The association between parental images and satisfaction in intimate relationships in a Northern Finland sample

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ABSTRACT

Objectives. Experiences in one’s family of origin, especially the relationship to one’s parents, supposedly form the basis of relationships in adulthood. The connection between traumatic childhood events and later life has been studied intensively, whereas average childhood growth experiences have been given less attention. The aim of this study was to find out the association between images of the mother and father and the psychosocial well-being of young adults from the perspective of satisfaction in intimate relationships.

Study design. Cross-sectional study.

Methods. The research is a part of the Oulu University Hospital "Mother-Child Follow-up Study 1971–1972". The follow-up data were collected from the young adults (n=337) in 2000 by way of mailed questionnaires, which included 17 questions about the participants’ images of their parents and 18 questions about their intimate relationship satisfaction. In this study we used attachment theory as a theoretical frame of reference.

Results. Mental images of dominating parents were associated with quarrelsome intimate relationships, and the image of a dominating father, with repressive/submissive and less balanced relationships. Mental images of diligent and sociable parents were associated with a loving and balanced relationship, and the image of supportive parents, with a balanced relationship. Parental diligence was associated with a less quarrelsome relationship.

Conclusion. The young adults’ mental images of their parents were associated with their intimate relationship satisfaction. Positive mental images of the father, in particular, seemed to protect young adults from a quarrelsome and repressive/submissive intimate relationship.

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Keywords: family of origin, attachment, parent-child relationship, parenthood, marital satisfaction, mental representation, mental image, intimate relationship
INTRODUCTION

The association between experiences in one’s family of origin and early interaction with well-being in adulthood has been well covered in research during the last 2 decades. For the most part, the research has explored the relationship between traumatic childhood events and subsequent life. Domestic violence and victimization have been connected to subsequent behaviour problems, social maladjustment and aggressiveness (1). The association between divorce and the child’s externalizing and internalizing behaviour has been suggested to be partially mediated by depressive/withdrawn parenting (2). Parental depression has been associated with depression in childhood or adolescence (3); parental alcohol or drug addiction, with externalizing or depressive disorders in childhood or adolescence (4); and the death of 1 or both parents, with the child’s depression and alcohol or other substance abuse (5). In addition, experiences of domestic violence and physical punishment have been connected to trouble in future intimate relationships (6), as has childhood sexual abuse (7).

Falke, Wagner and Mosmann (2008) used questionnaires to study the connection between family-of-origin experiences and the marital adjustment of 542 middle-class Brazilians. They found that favourable family-of-origin experiences and a positive opinion of their parents’ relationships was connected to better quality in the participants’ own marital relationships. However, experiences in the participants’ families of origin explained only 10.8% of the quality of their marital relationships (8–10). Sabatelli and Bartle-Haring (2003) studied how both spouses’ experiences of their own families of origin uniquely affected their experiences of their marital relationship. For both husbands and wives, well-functioning models in their families of origin were notable factors in better marital adjustment, and vice versa (11–13).

An individual’s own developmental history is regarded as 1 factor affecting mating and marital satisfaction. Here an adult’s attachment is considered to relate comprehensively, and mainly unconsciously, to one’s way of living in an intimate relationship (14–16). John Bowlby (1907–1990), a child psychiatrist and psychoanalyst and the creator of attachment theory, raised the importance of a child’s growing environment to her/his development. He emphasized how separation from one’s mother and the loss of a mother’s love can threaten child development. Bowlby also proposed that children continuously internalize their nursing experiences in such a way that early attachments will shape later extra-familiar relationships (17–19). After Bowlby, many researchers have been interested in how experiences of early childhood are transferred into the mind as memory models of oneself and others, which later in life will guide perceptions, expectations and interpretations – and consequently behaviour – in different situations and interactive relations (16,20–23). As well, many studies based on attachment theory have examined whether the types of attachment formed in childhood correspond to the types of attachment formed in adulthood, especially those created in intimate relationships (14,24–29).

Previous studies indicate the association between traumatic events in childhood and problems in adulthood (30–32), but less evidence has been collected on the effect of various normal growth experiences on adult well-being. The association between experiences in the family of origin and marital satisfaction from anything wider than a problem-based perspective has been studied somewhat (8,11) but, as far as we know,
not in the circumpolar area. Circumstances in the North are somewhat different. Nature is more severe and rapid urbanization attracts the young to the cities, thus young people's contact with their own family may remain distant. This creates special challenges for the well-being of families in the circumpolar region. It is therefore justified to investigate whether experiences in northern youths' families of origin remain in their minds as internal representations, and whether these are associated with subsequent relationships and intimate relationship satisfaction. Internal representations may be particularly important for circumpolar people who live in sparsely populated areas, where young adults often have to leave their families of origin and their growing environments at a very young age to find work or to begin their studies.

In this study, we wanted to examine the association between normal childhood experiences and well-being in adulthood using data collected from the homogeneous population of a Nordic democratic welfare country. The data from “The Mother-Child Follow-up Study 1971–1972” offer the possibility to examine the association between one's mental images of one's parents and intimate relationship satisfaction from a northern Finnish perspective – and add the possibility of comparing the results with other studies.

**MATERIAL AND METHODS**

The data of this study are a part of the 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. The participants of the study were women who had come to Oulu University Hospital during 1971–1972 to give birth to their healthy first or second child (33). The actual study was preceded by a pilot study in the 1960s, which included 63 post-partum mothers. When their children had reached the age of 5, a pilot follow-up study was conducted that included 50 mothers (33–35). The actual study examined the physiological reactions of 491 healthy post-partum mothers to a child's cry. The number of children was 495, including 4 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) (33,36).

The first follow-up study was conducted in 1978–1979 (Fig. 1, Phase 2), in which 353 mothers returned the questionnaires concerning 354 children (1 pair of twins) (34). The sample used in this study consisted of the grown-up offspring born in 1971–1972 who attended the second follow-up study in 2000 (Fig. 1, Phase 3). At that time, the questionnaires were sent to 472 participants of which 337 young adults responded, which equals 68.1% of the initial sample. Twelve of them came from single-parent families. The participants' marital statuses, levels of education and work situations are shown in Table I. The unmarried individuals are divided into those who answered the relationship questions (n=41) and those who did not answer (n=36); the questionnaire asked that currently single participants answer on the basis of their most recent intimate relationships.

The aim of this study was to find out how participants’ mental images of their mothers and fathers were associated with the participants’ psychosocial well-being, from the perspective of marital or intimate relationship satisfaction. The mental images of the participants’ parents were assessed by asking, “How did you perceive your childhood father/mother?” The participants were asked to grade 17 different traits of their parents
**Table 1.** Description of the participants.

| Marital status       | n   | %    | Education            | n   | %    | Work situation                  | n   | %    |
|----------------------|-----|------|----------------------|-----|------|----------------------------------|-----|------|
| Married              | 121 | 35.9 | University           | 53  | 16.0 | Working full-time                | 194 | 57.9 |
| Cohabiting           | 132 | 39.2 | Polytechnic          | 26  | 7.8  | Working part-time                | 12  | 3.6  |
| Unmarried, answered  | 41  | 12.1 | College level        | 77  | 23.3 | Self-employed/ entrepreneur      | 20  | 6.0  |
| Unmarried, did not answer | 36  | 10.7 | Secondary            | 96  | 29.0 | Student                          | 29  | 8.7  |
| Separated/divorced   | 5   | 1.5  | Incomplete           | 51  | 15.4 | Maternity/paternity leave        | 44  | 13.1 |
| Widowed              | 1   | 0.3  | No vocational educ.  | 28  | 8.5  | Unemployed/laid off              | 28  | 8.3  |
| Unknown              | 1   | 0.3  |                      |     |      | Retired                          | 2   | 0.6  |
|                      |     |      |                      |     |      | Other                            | 6   | 1.8  |
| **Total**            | 337 | 100.0|                      | 331 | 100.0|                                  | 335 | 100.0|
| **NA**               | –   | NA   |                      | 6   | NA   |                                  | 2   |      |
| **Total**            | 337 | 100.0|                      | 337 | 100.0|                                  | 337 | 100.0|

a Unmarried, answered the relationship questions on the basis of an earlier intimate relationship.

b Unmarried, did not answer the relationship questions.

NA=A few participants did not answer every question.

**Figure 1.** The data in the different phases of the study.
as they experienced them during their growing years, using a 5-level scale analysed in the following order: 1 = never, 2 = seldom, 3 = sometimes, 4 = fairly often, 5 = very often. The questions about participants’ mothers were posed separately from questions about their fathers (Tables II and III). To evaluate intimate relationship satisfaction, the following study question was chosen: “How do you grade the following aspects of your intimate relationship?” Here the participants were asked to grade their intimate relationship satisfaction using 18 different items on a scale of 1 to 5, where 1 = hardly or not at all, 2 = a little, 3 = somewhat, 4 = pretty much, 5 = very much (Table IV).

The study question was approached from the perspective of attachment theory. The statistical methods used were principal component analysis (PCA) and the Mann-Whitney U-test. The principal component analyses were done using Varimax rotation separately for the mental image items of mothers, fathers and intimate relationships. Paying attention to the skewedness of the data, the reliability of the PCA solution was assured by running a number of requisite control analyses. The obtained (PCA) components were interpreted and named after the rotation by the most strongly loaded variables (37–39). The PCA gave 4 components describing participants’ mental images of their mothers and fathers: 1. supportive; 2. dominating; 3. sociable; and 4. hard-working. Four different components describing intimate relationship experiences were also obtained: 1. quarrelsome; 2. loving; 3. balanced; and 4. repres-sive/submissive. Using the results of the PCA, sum variables were drawn for both the mental images and the relationship variables, and the variables were accepted to the sum if their factor loading was 0.45 or more. The absolute value of the sum variables was divided by the number of variables included, thus the range of the ratio scale became 1–5. After that, the mental images of mothers and fathers were treated as continuous variables. The intimate relationship components were divided by the means into 2 classes: class zero (0), which included 75% of the cases representing positive relationship experiences, and class one (1), which included 25% of cases representing negative relationship experiences. In addition, those with missing intimate relationship responses were analysed.

RESULTS

Communality values describe how much of the variation of a single perceived variable can be explained using the principal components of the PCA solution (max 1.0). If the values do not fit under the limit of 0.5, they measure each principal component fairly reliably. Cronbach’s alpha is a coefficient of consistency and measures how well a set of variables or items measures a single, unidimensional, latent construct. Alpha can take values between negative infinity and 1 (37,38). In this study, a limit value of 0.6 was used. Communality values for the PCA solution of the mother images ranged between 0.432–0.754 and the Cronbach’s alpha values for component reliability were between 0.361–0.857 (Table II). The communality values for the PCA solution of the father images ranged between 0.476–0.756 and the Cronbach’s alpha values were between 0.598–0.852 (Table III). The communality values for the PCA solution of the intimate relationship variables ranged between 0.498–0.852 and the Cronbach’s alpha values were between 0.680–0.900 (Table IV).

The PCA solution of the mother image variables gave 4 components (Table II). The PCA solution of the father image variables gave 5
components, in whose solution the dominating component was split into 2 components. For the analogy, the father image solution was forced into a 4-component solution (Table III). Altogether, the principal components described 59.9% of the variation in the mother image variables and, correspondingly, 61.1% of the variation in the father image variables. The variable “domestic” loaded on different components in the mother and father image solutions, getting a low communality value in both of them; therefore it was left out of the sum variables. Thus, mainly analogous solutions were brought out for each of the 4 components describing images of the participants’ mothers and fathers. The images of mothers and fathers were named by the essence of the components (1) supportive, (2) dominating, (3) sociable and (4) hard-working. However, because of the low Cronbach’s alpha value of the mothers’ “hard-working” component, we decided to use the single variables “Committed to work” and “Diligent” instead of a common sum variable for both the mother and father images to facilitate comparison.

The attributes of supportive parenthood included respect for the child and warm interaction. This was linked to support in schoolwork, participating in the child’s hobbies, acknowledgment and praise, arranging nice surprises and being tender and warm. Emphasizing one’s authoritarian state and crossing the child’s borders – for instance, by being authoritative, punishing and demanding – were features of dominating parenthood, and some of these parents might also hit their children or become violent when angry. In addition, these parents were linked to coldness, insensitiveness and incoherency. The typical traits of sociable parenthood were happiness, talkativeness and spontaneity in relationships.

### Table II. Solutions of principal component analysis (PCA) of mother image variables.

| Components          | Supportive | Dominating | Sociable | Hard-working$^{a}$ | Communalities |
|---------------------|------------|------------|----------|---------------------|---------------|
| % 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      | 0.780      | 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               | 0.688         |
| Supported with schoolwork | 0.801      | -0.088     | 0.191    | 0.095               | 0.696         |
| Gave acknowledgement, praise | 0.760      | -0.135     | 0.290    | -0.007              | 0.680         |
| Arranged nice surprises | 0.704      | 0.016      | 0.005    | -0.052              | 0.498         |
| Warm, tender         | 0.680      | -0.229     | 0.388    | 0.004               | 0.665         |
| Demanding            | 0.144      | 0.806      | 0.026    | 0.131               | 0.687         |
| Punished             | -0.052     | 0.760      | -0.126   | -0.148              | 0.618         |
| Authoritative        | -0.166     | 0.741      | 0.029    | 0.126               | 0.593         |
| Hit when angry, was violent | -0.388     | 0.521      | -0.067   | -0.160              | 0.453         |
| Cold, insensitive    | -0.450     | 0.510      | -0.437   | 0.128               | 0.670         |
| Incoherent, erratic and unpredictable | -0.454     | 0.462      | -0.219   | -0.029              | 0.468         |
| Talkative            | 0.160      | 0.043      | 0.765    | 0.030               | 0.614         |
| Happy                | 0.444      | -0.238     | 0.672    | -0.013              | 0.705         |
| Spontaneous in relationships | 0.034      | 0.011      | 0.656    | 0.003               | 0.432         |
| Domestic$^{c}$       | 0.146      | -0.104     | 0.522$^{c}$ | 0.091               | 0.313         |
| Committed to work$^{b}$ | -0.108     | 0.075      | -0.101   | 0.852               | 0.754         |
| Diligent$^{b}$       | 0.278      | -0.056     | 0.364    | 0.660               | 0.648         |

Extraction method: Principal component analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization. Rotation converged in 5 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 III. Solutions of principal component analysis (PCA) of father image variables.

| Components | Supportive | Dominating | Sociable | Hard-working<sup>b</sup> |
|------------|------------|------------|----------|--------------------------|
| % 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 |
| Supported with schoolwork | 0.843 | -0.066 | 0.091 | 0.115 |
| Gave acknowledgement, praise | 0.814 | -0.112 | 0.237 | -0.021 |
| Arranged nice surprises | 0.620 | -0.060 | 0.289 | 0.061 |
| Warm, tender | 0.603 | -0.242 | 0.433 | -0.035 |
| Demanding | 0.191 | 0.657 | 0.009 | 0.326 |
| Punished | -0.006 | 0.736 | -0.036 | -0.005 |
| Authoritative | -0.077 | 0.743 | -0.059 | 0.331 |
| Hit when angry, was violent | -0.185 | 0.650 | 0.012 | -0.332 |
| Cold, insensitive | -0.426 | 0.540 | -0.378 | -0.091 |
| Incoherent, erratic and unpredictable | -0.292 | 0.623 | -0.118 | -0.215 |
| Talkative | 0.262 | 0.018 | 0.817 | -0.008 |
| Happy | 0.394 | -0.228 | 0.739 | 0.053 |
| Spontaneous in relationships | 0.099 | 0.037 | 0.733 | 0.064 |
| Domestic<sup>a</sup> | 0.301<sup>a</sup> | -0.281 | 0.149 | 0.008 |
| Committed to work<sup>h</sup> | -0.186 | 0.152 | 0.092 | 0.774 |
| Diligent<sup>b</sup> | 0.225 | -0.125 | 0.007 | 0.820 |

Extraction method: Principal component analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.

<sup>a</sup> Excluded from component because of low communality.

<sup>b</sup> “Committed to work” and “Diligent” were used as variables instead of Hard-working component, for comparison with mother image variables.

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

| Components | 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 |
| Disagreements | 0.767 | -0.079 | -0.133 | 0.038 |
| Bitterness towards each other | 0.731 | -0.234 | -0.143 | 0.072 |
| Jadedness | 0.653 | -0.389 | -0.194 | 0.066 |
| Pouting, “silent treatment” | 0.652 | 0.041 | -0.187 | 0.226 |
| Dependence on each other | 0.030 | 0.744 | -0.021 | 0.184 |
| Togetherness | -0.280 | 0.671 | 0.165 | -0.221 |
| Working together | -0.188 | 0.614 | 0.379 | -0.216 |
| Feeling of fellowship | -0.435 | 0.558 | 0.414 | -0.011 |
| Understanding each other | -0.596 | 0.492 | 0.255 | -0.063 |
| Love | -0.521 | 0.490 | 0.399 | -0.037 |
| Mutual trust | -0.568 | 0.383 | 0.438 | -0.047 |
| Ease of approaching each other | -0.477 | 0.353 | 0.498 | -0.075 |
| Feeling that life has a purpose | -0.227 | 0.207 | 0.715 | -0.140 |
| Willingness to forgive | -0.358 | 0.049 | 0.689 | 0.105 |
| My striving to deal with disagreements by discussing together | 0.065 | 0.088 | 0.629 | -0.043 |
| My submission to my spouse’s will | 0.263 | -0.148 | 0.009 | 0.812 |
| My spouse’s submission to my will | -0.012 | 0.061 | -0.087 | 0.888 |

Extraction method: Principal component analysis. Rotation method: Varimax with Kaiser normalization. Rotation converged in 5 iterations.
The principal component solution of the intimate relationship variables produced 4 components that were named according to the nature of the component as follows: (1) quarrelsome, (2) loving, (3) balanced, and (4) repressive/submissive. On the whole, the principal components of the intimate relationship variables described 63.2% of the variation in the variables (Table IV). Characteristic of a quarrelsome relationship was a negative emotional charge towards each other, which included disagreements, jadedness and "silent treatment." In addition, it was linked to low willingness to understand each other. Love and mutual trust were not characteristic of a quarrelsome relationship.

Table V. Connection between maternal and paternal images and the participant's experiences in an intimate relationship.

| Type of relationship | Quarrelsome | Loving | Balanced | Repressive / submissive | Intimate |
|----------------------|-------------|--------|----------|-------------------------|----------|
|                      | No^a        | Yes^b  | No^c      | Yes^d                  | No^e     |
| Mother/Father image variables | n | Mean | SD | n | Mean | SD | p | n | Mean | SD | p | n | Mean | SD | p | n | Mean | SD | p | n | Mean | SD | p | n | Mean | SD | p | n | Mean | SD | p |
| Mother | Supportive | 219 | 3.5 | 0.8 | 79 | 3.2 | 61 | 3.4 | 61 | 3.3 | 0.8 | <0.001 | 182 | 3.5 | 0.8 | 115 | 3.5 | 0.7 | ns | 298 | 3.5 | 0.8 | 37 | 3.6 | 0.7 | ns |
| Dominating | 214 | 2.6 | 0.8 | 80 | 2.5 | 0.6 | 0.037 | 227 | 2.3 | 0.6 | 62 | 2.5 | 0.6 | ns | 209 | 2.3 | 0.6 | 80 | 2.4 | 0.6 | ns | 179 | 2.3 | 0.6 | 114 | 2.4 | 0.6 | 0.014 |
| Sociable | 215 | 3.9 | 0.7 | 76 | 3.8 | 0.7 | 0.036 | 209 | 3.9 | 0.7 | 77 | 3.6 | 0.7 | 0.002 | 176 | 3.9 | 0.7 | 114 | 3.8 | 0.7 | ns | 291 | 3.8 | 0.7 | 35 | 3.9 | 0.7 | ns |
| Diligent | 219 | 4.6 | 0.7 | 79 | 4.4 | 0.8 | 0.015 | 231 | 4.6 | 0.6 | 62 | 4.3 | 0.8 | <0.001 | 183 | 4.6 | 0.7 | 114 | 4.5 | 0.7 | ns | 298 | 4.5 | 0.7 | 36 | 4.4 | 0.7 | ns |
| Committed to work | 219 | 3.3 | 1.2 | 80 | 3.6 | 1.0 | ns | 232 | 3.4 | 1.2 | 62 | 3.5 | 1.0 | ns | 213 | 3.4 | 1.2 | 115 | 3.4 | 1.2 | ns | 298 | 3.4 | 1.2 | 37 | 3.3 | 1.1 | 0.042 |
| Father | Supportive | 208 | 3.2 | 0.8 | 75 | 2.9 | 0.8 | 0.009 | 223 | 3.2 | 0.8 | 55 | 2.9 | 0.9 | 0.014 | 204 | 3.2 | 0.8 | 74 | 2.8 | 0.7 | 0.001 | 170 | 3.2 | 0.8 | 112 | 2.9 | 0.9 | 0.001 |
| Dominating | 208 | 2.6 | 0.6 | 75 | 2.7 | 0.7 | 0.017 | 222 | 2.4 | 0.6 | 66 | 2.6 | 0.7 | ns | 209 | 2.4 | 0.6 | 74 | 2.6 | 0.7 | 0.021 | 172 | 2.4 | 0.6 | 110 | 2.7 | 0.7 | <0.001 |
| Sociable | 207 | 3.4 | 0.8 | 72 | 3.1 | 0.8 | 0.039 | 218 | 3.4 | 0.8 | 56 | 3.1 | 0.8 | 0.012 | 204 | 3.4 | 0.8 | 70 | 3.1 | 0.8 | 0.008 | 166 | 3.5 | 0.8 | 112 | 3.1 | 0.7 | <0.001 |
| Diligent | 209 | 4.5 | 0.8 | 75 | 4.2 | 0.9 | 0.018 | 224 | 4.5 | 0.8 | 55 | 4.2 | 0.9 | 0.044 | 205 | 4.5 | 0.8 | 74 | 4.2 | 0.9 | 0.015 | 171 | 4.5 | 0.8 | 112 | 4.3 | 0.9 | ns |
| Committed to work | 211 | 4.1 | 1.0 | 75 | 4.0 | 0.9 | ns | 225 | 4.1 | 1.0 | 56 | 3.8 | 0.9 | 0.021 | 207 | 4.1 | 1.0 | 74 | 4.0 | 0.8 | ns | 173 | 4.1 | 1.0 | 112 | 4.0 | 1.0 | ns |

Scale 1–5.

P-value Mann-Whitney U-test.

^a Including 75% of cases representing positive relationship experiences.

^b Including 25% of cases representing negative relationship experiences.

^c Is/Has been = those who answered the relationship questions on the basis of a present or earlier intimate relationship.

^d Did not answer the relationship questions.
and intimate relationship satisfaction is shown in Table V. Positive images of one's parents were associated with intimate relationship satisfaction, whereas negative parental images were associated with negative experiences in the intimate relationship. Parental domination was found suggestively in the background of a quarrelsome relationship (mother, p=0.037 and father, p=0.017) as was, suggestively, low diligence in both parents (p=0.015 and p=0.018). A supportive father was associated with a less quarrelsome relationship (p=0.009), as was, suggestively, a sociable father (p=0.039). A loving relationship was suggestively related to parental sociability (p=0.036, p=0.012) and diligence (p=0.012, p=0.044), as well as to the image of a supportive (p=0.014) and hard-working (p=0.021) father. A balanced relationship was associated with the image of supportive (p<0.001, p=0.001) and sociable parents (p=0.002, p=0.008) and with parental diligence (p<0.001, p=0.015), as well as, suggestively, with low paternal domination (p=0.021). Scarce paternal supportiveness and sociability (p=0.001) and paternal domination (p<0.001) appeared in the background of a repressive/submissive relationship. The parental images of those participants who did not respond to the intimate relationship questions are also presented in Table V. Because the questionnaire asked participants that were not currently in an intimate relationship to respond on the basis of a previous relationship, the participants that did not answer the relationship questions are considered to be single in Table V. On the basis of their answers, the lack of any intimate relationship had a suggestive association with low maternal domination (p=0.014) and scarce maternal commitment to working (p=0.042). Since it is impossible to know with certainty the marital status of the non-respondents, this result should be viewed with caution.

DISCUSSION

In this study, we wanted to examine the association between normal childhood experiences and well-being in adulthood from the perspective of satisfaction in intimate relationships, using the data collected from a homogeneous population of a Nordic democratic welfare country. In the data, the participating young adults assessed their images of their parents and their own contentment with their intimate relationships. The results are consistent with the hypothesis and earlier studies in that recollections of one's parents from one's growing years and experiences in one's childhood family did have an effect on later relationships, especially intimate relationships (14,16,21,23,24,28,39). Earlier studies have mainly contemplated the association between traumatic events and trouble in intimate relationships (6,7). In this study, images of parental features are examined from a wide perspective, not only from the perspective of trouble.

The components of the maternal and paternal images found in this study – supportive, dominating and sociable, as well as the variables committed to work and diligent – are also valid in describing different contemporary parental characteristics. Appreciating and respecting the child by supporting with schoolwork, participating in hobbies, giving positive feedback and arranging nice surprises are pronounced in supportive maternal and paternal images. These images seem to build well-functioning inner models that are carried forward into the child’s future intimate relationships, which are experienced as balanced. Tenderness and warmth are also important features in supportive parenthood. These childhood experiences and parenthood characteristics seem to be reflected particularly in balanced relationships, which are characterized by an ease in approaching
each other, a feeling that life is purposeful, a willingness to forgive and striving for discussion when disagreements appear. Paternal supportiveness also seems to be reflected in loving relationships, in which dependence on each other, totality, togetherness, fellowship, understanding and love are experienced. Also important are the social traits of the parents, such as happiness, talkativeness and spontaneity in relationships; these are reflected in loving and balanced intimate relationships. Parents’ – and especially the mother’s – diligence seems to be reflected in both loving and balanced relationships, whereas the father’s commitment to work had positive consequences in this respect.

This study’s results are parallel with the results of the study by Falke, Wagner and Mosmann (2008), in which favourable experiences in the participant’s family of origin and a positive view of their parents’ relationship were associated with better quality in the participant’s own intimate relationship (8). According to attachment theory, a child’s first object of attachment is his caretaker, first and foremost his own mother. An attachment relationship is formed with another person to ensure a feeling of security. A child in a secure attachment relationship learns to regard his caretaker as his secure base where he seeks to maintain closeness and contact while exploring his surroundings (40). Approached from the perspective of attachment theory, especially in the supportive but also in the sociable parenthood, a mother and father can succeed in creating a secure, autonomic attachment between themselves and their child by interacting actively with the child. This secure attachment appears to have an effect on the child’s satisfaction in intimate relationships later in adulthood. According to the study by Nauha and Silvén (2000), among others, it is most common within couples for both parties to be either autonomously or non-autonomously (i.e., insecurely) attached.

Autonomously attached adults lived together more commonly than predicted, the reason being that the expectations of being securely attached in the intimate relationship were already matched up at the time of their meeting (15). A securely attached adult attracted another securely attached one, which, according to Hazan and Shaver (1987), was manifested in their relationship as mutual intimacy and satisfaction in sexuality. Autonomically attached spouses described their most important experiences in love as happy and confidential. They also accepted their loved ones despite their faults (27,28).

Dominating parenthood can be characterized by coldness, insensitivity and incoherency, and the parent’s authoritarian state in this kind of parenthood is pronounced by means of authoritativeness, punishment and demands, which may also include hitting and violence. According to our results, this kind of parenting appears to especially predispose children to quarrelsome future relationships. Dominating paternity is pronounced on the basis of an unbalanced and repressive/submissive relationship in particular, whereas supportive and sociable paternity would appear to protect the child from a repressive/submissive intimate relationship. These images reflect the father and the father-child relationship of the 1970s. Society has changed, and we are increasingly interested in the presence of fathers in the child’s life. It is also possible for a child to form a secure attachment with their father even if there were difficulties in the child’s attachment relationship with their mother.

A child in an insecure attachment relationship has learned not to use his parent as his secure base. The child has noticed that his parent is not available in the way that he needs and does not react to signals that reveal his internal distress. The child is left alone, particularly with his negative feelings, whereupon he needs to resort to other
ways of controlling his emotional state that he is able to come up with at his level of development (40). According to attachment theory, dominating mothers and fathers do not create an environment and attachment secure enough for their child, which may predispose these children to insecure attachments in adulthood as well. Insecure models of attachment are developed during childhood to protect against frustration and helplessness, which may cause anxiety and sadness (28). According to Holmes (1997), insecure attachment in an intimate relationship can be seen as a defensive compromise, where either autonomy or emotional proximity is sacrificed to save physical proximity. Defensive exclusion can occur due to painful events in the past; for example, someone who has often been abandoned may “hasten” to abandon their spouse to prevent further abandonment of him or herself (22,28). These basic mechanisms of attachment and their significance to satisfaction in an intimate relationship seem to fit the results of this study.

Typical characteristics of a quarrelsome intimate relationship are quarreling, disagreement, bitterness, pouting, “silent treatment,” and weariness. Few feelings of fellowship, love and mutual trust are experienced. Further, there is less of an understanding of each other and approaching each other is seen to be difficult. This study reinforces the results of Cast et al. (2006), among others, which have shown abuse in childhood to predispose adults to social inability and, especially, to problems in intimate relationships in adulthood. Accordingly, physical punishment teaches the use of aggressive and controlling problem-solving strategies and hinders the development of important problem-solving skills in relation to others. These strategies and skills become a part of the individual’s problem-solving tools later in life, including in their marriage. Adults who have been physically punished in childhood are more likely to use physical or verbal violence towards their spouse and control them, and they have a weaker ability to look at things from their spouse’s point of view (6).

We could not find a coherent component for evaluating parents’ attitude towards work, and so we used 2 variables instead. It also seems that one’s father’s and mother’s commitment to work was perceived differently, which can especially be understood from the perspective of a small child, as the mother is most often experienced as the first attachment figure. Accordingly, paternal commitment had more positive results in terms of loving relationships in the offspring, whereas diligence of both parents had positive results in terms of loving, balanced and less quarrelsome relationships in the offspring. However, when comparing the parental images of those who answered the questions about intimate relationships with the images of those who didn’t answer, work-committed and dominant motherhood was surprisingly less common in the non-responding group. Perhaps it is possible to suppose that scarceness of dominance and hard work in the maternal image is associated with some kind of precaution in the relationship, assuming that those who did not respond to the relationship questions had not had any experience in intimate relationships.

The aim of this study was to examine whether young adults’ images of their mothers and fathers were connected with satisfaction in their intimate relationships. The results point out those positive images of the mother and father as being consistently connected with intimate relationships that are considered loving and balanced, whereas negative images are connected with quarrelsome and repressive/submissive intimate relationships. Additionally, images of the father emerge as factors influencing an intimate relationship even more extensively than images of the mother. A positive
image of the father and of his active presence – or the lack of it – is of significance.

The results indicate that experiences in childhood in which the child is allowed to grow and develop under the protection of present parenthood are reflected in the basis of adult well-being and satisfaction in intimate relationships. Learned well-functioning models of interaction appear to be carried forward into later relationships, especially intimate relationships. Although research on the significance of the father image has recently been on the rise (41–43), the results of this study present a challenge to pay more attention to the meanings of fatherhood. Further, this study gives some indication of what we should pay attention to in the developmental environment so that experiences in a child’s family of origin can be positively carried forward into the basis of that child’s own adulthood, the well-being of their intimate relationships and the development base of the new generation. This is particularly important in the circumpolar regions, where one often has to leave his/her own growth environment at a very young age for study and job opportunities that may be very far from home.

Limitations and strengths
In examining the results of this study, critical attention should be paid to the possibility that, when asking about a participant’s memories and experiences, that participant’s present mood may reflect on how their childhood is remembered. If the participant is balanced and happy with their life at the time of the study, they are more likely to remember their childhood as being bright than a participant who is discontent at the time of the study. It has to be seen as a strength of this study that the data were collected from the population of a Nordic democratic society in pursuit of the study’s aim to investigate issues associated with the well-being of average families, children and adults, and to find answers to what we should pay attention to in the developmental environment so that the objective of a parenthood that supports the growth of a child and satisfaction in future intimate relationships would be achieved.

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Conflict of interest statement
The study was approved by the Ethical Committee of Oulu University Hospital, Finland and there are no conflicts of interest.

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Parental images and intimate relationships

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