

Abstract

Self-concept is theorised to reflect how people perceive themselves as evaluated by the others (“the looking glass self”), and oftentimes such perception was more congruent with people’s own appraisal of themselves rather than with the other’s actual appraisals (Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979). Such perceptions are likely to be internalised from early parent-child experiences, forming schematic mental representations about the self in relation to others, and thus affecting personal development and future relationships (Bowlby, 1969; Baldwin, 1992). In the present study, the idea of the relational self-schema was studied in the parent-child context and as an automatic, implicit social-cognition, operationalised as the strength of association between self and being rejected versus being accepted by others. We focused on examining whether mothers’ relational self-schema would have an effect on the way they parent, in a way that those who resonated more readily with interpersonal rejection would demonstrate more critical and harsh parenting towards their children in a laboratory observational task. Parenting stress was hypothesised as a potential moderating variable that served to remind of the relational quality and affects accompanying parenthood and to activate relational self-schema, exacerbating the aforementioned effect on negative parenting. From the behavioural and self-report data of 115 parent-child dyads in Hong Kong, we failed to find evidence for our hypotheses. However, additional analyses found that parenting stress and past experience of negative parenting (paternal abuse) reported by the mothers could predict their negativity shown at the parent-child interaction task. Explanations on the findings along the theory of intergenerational transmission of child maltreatment, limitations of the current study, as well as the implications were discussed.