant and authoritarian environment with illogical emotional responses (Pulkkinen 1994, 2002) predisposes children to insecure attachment (dismissive, preoccupied, unresolved) and later social and adaptation problems (e.g. Cohn et al. 1992; McCarthy and Maughan 2010).

In previous studies, an offspring's gender has had an effect on how mothers and fathers treat their children and how children respond to the family environment (Belsky and Rovine 1988; Braungart-Rieker et al. 1999). However, according to Paquette (2004), fathers more than mothers tend—regardless of a child's gender—to surprise their children and to encourage risk taking while at the same time ensuring their children's security, enabling them to learn to defend themselves and to enter unfamiliar situations more confidently. In a study of 5-year-old children, fathers used more directly controlling language, whereas mothers preferred a more indirect approach (McLaughlin et al. 1980). Fathers also used significantly more imperatives towards their sons than their daughters (Gleason 1987). In another study, the father–toddler age son relationship was the least close and the mother–daughter relationship the closest in parent–child dyadic relations (Lovas 2005). The relationship between the elderly mother and her adult daughter was also emotionally intense, involving closeness and continuation as well as conflict (Fingerman 2001).

Even though the mother–daughter relationship appears to remain close throughout life, Levin and Currie (2010) found among Scottish adolescents that the boys and girls who reported easy communication with their father had the highest life satisfaction. On the other hand, although girls reported difficult communication with the father twice as often as with the mother, those girls with difficult communication with the mother had the lowest life satisfaction.

Cultural differences may contribute to parent–child interaction, parental upbringing and gender role. Attachment is said to be based on the universality of early parent–child interaction (Cassidy and Shaver 1999; Main 1990; Van Ijzendoorn and Sagi-Schwartz 2008), but research on attachment theory has mainly been conducted in Western cultures (Rothbaum et al. 2000). Thus, attachment patterns may be partly dependent on cultural expectations (Ainsworth 1989; Wei et al. 2004).

In most Western cultures, a relatively high level of independence and individualism is respected, whereas in Asian cultures collectivism and importance of acceptance from others is more prominent (Rothbaum et al. 2000; Wei et al. 2004). Gender roles according to Confucianism include expectation of obedience from a woman to her parents in childhood, to her husband in marriage, and to her son in old age (Chen and Chung 1994; Johnsrud 1995), whereas in Western cultures equality is more prominent, although not self-evident (Lee and Ono 2012). In Finland, parental roles were affected by military conflicts during World War II (1939–1945). Women's responsibilities broadened, and they had to go to work as well as take care of their children. After the war, their work shifted to factories along with rapid industrialization, while men had difficulties in adapting back to family life. This disturbance of family roles may have partly transferred to the next generations (Kujala 2003).

Attachment bonds in childhood link with other relationships (Bowlby 1969; Conger et al. 2000), especially with close relationships (Ainsworth 1989; Hazan and Shaver 1987, 1994; Nickerson and Nagle 2004). The way an individual is attached with peers and family has been intercorrelated among young adults (Bartholomew and Horowitz 1991), and safely attached adults may have better success in adult romantic relations and vice versa (Bartholomew 1997; Cassidy 2000; Hazan and Shaver 1987). However, culture-dependent gender roles may affect expectations of and experiences in adult intimate relationships. Among Chinese married couples, men's marital satisfaction was linked to the longevity of the relationship, whereas for women the length of the marriage was negatively related to marital adaptability and satisfaction (Shek 1995). Among Euro-American married couples, men reported higher marital satisfaction (Ng et al. 2009; Fowers

1991) and obtained greater mental health benefits from marriage than women (Fowers 1991). In Chinese Malaysians, marital satisfaction predicted life satisfaction in both genders (Ng et al. 2009). In Finland, currently married men were generally more satisfied with their intimate relationship than cohabiting, non-married men, but no such a difference was found among women (Kinnunen and Pulkkinen 2003).

The widely held assumption that women experience lower marital satisfaction than men was tested recently in the meta-analysis of Jackson et al. (2014). Wives were only slightly less satisfied in their marital relationships than husbands, and only when samples included clinical cases with marital therapy. Gender differences were not found when only community-based samples were analyzed. In an extensive study by Lee and Ono (2012) with data from 27 countries, self-reported happiness of married and cohabiting individuals varied cross-nationally according to societal gender beliefs. The traditional gender beliefs were associated with increased happiness in both genders, but more clearly among men. Finland was among the egalitarian countries where gender did not have a major effect on happiness.

The effects of environmental expectations and early rearing experiences cannot easily be separated. However, childhood affective events—regardless of culture or gender role expectations—can have a profound effect on the quality of close relationships in adulthood (Collins and Read 1990). Among Caucasian married couples, a woman's positive childhood relationship with her father was linked to higher marital satisfaction and stability (Strait et al. 2013). In Brazil, men reported healthier childhood relationships, whereas women more commonly reported negative life experiences (such as physical and sexual abuse) and were also more commonly dissatisfied with their partner (Falcke et al. 2008).

Regardless of gender, well-functioning models in the family-of-origin have been related to better marital adjustment and vice versa (Sabatelli and Bartle-Haring 2003). In North Central Iowa, an 11-year follow-up (Conger et al. 2000) suggested that nurturing parenting predicted warm, supportive, and low-hostility behavior towards the romantic partners in young adults. Overall positive family-of-origin experiences and parent-child relationships have also been linked with higher sexual satisfaction among predominantly Caucasian married couples (Strait et al. 2013). In a Finnish study of Kiviniemi et al. (2011), the attributes of supportive parenthood included respect for the child and warm interaction. A positive parental image was associated with subsequent positive experiences in an individual's intimate relationship, whereas parental domination was linked with a negative intimate relationship.

Previous studies have emphasized the importance of childhood experiences and secure attachments for positive later close relationships (Ainsworth 1989; Hazan and Shaver 1987, 1994; Nickerson and Nagle 2004). Childhood memories of parents have been measured with a 23-item version of the Emotional Warmth scale that includes the components of parental rejection, emotional warmth and protection (Arrindell et al. 1999). On the other hand, marital satisfaction as a global evaluation of the marriage has been defined in two dimensions. Marital dissatisfaction reflects an evaluation of the marriage with salient negative features and a relative absence of positive features, whereas the opposite is true for marital satisfaction (Bradbury et al. 2000). Furthermore, Lawrence et al. (2011) reviewed previous studies and suggested that marital quality could include dimensions of intimacy, sexuality, support, power and conflict solving as important aspects in intimate relations.

Based on the previous studies, fathers and mothers appear to treat their sons and daughters somewhat differently, which can be expected to lead partly to divergent parental images and expectations in men's and women's subsequent adult relationships. To the best of our knowledge, gender differences in the associations of parental images and quality in intimate relationships among Finnish adults have not been examined previously. We expect our study to add knowledge about this issue, in the particular case of a homogeneous population with a high level of equality between men and women.

The first aim of the present study was to measure the positive and negative aspects of parental images (at the memory level). The second aim was to measure how these parental images are related to the quality of the intimate relationship in each gender. We assumed that maternal supportiveness is recalled more clearly by daughters (H1a), and paternal domination by sons (H1b). We also expected that in Finland, a rather egalitarian country, only minor differences in the quality of the intimate relationship by gender would be detected (H2). Our third hypothesis was that loving and balanced intimate relationships are associated with paternal supportiveness in women (H3a) and with maternal supportiveness in men (H3b), and that paternal domination is linked with the quarrelsome and repressive-submissive aspects of the intimate relationships of the men (H3c).

Method

Participants

The data of this study are part of a longitudinal study, "The Mother-Child Follow-up Study 1971-1972," conducted in

northern Finland by the Clinic of Child Psychiatry of the University and University Hospital of Oulu. Figure 1 presents the flow-chart for the study sample, its participants and three phases. *In the first phase*, the study participants consisted of women ($N = 491$) who gave birth to their healthy first or second child during 1971–1972 in Oulu University Hospital. The number of children was 495, including four pairs of twins. Of the mothers, 310 were primiparous and 181 were biparous, and their mean ages were 22.2 and 25.6 years, respectively (Fig. 1, Phase 1). *The second study phase* (Phase 2 i.e. the 1st follow-up) was conducted in 1978–1979, in which 353 mothers returned the questionnaires concerning their 354 children (one pair of twins) (Seitamo and Wasz-Höckert 1981; Seitamo et al. 1979). *In the third study phase* the sample consisted of the grown-up offspring born in 1971–1972. In 2000, they were sent the questionnaires ($n = 472$). A total of 337 (68.1 %) of the 28–29 years old adults responded.

The present study included only those respondents who were married or cohabiting, i.e. 100 (69.4 %) of the men and 153 (79.7 %) women (Fig. 1). In the study population ($N = 253$), gender-specific differences were found with

respect to education ($p = 0.048$) and work status ($p < 0.001$) (Table 1). Women had a university or college level education more often than men, whereas men were almost twice as often employed full time. A total of 85 women (55.6 %) and 43 men (43.0 %) had children and 27.5 % of the women were on maternity leave, which in Finland can last up to 3 years.

Procedure

In the first study phase (Fig. 1) of the mother–child follow-up study (1971–1972), the mothers responded to questionnaires after giving birth. They reported their current marital status, family income and the education of both parents. In the second study phase (1978–1979), mothers responded to posted questionnaires also including questions concerning their child and family situation. In the third study phase (2000), the address information for the offspring of the mothers from Phase 1 was obtained from the National Population Register Centre. Nine of the offspring had died and 14 addresses could not be settled. The questionnaire was sent with questions on the respondent's

Fig. 1 Flowchart of the study population

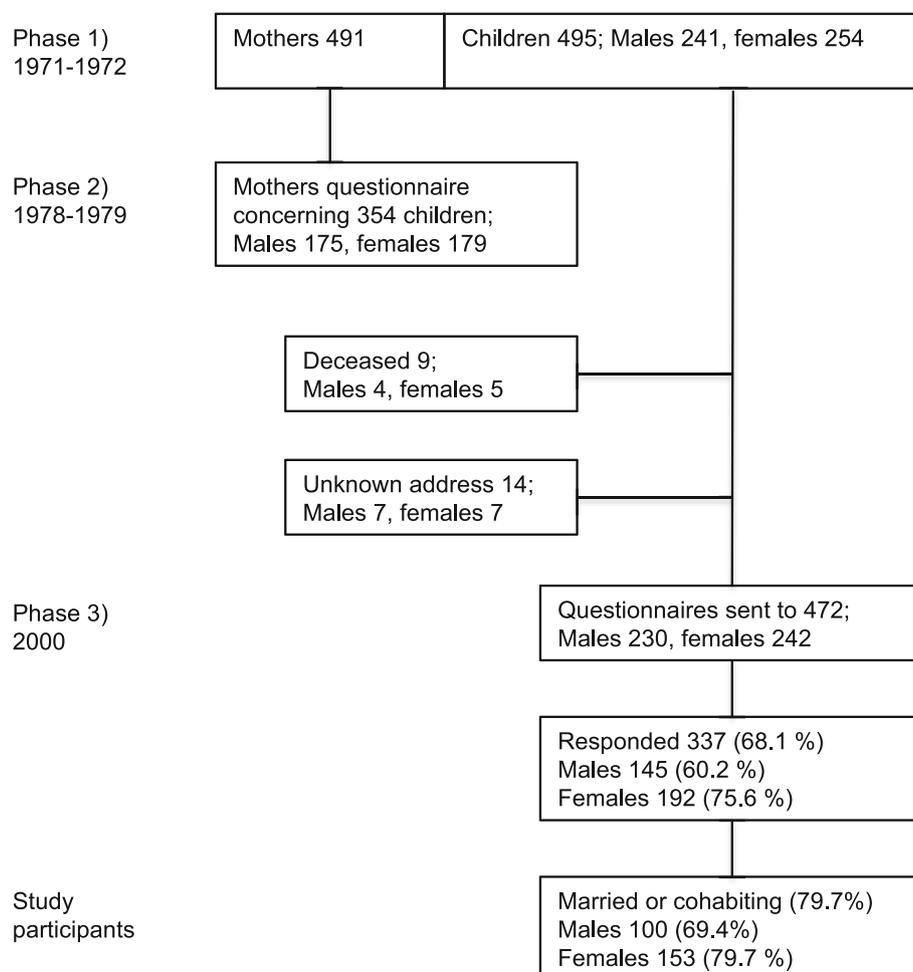


Table 1 Characteristics of the study subjects by gender

	Women		Men		<i>p</i>
	<i>n</i>	(%)	<i>n</i>	(%)	
Marital status					0.214
Married	78	51.0	43	43.0	
Cohabiting	75	49.0	57	57.0	
Education					0.048*
University	28	18.3	13	13.0	
University of applied sciences	11	7.2	8	8.0	
College level	40	26.1	18	18.0	
Secondary	37	24.2	41	41.0	
Incomplete	25	16.3	8	8.0	
No vocational education	10	6.5	10	10.0	
Missing	2	1.3	2	2.0	
Work situation					<0.001***
Working full-time	63	41.2	78	78.0	
Working part-time	8	5.2	–	–	
Self-employed/entrepreneur	5	3.3	11	11.0	
Student	13	8.5	5	5.0	
Maternity/paternity leave	42	27.5	–	–	
Unemployed/laid-off	15	9.8	5	5.0	
Retired	1	0.7	–	–	
Other	6	3.9	–	–	
Missing			1	1.0	
Total <i>N</i> = 153	153	100.0	100	100.0	

p* < 0.05; *p* < 0.01; ****p* < 0.001

childhood (growth environment, experiences of the family-of-origin, parental images at the memory level) and current life situation (health, intimate relationships, children and upbringing attitudes). As the present study focuses on intimate relationships, we included only married and cohabiting respondents.

Measures

Assessment of a Respondent's Parental Images

The parental images were assessed with a question, "How did you experience your childhood father/mother?" Altogether 17 different traits were analyzed with a five-level Likert scale (1 = *never*, 2 = *seldom*, 3 = *sometimes*, 4 = *fairly often*, 5 = *very often*). Principle Component Analysis (PCA) revealed the latent constructs of the clusters of traits, which measured parental images and reflected childhood interaction with the parents. Five of the traits were used to construct a *supportive* image and six to construct a *dominating* image (Tables 5 and 6 in "Appendix"). The traits in parental *supportiveness* were: (1)

supporting hobbies; (2) supporting schoolwork; (3) giving positive feedback; (4) arranging pleasant surprises; (5) warmth and tenderness. *Dominating* parenthood was characterized by (1) demandingness; (2) punishment; (3) authoritative; (4) possible violence; (5) coldness and insensitivity; (6) incoherency (Kiviniemi et al. 2011). The sum scores for the supportive and dominating images were calculated as the means of their corresponding trait scores. The Cronbach's alpha for the maternal supportive image was 0.86 and dominating image 0.78, while the respective alphas for paternal images were 0.85 and 0.76 (Kiviniemi et al. 2011).

The supportive subscale of our study resembles the Emotional Warmth subscale (EW) of the short version (Arrindell et al. 1999, 2005) of the originally Swedish Egna Minnen Beträffanden Uppförstran scale (EMBU; My Memories of Upbringing) (Perris et al. 1980). Five of the six themes of the EW in the short EMBU (s-EMBU) were included in our scale. Correspondingly, five themes of the Rejection subscale of the s-EMBU were included in our Dominating subscale. The s-EMBU has been validated and used in different cultures (Arrindell et al. 1999, 2005).

Assessment of a Respondent's Own Intimate Relationship

In the present study, the quality of intimate relationship was evaluated with the study question, "How do you grade the following traits of your intimate relationship?" Altogether 18 different traits were evaluated on a scale of 1–5 (1 = *hardly not at all*, 2 = *a little*, 3 = *somewhat*, 4 = *pretty much*, 5 = *very much*). Four constructs for the quality of an intimate relationship were formed based on principal component analysis (PCA), two of them describing negative aspects (*quarrelsome* and *repressive–submissive*) and two of them positive aspects (*loving* and *balanced*) (Table 7 in "Appendix").

The *quarrelsome relationship* had nine traits: (1) quarrels; (2) disagreements; (3) mutual bitterness; (4) jadedness; (5) pouting, "silent treatment" (speechlessness or muteness); (6) lack of understanding each other; (7) lack of love; (8) lack of mutual trust; (9) difficulties in approaching each other. The *loving relationship* had six traits: (1) dependence on each other; (2) togetherness; (3) working together; (4) feelings of fellowship; (5) understanding each other; (6) love. The *balanced relationship* had four traits: (1) feeling that life has a purpose; (2) willingness to forgive; (3) dealing with disagreements by discussing together; (4) ease of approaching each other. The *repressive–submissive relationship* included two traits of the themes of commanding and submission: (1) study subject's submission to his/her spouse's will; (2) spouse's submission to study subject's will (Kiviniemi et al. 2011). The construct scores for the quality of intimate relationship were calculated as

the mean score of the corresponding traits included in the cluster. The Cronbach's alpha for the quarrelsome relationship was 0.90, and correspondingly for the loving relationship 0.82, balanced relationship 0.68, and repressive–submissive relationship 0.71 (Kiviniemi et al. 2011).

Positive and negative dimensions in the quality of an intimate relationship have been emphasized by several investigators (Bradbury et al. 2000; Fincham and Linfield 1997; Henry et al. 2007; Kiecolt-Glaser and Newton 2001; Umberson et al. 2005), and our analyses also revealed positive and negative quality aspects, similar to the themes presented in the review of Lawrence et al. (2011). They concluded that the quality of an intimate relationship includes intimacy (sense of closeness, interdependence, sharing, love, affection and mutual comfort; i.e. aspects of the *loving relationship* in our study), sexual relationship (not included in our study), support (quality, adequacy and match of mutual support; i.e. aspects of the *balanced relationship*), power (power across a variety of areas in family life; i.e. aspects of the *repressive–submissive relationship*), and conflict solving (dimensions of conflicts and arguments, aggression or withdrawal during arguments, conflict recovery; i.e. aspects of the *quarrelsome relationship*).

The mean scores for the intimate relationship were divided into two classes based on the distribution of the study subjects: 25 % representing negative (lack of loving and lack of balance or highly quarrelsome and highly repressive–submissive) and 75 % positive (highly loving and highly balanced or scarcely quarrelsome and scarcely repressive–submissive) and average sections of the intimate relationship assessments. The dichotomy was used partly due to the skewness of the distribution of items and partly in order to compare the most negative qualities of the intimate relationship to other relationships.

Data Analyses

Principal component analysis (PCA) with varimax rotation was used to construct the components of parental images and intimate relationships. Differences between the categorical variables were tested with the Chi Square test, and the Mann–Whitney *U* test was used for variables with non-normal distribution. *p* values <0.05 were regarded as significant.

Results

No significant differences were found in parental images by gender, except that the men's recalled perception of their fathers was more dominating than the women's ($p = 0.045$) (Table 2). This difference was significant only between cohabiting women and men [means (SD) women 2.31 (0.6) vs. men 2.67 (0.7); $p = 0.003$], being non-significant between married women and men. Having children did not change the pattern between the genders. When both genders were analyzed together, the study subjects perceived their mothers as having been more supportive than their fathers [means (SD): mother 3.43 (0.8) vs. father 3.07 (0.8); $Z = -7.082$; $p < 0.001$] and their mothers as less dominating than their fathers [means (SD): mother 2.35 (0.6) vs. father 2.50 (0.7); $Z = 2.971$; $p < 0.003$].

Women perceived their intimate relationships as more loving ($p = 0.032$) and more balanced ($p = 0.006$) than men, whereas men reported their relationships as more quarrelsome ($p = 0.027$) and experienced more repressiveness towards/from their spouse ($p < 0.001$) (Table 2). Cohabiting was linked more strongly than being married with a quarrelsome intimate relationship both in women [means (SD): married = 1.6 (0.5); cohabiting = 1.9 (0.6);

Table 2 Mean and standard deviation of sum scores (SD) of parental images and intimate relationship by gender (Mann–Whitney *U* test with *p* values)

Parental image ^a	Women			Men			<i>p</i>
	<i>n</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Maternal image							
Supportive	151	3.4	0.9	100	3.5	0.7	0.774
Dominating	149	2.3	0.7	98	2.4	0.6	0.365
Paternal image							
Supportive	143	3.1	0.9	98	3.0	0.7	0.565
Dominating	146	2.4	0.7	97	2.6	0.6	0.045*
Intimate relationship ^a							
Quarrelsome	152	1.8	0.6	100	1.9	0.5	0.027*
Loving	150	4.1	0.6	97	4.0	0.6	0.032*
Balanced	150	4.2	0.6	97	4.0	0.6	0.006**
Repressive–submissive	152	2.1	0.8	99	2.6	0.8	<0.001***

p values concern the difference between women and men

* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

^a Scale 1–5

$p = 0.007$] and in men [means (SD): married = 1.7 (0.4); cohabiting = 2.0 (0.5); $p = 0.021$]. Being married was linked more than cohabiting with a loving [means (SD): married = 4.2 (0.5); cohabiting = 3.9 (0.6); $p = 0.022$] and balanced intimate relationship [means (SD): married = 4.2 (0.5); cohabiting = 3.8 (0.6); $p = 0.001$] in men, whereas women showed a similar trend only with respect to the balanced relationship [means (SD): married = 4.3 (0.6); cohabiting = 4.1 (0.6); $p = 0.056$]. A repressive–submissive intimate relationship was not associated with relationship status either in women or in men (data not shown).

In women, perceived maternal ($p = 0.032$) and paternal ($p = 0.001$) supportiveness was associated with balanced relationships (Table 3; Fig. 2). Paternal supportiveness was also associated with a loving relationship ($p = 0.013$) and was reflected in the lack of negative aspects, i.e. quarrelsome and repressive–submissive sides in the intimate relationship ($p = 0.001$; $p = 0.007$). Paternal domination was reflected in repressiveness and/or submissiveness in women's intimate relationships ($p = 0.023$).

In men, perceived maternal supportiveness was reflected in a loving ($p = 0.022$) and balanced ($p = 0.026$) intimate relationship and there was a trend for maternal supportiveness to protect from a quarrelsome relationship ($p = 0.050$) (Table 4; Fig. 3). Perceived paternal domination was linked with a repressive–submissive ($p = 0.028$) and non-significantly with a non-balanced ($p = 0.065$) intimate relationship.

Discussion

The present study found gender differences in parental images and in self-perceptions of an individual's own intimate relationship among young adults in Finland, which is a Nordic society with a homogenous population and high equality between genders. To the best of our knowledge, gender differences between recalled parental images and the quality of current intimate relationships have not been examined previously in young Finnish adults. Among women, supportiveness of both parents was associated with a balanced intimate relationship, but only paternal supportiveness with a loving intimate relationship. The latter also protected women from a quarrelsome and repressive/submissive relationship, whereas paternal domination appeared to predispose them to repressiveness and/or submissiveness in their intimate relationships (Fig. 2). Among men, perceived maternal supportiveness was reflected in a loving and balanced intimate relationship and it protected from a quarrelsome relationship,

Table 3 Maternal and paternal images (mean, SD) and self-assessment of current intimate relationship in married and cohabiting women (Mann–Whitney U test with p values)

	Quarrelsome			Loving			Balanced			Repressive–submissive																			
	Yes ^b		p	Yes ^a		p	Yes ^a		p	No ^a		p																	
	n	Mean SD		n	Mean SD		n	Mean SD		n	Mean SD		n	Mean SD															
<i>Women</i>																													
Maternal image																													
Supportive	124	3.4	0.9	27	3.3	0.8	0.367	126	3.4	0.9	23	3.3	0.8	0.548	119	3.5	0.9	30	3.1	0.8	0.032*	112	3.4	0.8	39	3.4	0.9	0.770	
Dominating	121	2.3	0.7	28	2.4	0.5	0.281	123	2.3	0.7	24	2.4	0.6	0.356	117	2.3	0.7	30	2.4	0.6	0.198	110	2.3	0.6	39	2.5	0.8	0.166	
Paternal image																													
Supportive	116	3.2	0.9	27	2.6	0.7	0.001***	120	3.2	0.9	21	2.7	0.9	0.013*	113	3.2	0.9	28	2.6	0.7	0.001**	104	3.2	0.8	39	2.8	1.0	0.007***	
Dominating	119	2.4	0.6	27	2.6	0.9	0.330	122	2.4	0.6	22	2.6	0.9	0.289	116	2.4	0.6	28	2.6	0.8	0.367	107	2.4	0.7	39	2.6	0.7	0.023*	

p values relate to the difference of the parental images between (a) and (b)

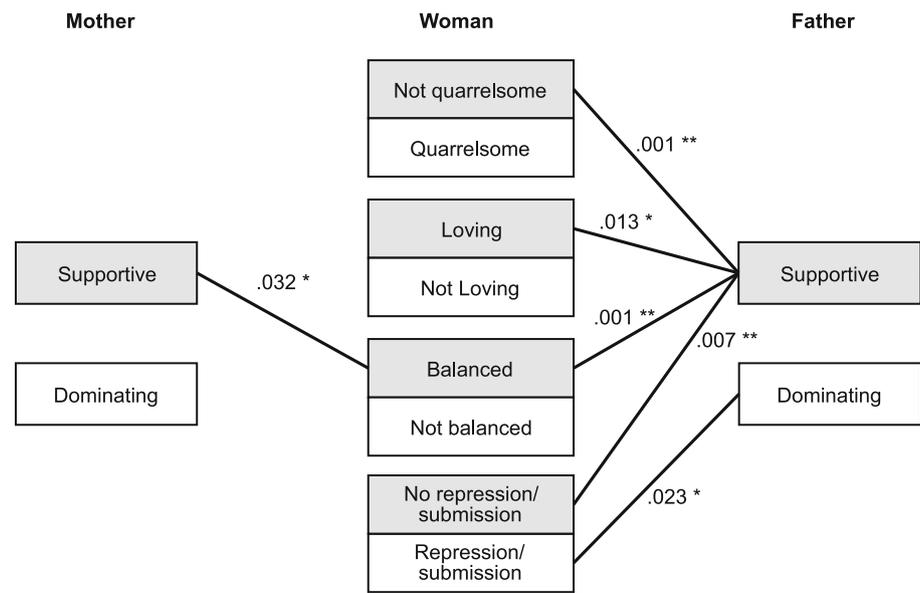
* $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$; *** $p < 0.001$

^a Including 75 % of cases representing positive relationship experiences

^b Including 25 % of cases representing negative relationship experiences

^c Scale 1–5

Fig. 2 The relationships between maternal and paternal images and women's self-assessments of their intimate relationship



*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

whereas paternal domination was associated with a repressive–submissive relationship (Fig. 3).

The positive and negative aspects of parental images at the memory level were measured by recalled experiences of childhood parents. We found no gender differences in parental supportive images, in contrast to previous studies reporting on the closeness of the mother–daughter relationship (Fingerman 2001; Levin and Currie 2010), and also to our assumption (H1a) that maternal supportiveness would be reported more clearly by the daughters. However, our finding that men recalled their fathers as being somewhat more dominating was consistent with previous findings of paternal controlling communication (Gleason 1987; McLaughlin et al. 1980), and consistent with our assumption (H1b) that paternal domination is experienced more among the sons.

Women perceived their intimate relationships as more balanced and more loving than men, whereas men reported more negative qualities (disagreements/repression–submission problems). This contradicted the previous results of men being more satisfied in their intimate relationship (Fowers 1991; Ng et al. 2009; Shek 1995) and our assumption (H2) of equal quality in intimate relationships between genders. It should be noted that a balanced or loving relationship in the present study included positive aspects (such as ease of approaching, feelings of fellowship and striving to deal with disagreements and mutual dependence), but not the overall satisfaction with marriage (Fowers 1991; Ng et al. 2009; Shek 1995).

Study settings with different cultural backgrounds (Falcke et al. 2008; Ng et al. 2009) and societal gender beliefs (Lee and Ono 2012) may affect the results. It is

possible that somewhat different aspects of intimate relationships are emphasized in northern European cultures, where women value educational and financial independence even within close relationships. We suggest that especially in comparison with women, the emphasis on repression and submission in men's reports of their intimate relationship in the present study may correspond to the Finnish egalitarian societal beliefs concerning gender (Lee and Ono 2012). Even if equality is emphasized, higher female education and the tendency towards high female independence in society may introduce emotionally challenging demands for men.

In both genders, cohabiting was related more often to a quarrelsome relationship than being married, while especially in men, high commitment to the relationship (marriage) was associated with a balanced and loving relationship. In Finland, about a quarter of all couples are not married but live in common-law marriages (cohabiting) (Official Statistics of Finland 2013). However, regardless of the marital status, the level of happiness has been rather high in Finland (Lee and Ono 2012). In northern European cultures, an intimate relationship is based on love and on free will. If the couple does not want to be together, economic independence will provide them with an opportunity to leave the relationship.

Internalization of parents and early attachment patterns are suggested to shape a child's relationships in adulthood (Ainsworth et al. 1978; Bowlby 1973, 1977; Welch and Houser 2010). Thus, parental images could be associated with the quality of adult intimate relationships (McCarthy and Maughan 2010). Our results supported these expectations and were mostly in agreement with previous studies

Table 4 Maternal and paternal images (mean, SD) and self-assessment of current intimate relationship in married and cohabiting men (Mann–Whitney *U* test with *p* values)

	Quarrelsome				Loving				Balanced				Repressive–submissive															
	Yes ^b		No ^b		Yes ^a		No ^b		Yes ^a		No ^b		Yes ^b		No ^a													
	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	<i>p</i>	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	<i>p</i>	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	<i>p</i>	<i>n</i>	Mean	SD	<i>p</i>												
<i>Men</i>																												
<i>Maternal image</i>																												
Supportive	71	3.6	0.6	29	3.3	0.7	0.050	78	3.6	0.6	19	3.1	0.7	0.022*	68	3.6	0.7	29	3.2	0.7	0.026*	42	3.5	0.7	57	3.5	0.6	0.809
Dominating	69	2.3	0.6	29	2.4	0.5	0.358	76	2.3	0.5	19	2.5	0.6	0.135	66	2.3	0.5	29	2.4	0.5	0.304	41	2.3	0.5	56	2.4	0.6	0.417
<i>Paternal image</i>																												
Supportive	70	3.1	0.7	28	2.9	0.8	0.239	77	3.1	0.7	18	2.8	0.8	0.148	66	3.1	0.7	29	2.9	0.7	0.316	42	3.1	0.7	55	3.0	0.8	0.185
Dominating	69	2.5	0.6	28	2.8	0.7	0.100	76	2.5	0.6	18	2.7	0.7	0.311	65	2.5	0.6	29	2.8	0.7	0.065	42	2.4	0.7	54	2.7	0.6	0.028*

p values relate to the difference of the parental images between (a) and (b)

p* < 0.05; *p* < 0.01; ****p* < 0.001

^a Including 75 % of cases representing positive relationship experiences

^b Including 25 % of cases representing negative relationship experiences

^c Scale 1–5

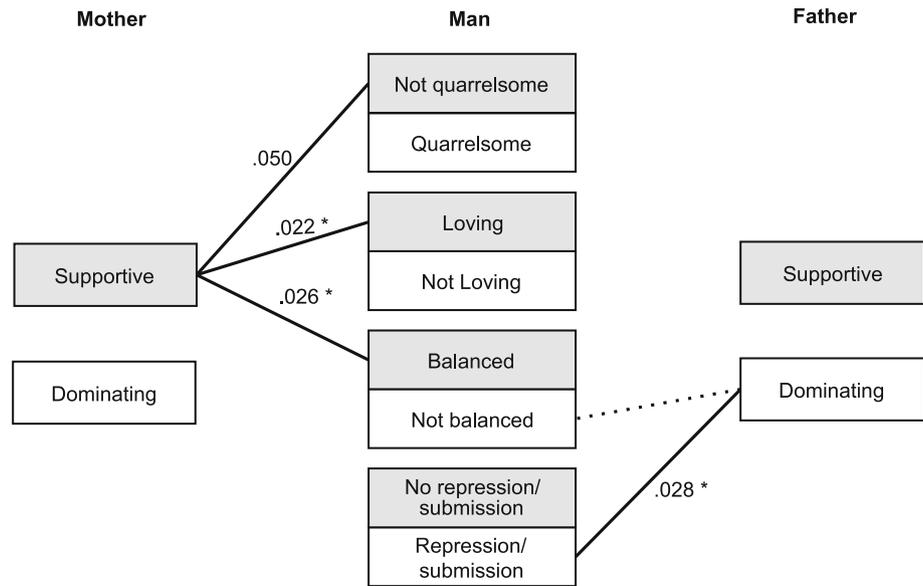
(Cohn et al. 1992; McCarthy and Maughan 2010). Secure attachment status (reflected in positive, supportive parental images) was associated with higher quality in intimate relationships (loving and balanced) and insecure attachment (reflected in negative, dominating parenthood) with poor quality (quarrelsome and repressive–submissive).

Parental supportiveness in women and maternal supportiveness in men was important for a positive and balanced perception of intimate relationships in adulthood. However, paternal supportiveness also supported a loving relationship in women and protected them from the quarrelsome and repressive–submissive components of the intimate relationship (Fig. 2). This corresponds with our assumption (H3a) and with previous results of Strait et al. (2013), who highlighted the importance of paternal images in the daughter’s relationship satisfaction. Correspondingly, our findings concerning maternal supportiveness manifesting in the background of the son’s higher quality of intimate relationship (balanced/loving/non-quarrelsome) (Fig. 3) are in line with our assumption (H3b) and with previous studies reporting that higher levels of marital quality are associated with men’s positive perceptions of their childhood relationship with their mother (Strait et al. 2013).

Paternal domination associating with the repressive–submissive aspects of the adult intimate relationship regardless of gender are partly comparable with our assumption (H3c) and with the previous findings that high stress levels in the childhood family can undermine adult marital relationships (Umberson et al. 2005), and that childhood family problems can lead to tenuous adult attachment relationships (Sabatelli and Bartle-Haring 2003). Children learn to expect certain things from relationships based on their prior experiences with adult caregivers. These expectations and scripts could be carried into their adult relationships (Bowlby 1969; Strait et al. 2013). We also note that the upbringing trend of Finnish fathers has included authoritarian trends reflecting the previous generation’s war experiences and their difficulties in adapting to family life (Kujala 2003).

The importance of the mother–child relationship has been emphasized and cannot be denied, especially in very early childhood. In the present study, maternal supportiveness in childhood appeared to be important for the adult intimate relationship, but childhood paternal images had even more multidimensional associations than childhood maternal images, especially in the case of women’s intimate relationships. Thus, our findings reinforce the importance of the mother, but also the importance of fathers’ involvement in childcare and participative interaction for the child’s future well-being. Further research is needed to examine the subtleties of attachment continuity and the relationship between childhood parenting and adult

Fig. 3 The relationships between maternal and paternal images and men's self-assessments of their intimate relationship



*** $p < .001$; ** $p < .01$; * $p < .05$

intimate relationship satisfaction. Finally, clinicians and educators should acknowledge the importance of the family-of-origin and the unique significance of both mothers and fathers in the intimate adult relationships of the offspring.

Limitations

Instead of extensive measures of multiple dimensions of marital quality collected at multiple data points (Umberson et al. 2005), we were limited in the data-based analysis in this cross-sectional study to some assessments of positive and negative dimensions of marital experience. For example, our data lacked measures of marital stability and global assessments (e.g. Fincham and Bradbury 1987). The majority of our study participants had positive memories of their parents and positive assessments of their current intimate relationships. Present mood and life satisfaction can create some bias on how childhood parental images are recalled and perceived. However, the homogenous population of Nordic democratic society, with a high level of

equality between men and women, is ideal for studying the gender-specific differences in parental images and intimate relationships.

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Funding The Ethical Committee of the Northern Ostrobothnia Hospital District in Finland approved the study.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest None.

Appendix

See Tables 5, 6 and 7.

Table 5 Solutions of principal component analysis (PCA) of mother image variables

	Components			
	Supportive	Dominating	Sociable	Hard-working ^b
% of Variance (total 59.9 %)	22.3	15.8	14.3	7.6
Eigenvalue	5.64	2.05	1.31	1.19
Cronbach's alpha	0.857	0.78	0.641	0.361 ^b
Mother image variables	n = 335	n = 328	n = 326	n = 334
Supported, took part in hobbies	0.813	-0.062	0.123	0.086
Supported with school work	0.801	-0.088	0.191	0.095
Gave acknowledgement, praise	0.760	-0.135	0.290	-0.007
Arranged pleasant surprises	0.704	0.016	0.005	-0.052
Warm, tender	0.680	-0.229	0.388	0.004
Demanding	0.144	0.806	0.026	0.131
Punished	-0.052	0.760	-0.126	-0.148
Authoritative	-0.166	0.741	0.029	0.126
Hit when angry, was violent	-0.388	0.521	-0.067	-0.160
Cold, insensitive	-0.450	0.510	-0.437	0.128
Incoherent, erratic and unpredictable	-0.454	0.462	-0.219	-0.029
Talkative	0.160	0.043	0.765	0.030
Happy	0.444	-0.238	0.672	-0.013
Spontaneous in relationships	0.034	0.011	0.656	0.003
Domestic ^a	0.146	-0.104	0.522 ^a	0.091
Committed to work ^b	-0.108	0.075	-0.101	0.852
Diligent ^b	0.278	-0.056	0.364	0.660

Loadings of variables to form each component are indicated in bold

Extraction method: principal component analysis; Rotation method: varimax with Kaiser normalization. Rotation converged in five iterations

^a Excluded from component because of low communality

^b "Committed to work" and "Diligent" were used as variables instead of hard-working component, because of low Cronbach's alpha

Table 6 Solutions of principal component analysis (PCA) of father image variables

	Components				Communalities
	Supportive	Dominating	Sociable	Hard-working ^b	
% of Variance (total 61.1 %)	20.9	16.9	13.5	9.9	
Eigenvalue	5.25	2.37	1.58	1.19	
Cronbach's alpha	0.852	0.764	0.735	0.598	
Father image variables	n = 319	n = 319	n = 315	n = 321	
Supported, took part in hobbies	0.818	0.011	0.095	-0.022	0.679
Supported with school work	0.843	-0.066	0.091	0.115	0.737
Gave acknowledgement, praise	0.814	-0.112	0.237	-0.021	0.732
Arranged pleasant surprises	0.620	-0.060	0.289	0.061	0.476
Warm, tender	0.603	-0.242	0.433	-0.035	0.611
Demanding	0.191	0.657	0.009	0.326	0.574
Punished	-0.006	0.736	-0.036	-0.005	0.543
Authoritative	-0.077	0.743	-0.059	0.331	0.671
Hit when angry, was violent	-0.185	0.650	0.012	-0.332	0.568
Cold, insensitive	-0.426	0.540	-0.378	-0.091	0.625
Incoherent, erratic and unpredictable	-0.292	0.623	-0.118	-0.215	0.534
Talkative	0.262	0.018	0.817	-0.008	0.736
Happy	0.394	-0.228	0.739	0.053	0.756
Spontaneous in relationships	0.099	0.037	0.733	0.064	0.553
Domestic ^a	0.301 ^a	-0.281	0.149	0.008	0.192
Committed to work ^b	-0.186	0.152	0.092	0.774	0.665
Diligent ^b	0.225	-0.125	0.007	0.820	0.738

Loadings of variables to form each component are indicated in bold

Extraction method: principal component analysis; Rotation method: varimax with Kaiser normalization. Rotation converged in five iterations

^a Excluded from component because of low communality

^b "Committed to work" and "Diligent" were used as variables instead of hard-working component, same as mother image variables, for comparison

Table 7 Solutions of principal component analysis (PCA) of intimate relationship variables

	Components				Communalities
	Quarrelsome	Loving	Balanced	Repressive/submissive	
% of Variance (total 63.18 %)	24.57	15.31	13.92	9.38	
Eigenvalue	7.327	1.618	1.371	1.056	
Cronbach's alpha	0.900	0.821	0.680	0.707	
Relationship variables	n = 299	n = 294	n = 294	n = 298	
Quarrels	0.846	-0.086	0.029	0.060	0.727
Disagreements	0.767	-0.079	-0.133	0.038	0.613
Bitterness towards each other	0.731	-0.254	-0.143	0.072	0.624
Jadedness	0.653	-0.389	-0.194	0.066	0.620
Pouting, "silent treatment"	0.652	0.041	-0.187	0.226	0.512
Dependence on each other	0.030	0.744	-0.021	0.184	0.588
Togetherness	-0.280	0.671	0.165	-0.221	0.606
Working together	-0.188	0.614	0.379	-0.216	0.603
Feeling of fellowship	-0.435	0.558	0.414	-0.011	0.672
Understanding each other	-0.596	0.492	0.255	-0.063	0.667
Love	-0.521	0.490	0.399	-0.037	0.672

Table 7 continued

	Components				
	Quarrelsome	Loving	Balanced	Repressive/submissive	
Mutual trust	-0.568	0.383	0.438	-0.047	0.663
Ease of approaching each other	-0.477	0.353	0.498	-0.075	0.605
Feeling that life has a purpose	-0.227	0.207	0.715	-0.140	0.626
Willingness to forgive	-0.358	0.049	0.689	0.105	0.615
My striving to deal with disagreements by discussing together	0.065	0.088	0.629	-0.043	0.409
My submission to my spouse's will	0.263	-0.148	0.009	0.812	0.750
My spouse's submission to my will	-0.012	0.061	-0.087	0.888	0.800

Loadings of variables to form each component are indicated in bold

Extraction method: principal component analysis; Rotation method: varimax with Kaiser normalization. Rotation converged in five iterations

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